

Chestnut Hill church crosses over into Romanticism

by MICHAEL CARUSO

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill played host to the second of three concerts in The Crossing's "Month of Moderns" series Friday, May 22. A good-sized audience was on hand to hear Donald Nally lead the 24-member chamber choir in a program that featured Bo Holten's *In nomine*, Peter McGarr's *Dreaming England: This Scepter'd Isle*, Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen's *Statements and Examples*, Thierry Escaich's *Evocation II* for solo organ, James MacMillan's *A New Song*, Petr Eben's *Pictures of Hope*, Kirsten Broberg's *Breathturn* and Steven Stucky's *Whispers*.

The concert was both daunting and rewarding — and revelatory on many levels, not the least of which was the portrait it gave of Donald Nally as an interpretive artist.

While Nally prefers to work with a chamber choir exclusively in the repertoire of contemporary music, he is nonetheless a romantic when it comes to his mode of interpreting modern music.

Is he a romantic in the same fashion as Leopold Stokowski and Eugene Ormandy were when they conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra? Not quite. However, like both Stoki and Ormandy, Nally is interested in sound and he elicits a particularly distinctive timbral quality from The Crossing not unlike the distinctiveness of the famous "Philadelphia Sound" created by Stokowski and enhanced by Ormandy.

While their specific sound was lush, glistening, sumptuous and lustrous, Nally's is pointed and focused. While Stoki sought the top-to-bottom contrapuntal clarity of the pipe organs he once played as a virtuoso and Ormandy leaned in the direction of highlighting the strings since he had been a violinist, the genesis for Nally's tone for The Crossing comes from the highest voices, the sopranos.

There's also much more attention paid to the sound of the words, themselves. The text often determines the tone of the singing with Nally and The Crossing: in Latin, more open on the vowels; in German, more guttural and darkly colored; in English, more varied and pungent.

As a result, I'd liken Nally to Arturo Toscanini, the greatest operatic and instrumental conductor of the early and middle 20th century. For Toscanini, the printed text was of paramount importance. The same is true for Donald Nally. Although Toscanini was often hailed as a classicist, his conducting was always stamped with his unmistakable personality. The same is true with Donald Nally's work with The Crossing.

And certainly that was the case on May 22. *In nomine* was breathtaking in its dreaminess. *Dreaming England* soared and soothed on the wings of the singing by the sopranos.

Nally and The Crossing will present the third and final installment of "Month of Moderns" Friday, June 5, 8 p.m. in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. Visit www.crossingchoir.com.