

Like 1

Tweet

Share

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



February 2017

www.bachcantatachoir.org

Vol. 10, No. 3

Sunday, February 5, 2017 at 2:00 p.m.

Billings: *Universal Praise*

Tallis: *O Nata Lux*

Monteverdi: *Magnificat for 6 voices*

Schütz: *Hodie Christus Natus Est*

J. S. Bach: *Cantata #47 Wer sich selbst erhöhet, der soll erniedriget werden*

All Bach Cantata Choir concerts are held at the Rose City Park Presbyterian Church at the corner of NE 44th & Sandy (office address 1907 NE 45th Ave) in Portland, Oregon ([map](#)).

Selections for Super Bach Sunday

By John Chilgren—Bass

Like the variety of Super Bowl plays and commercials, the Bach Cantata Choir is offering a smorgasbord of Renaissance and Baroque works for this concert, as well as introducing America's earliest composer. We hope that this concert will engage your ears as much as football can engage your eyes.



While European Baroque was coming to a close in the latter half of the 18th century, American cultural history was in its early years. Schools flourished, booksellers thrived, and newspapers expanded. Religious musical traditions formed the basis of early American music with itinerant masters becoming what was known as the first New England singing school even before the British colonies rallied for independence. One of the most prominent of these often self-taught musicians was Boston-born **William Billings**. Born in October 1746, he was considered eccentric, a man with a booming voice, one eye, a withered arm and stunted leg. A tanner by trade, Billings turned leather into shoes, boots, belts, book bindings, whips, gloves, etc., but also had a determination to teach music. On the night of the Boston Massacre in 1770, Billings was writing his first tune book, having co-sponsored the first singing school six months earlier at the age of 23. He had become a well-known singing master in Boston and surrounding towns and would establish what would later become the oldest musical society and first singing school in Stoughton, MA - the Stoughton Musical Society. Here he met his wife Lucy Swan; they would have nine children.



Billings was the first American to make music his profession, the first American to publish a significant volume of original music, *The New-England Psalm Singer* (the frontispiece of which was engraved by his friend Paul Revere), and the first American to redirect music from its Puritan roots to more modern 19th century music. This popular book would later be “blamed” for the addition of choir lofts and choirs to New England worship services! His music provided words with notes and melodies and even harmonizations. Uniquely American, Billings’ talent and inherent interest in singing steered him forward, albeit not without encouragement from friends. He had no composers to emulate. European Baroque and Renaissance masters were virtually unknown in New

England so it was the vigor and motivational skill that Billings brought to the table that has earned him a universally recognized place in the history of music education.

Billings died in Boston in 1800, five years after the death of his wife. He is buried in an unmarked grave. He published more than 300 choral compositions, six tune books (instructional books), as well as individual pieces. Hymn tunes, canons, anthems and fusing tunes (involving polyphonic singing) were part of his legacy. His anthem “*Universal Praise*” was one of 51 compositions published in his book *The Continental Harmony* in Boston in 1794.



English Renaissance composer **Thomas Tallis** (1505?-1585) occupies an eminent position in English music history as does his contemporary William Byrd (1540-1623), who collaborated under particularly difficult conditions in Tudor England. Unlike Byrd, however, Tallis’ choral music was almost entirely sacred whereas Byrd produced sacred, secular, keyboard, and consort music (which later evolved into chamber music in the Baroque era). While little is known about his early life (even the year of his birth is estimated to be between 1503-25), one event in 1575 had a substantial impact upon the future reception of Tallis’ music: the publication, with Byrd, of the *Cantiones quae ab argumento sacrae vocateur*, a.k.a. *Cantiones sacrae*, a collection of 34 Latin motets dedicated to the queen. He and Byrd acquired from Queen Elizabeth I a 21-year monopoly for printing rights to polyphonic music since piracy was rampant at this time. With the stamp of royal privilege upon this work, its contents as well as future compositions led to Tallis and Byrd being the progenitors of English music.

Tallis was a chorister in the Chapel Royal in London, an organist in Dover Priory in Kent, and later in Canterbury Cathedral in Kent where he composed and performed under various monarchs, including Henry VIII, Edward VI, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth I until his death in 1585. Tallis avoided religious controversies with the different demands of his rulers by changing style and content when necessary. A teacher of

William Byrd, among others, Tallis died peacefully in Greenwich. His burial site is unknown.

O Nata Lux was first published in the *Cantiones sacrae* mentioned above. The text derives from a 10th century hymn and Tallis weaves what was originally a seven-verse hymn into a two-verse hymn, mostly chordal and homophonic work with the final passage repeating twice, a common Tallis artifice. Listen to the final cadence where one hears a pungent dissonance like no other in English music.

In May 1567 was born one of the greatest musicians of his time, one who would be a major transitional figure between two distinct musical eras, Renaissance and Baroque: **Claudio (Giovanni Antonio) Monteverdi** (1567-1643). His birth town of Cremona, which lies in the fertile Po Valley of northern Italy, is also the birthplace of the violin owing to those who perfected its construction (Amati, Guarneri, and Stradivarius). In Monteverdi's time, Italy was a scattering of city states controlled by dynastic families: *Medici* in Florence, *Farnese* in Parma, *Este* in Ferrara and the *Gonzagas* in Mantua that controlled Cremona (in 2016 Mantua was declared the Italian capital of culture). At the same time, the *Hapsburgs* (Holy Roman Emperors at the time) regularly intervened in Italian affairs and Monteverdi had dealings with them as well. The Spanish branch of the *Hapsburgs* controlled Milan and other northern territories that included Cremona so in essence Monteverdi was born a Spanish citizen. At his death in 1643, Monteverdi was buried in a chapel in a minor basilica in Venice, the *Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari*, because as a "foreigner" he could not be buried in the basilica of San Marcos. It is known that Monteverdi didn't think too highly of Venetian politics and had hoped that the King of Spain would eventually rule there. Some of his published works indicate his preference for Spanish culture. Monteverdi was a recognized prodigy early on and published his first set of madrigals at age 15. A few years later Monteverdi had taken up employment as a gamba player at the court of *Gonzaga* in Mantua and soon after had published his third book of madrigals. His fame expanded and in a few years was musical director of the Mantuan court and in 1599 married one of the court singers; they had three children. She would fall ill and die in 1607. Saddened but not deterred by this setback, he published one of his most well-known sacred works, *Vísperas de la beata Virgen* (Vespers of the Blessed Virgin) in 1610 and his first musical drama, *L'Orfeo*, considered by many to be the first opera in history.

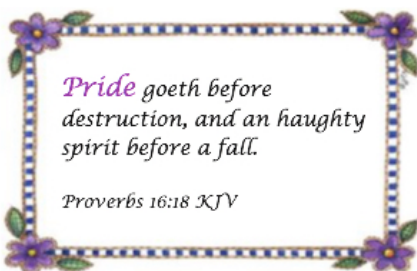


By 1613 he had acquired the esteemed position of *maestro di cappella* at the Basilica of San Marco where he would spend the remainder of his productive life. His ninth book of madrigals was published posthumously in 1653. His operas and sacred works, long forgotten, have been revived and Monteverdi, the singer-instrumentalist-composer-priest, has been resurrected anew for the world to appreciate. The year 2017 marks the 450th anniversary of his birth.

The *Magnificat for 6 voices* and basso continuo was part of Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers. The central feature of evening service of Vespers was the singing of psalms with its culmination being the Magnificat - the canticle of the Blessed Virgin - during which the altar was ceremonially censed.

J. S. Bach (1685-1750), after securing the coveted position as cantor at St Thomas in 1723, began his first annual cycle of cantatas, one for every Sunday and feast day of the ecclesiastical year, excepting weeks preceding Easter and Christmas when concerted music was traditionally suspended. This was a monumental task given all the other tasks assigned to him. After Bach's second cycle of cantatas, his production became less consistent. For example, 1726 was the year in which he performed many works of his 3rd cousin, Johann Ludwig Bach (1677-1731), a.k.a. the Meiningen Bach (see *BachBeat May 2016*). For the 17th Sunday after Trinity, Bach composed Cantata BWV 47, *Wer sich selbst erhöhet, der soll erniedriget werden* (Whoever exalts himself, will be abased), first performed on 13 October 1726. It is this work that will be performed on Super Bach Sunday.

The source of the text for this cantata was a series of poems by German poet Johann Friedrich Helbig in Eisenach. Bach's good friend Georg Philipp Telemann had composed works using Helbig's texts as well so it is unknown how Bach became acquainted with Helbig's poems, whether directly or via Telemann, but Bach would never use them again. Philipp Spitta, an early Bach biographer, wrote that this cantata "... is a composition, born of the most supreme command over all forms of music, great and small ... "



The first movement is the most labyrinthine and powerful of the five movements. Author Alec Robertson writes: "There are two expositions of the fugue, the subject of which, begun by the tenor, is designed to describe the self-exaltation of the proud and, in a tremendous passage, the proud are held up to contempt."

John Chilgren sings bass with the Bach Cantata Choir. He performed with the Portland Symphonic Choir for a decade and the Choral Arts Ensemble of Portland for 20 years. He has been a book and film reviewer for AAAS Science Books and Films for nearly 50 years.

Thank you!

We appreciate the generosity of all who support the Bach Cantata Choir.

Join our Growing List of Season Sponsors!

Sponsorships are available at two levels (below). To become a sponsor, visit our [website](#).

Friends of the Choir (\$100-249)	Director's Circle (\$250+)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognition on our website and program.• Invitation to special events, including "Bach-Sing" day carol sing on Dec. 26 and a book discussion party* in the spring.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All the benefits available to Friends of the Choir.• Two tickets to the Baroque Holiday Concert.

*Upcoming Book Discussion

Evening in the Palace of Reason — Bach meets Frederick the Great in the Age of Enlightenment
by James R. Gaines

Available in hardback, paperback, Kindle or Nook versions.

For a New York Times review: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/17/books/review/evening-in-the-palace-of-reason-being-geniuses-together.html>

Bach Cantata Choir

3570 NE Mathison Place
Portland OR 97212

www.bachcantatachoir.org

Artistic Director
Ralph Nelson

Assistant Conductor
Emma M. Riggle

Accompanist
John Vergin

Board of Directors

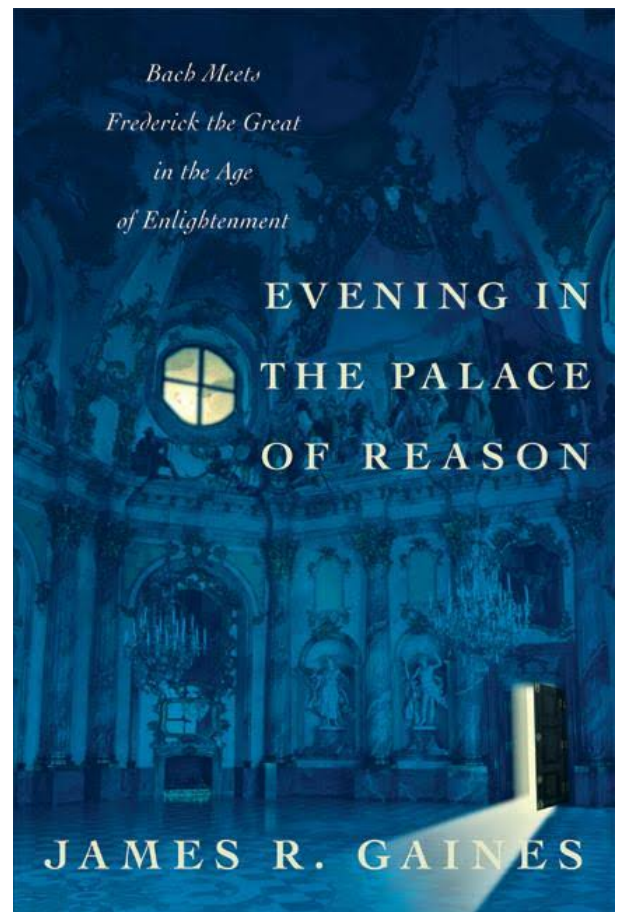
President
Ralph Nelson

Secretary
Emily Rampton

Treasurer
Julie Beck

Members at Large
Don Coates
Jim Hook
Barbara Lance

Pat Messick
Sue Nelson
Woody Richen



The Bach Cantata Choir's mission is to sing the entire set of cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach over a period of 30 years.

The Bach Cantata Choir is a legally organized non-profit corporation under Oregon law, and is a registered 501(c)(3) corporation with the IRS. Donations to the choir are tax-deductible to the extent provided by law and regulation.

The *BachBeat* newsletter is published cyclically by the Bach Cantata Choir.

Emily Rampton, Editor

[Click to view this email in a browser](#)

If you no longer wish to receive these emails, please reply to this message with "Unsubscribe" in the subject line or simply click on the following link: [Unsubscribe](#)

[Click here](#) to forward this email to a friend

Bach Cantata Choir
3570 NE Mathison Place
Portland, OR 97212
USA

[Read](#) the VerticalResponse marketing policy.

vertical DELIVERED BY
response
Try It Free Today!