

Bach Thing (2011)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

This visit from my son Christopher will be known in the annals as “the weekend we did the Bach thing.” This guy is pretty musical, and sings with the chorus of the Philadelphia Opera. When I knew he was coming I started hinting about singing at church, and when he agreed I started hinting harder, about our doing a duet, and he agreed again! (—A bribe of a promise of some Alabama barbecue sometimes works wonders.)

I thought of a spiritual, or an old camp song, or something where I can hear the tenor in my head, so he suggested...a Bach duet! “Der Herr Segne Euch” — “May God Smile on You.” Let me quote him: “It’s short, it’s not too hard, and you can do it!” Flattered, I agreed, and started listening to it, and humming along on YouTube, and tried to get the intervals, and the melody: not easy!

Then I got the music, and started looking at when the spots go up and when they go down, and where the dots are, and how many there are: and that passes for “reading music” with me. Tricky! Hard! Went to practice with our accompanist, and bombed out! Couldn’t finish! She is so nice that she told me it was because I hadn’t learned it yet, and when I learned it it would be fine, and here I thought I HAD learned it!

When Christopher came we worked on it three more times: morning, afternoon, evening, with a wonderful roll-up keyboard he brought.

When I got closer to it I found that the high note was off my map, and that I couldn’t sing it even in falsetto, and was missing some of the jumps, just off the mark ... but then the two of us went to the final rehearsal, on Saturday afternoon, with our saint of a pianist, and made it — barely — but not with much confidence.

But we did it! We did it on Sunday, and I have a recording to prove it! It was not with supreme confidence, and some of it it was precarious, but we finished at the same time, in the same church, with a stunningly and fittingly lovely last five notes. Made it! That Bach guy rocks.

We even got “Amens” and murmurs of affirmation when we finished.

People are so kind. One of my friends said she liked it when we both smiled the same way at the same time. What she didn't know is that we were both smiling at the same emotion: not spiritual transformation, but sheer relief.

Chris said he had a learning, too: that he'd never known that in all those years of my being in all those choirs that his father can't read music!