

Washington Bach Consort

Bringing Bach to Life

BY HEATHER SCHOELL

The power of live orchestral and chorale music has become a luxury, or at least a special occasion, for most of us. While we can download mp3s of live symphonies, it can't take the place of the presence or experience of witnessing musicians weaving individual notes into a tapestry of sound. With its evening events, free cantatas, and student outreach, Washington Bach Consort (WBC), conducted by Dr. J. Reilly Lewis, offers everyone a chance at this moving experience.

The Life Experience

Johann Sebastian Bach is one of the most recognized names in classical Baroque. Even if you do not know the names of Bach's works, such as "Air" and "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," you're sure to have heard them. To hear classical pieces come to life is exhilarating. Even if you prefer a different sort of music, just to bear witness to a bunch of strings

and wood and metal producing sounds that blend to create music you recognize is awesome.

Marc Eisenberg is the incoming Executive Director, and is excited to launch the season, starting with Mass in B Minor on Oct. 4. "It's arguably our signature piece," said Eisenberg. "It's Baroque orchestra at its best – everybody is enthusiastic about it. Some of the chorus has been in this for 25 years – they have a passion like Deadheads or Springsteen fans!"

Bill and Patty Driscoll, Hill residents, have been season ticket holders to the Washington Bach Consort for six years. "Every year we continue to renew – we certainly enjoy going," said Bill. "Lewis has made it a career to play all of Bach," he joked. "We're fans – they're in a class by themselves."



J. Reilly Lewis at the organ beneath the dramatic stained glass. Photos courtesy of Washington Bach Consort.



The orchestra recreates intricate music written for royalty.

Bringing Music to the Masses

Dr. J. Reilly Lewis began the Washington Bach Consort in 1977 as a way to bring superior musical performances to DC. Lewis, named one of Washingtonian magazine's Washingtonian of the Year 2005, is internationally recognized as a Baroque specialist, a conductor, and keyboard artist. He earned a doctorate in music from Julliard, and was on the DC music scene in the 1970s, jamming with his orchestral friends. That gave way to a budding performance operation run out of his mother's basement, culminating in the launch of the Washington Bach Consort in 1977.

Lewis recalled a young woman who, upon acceptance into the chorus, thanked him with tears streaming down her face. "She told me she needed this." This is a moment that Lewis keeps coming back to. "For me, music is an irrepressible urge," he said. "For performers, for people listening – there's something fundamentally meaningful, another di-

mension. That what is so important to me is so important to others... to know what you do makes a difference to society..." That passion is part of what heralds Lewis as a great conductor.

Capitol Hill resident Celia Morris gets this – she has been a subscriber for several years, and "enjoys it mightily. It is a great treat," she said. "Bach is a signal example of what music can do for you...It becomes an integral part of life – soothing, grounding," Morris continued. "It's an extreme pleasure, a labor of love, and in inspiration on several levels – sensual and intellectual."

"Bach rocks! This is not stuffy and stiff – it's cool stuff, engaging," Lewis effused. "In terms of 'early music', as it's called, the music scene has blossomed! Washington has become a mecca of early music," said Lewis. "We were pioneers, along with a few others. The scene has grown! Bach is eternal – with that as your masthead, it's always a winner."

The Library of Congress (LOC)

apparently agrees. Having recently completed all 215 of Bach's cantatas, WBC has been accepted into the LOC's permanent collection of recorded live music. As Lewis said, "This is huge!"

Access is Key

Outreach is about access. WBC offers free of charge their monthly Noontime Cantatas on the first Tuesday of the month, beginning Oct. 6. This is 50 minutes of music, free to the public, no tickets required. Performances are at 12:10 p.m. at the Church of the Epiphany, 1317 G Street, NW.

To children, specifically 3rd graders, WBC offers access to the enjoyment and understanding of Baroque music through their Bach

the young 15-year-old Bach." The performance includes cello, violin, harpsichord, and oboe, along with a vocalist. "The DC Arts Education Collaborative (www.dccollaborative.org) does the outreach and transportation – it's a great help." Educational materials are provided to schools to assist in teaching musical concepts, accompanied by a Bach CD for aural illustration.

Hear to Help

One of the best ways to support the Washington Bach Consort is to attend their performances, and then tell everyone how much you enjoyed it. You can purchase season tickets or individual tickets, and there are discounts for children. Donations are welcome. "Volun-



The chorus has a passion for early music.

in Time program. If you were familiar with this program in years past – it was begun 20 years ago – know that it has been rewritten and reworked, and will open this Nov. with a new show. Chuck Reifel, a long-time board member, former Executive Director, and current overseer of Bach in Time, explains, "It's 35 to 40% musical performance and the rest is a play. It is a meeting between the older Bach in a white wig and period costume communicating with

teer. Encourage participation in Bach in Time," said Eisenberg.

"I'm often told we're the best-kept secret," laughed Lewis. "Well after 30 years, we don't want to be a secret!"

This is part of a monthly series profiling nonprofits that serve our community. To suggest an organization to be profiled, please email Heather Schoell at hschoell@verizon.net with "suggestion" in the subject line. ★

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