

Broad Street Review

The Crossing's unique niche



BY: Tom Purdom
06.13.2009

Donald Nally's choir, The Crossing, occupies a unique niche in the musical ecosystem: Its singers perform new and unfamiliar music for a small chamber choir. It presents novel, beautiful, complex music that requires precise coordination and first-class voices.

The Crossing chamber choir: McCabe, *Scenes in America Deserta*; Fowler, *Potter's Clay*; Moore, *I saw him standing*; Smith, *Where flames a word*; Holten, *Rain and Rush and Rosebush*; Part, *I am the true vine*; Hill, *Voices of Autumn*. Donald Nally, conductor. June 5, 2009 at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, 8855 Germantown Ave. www.crossingchoir.com.

Nally: Quality, right down to the details.

Class act

TOM PURDOM

Donald Nally's choir, The Crossing, occupies a unique niche in the musical ecosystem: Its singers perform new and unfamiliar music for a small chamber choir. I heard them for the first time last season, when they joined Piffaro for a major event: the premiere of Kile Smith's *Vespers* for voice and Renaissance instruments. The Crossing's latest *a capella* concert in Chestnut Hill was the first pure Crossing concert I've attended, and it met most of my expectations. The Crossing presents novel, beautiful, complex music that requires precise coordination and first-class voices.

The program's main event was another premiere by Kile Smith, the final work in a trilogy Nally has dubbed the Celan Project: three settings for texts by Paul Celan (1920-1970), a Romanian Jewish poet who survived the Nazi death camps.

I'd never heard of Celan, and I found the texts obscure and complex. Celan grew up in the aftermath of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, speaking several languages, including Yiddish. But German was the language used by cultured Central Europeans in his youth, and he continued to write in it after the Holocaust, even though it was the language of his oppressors. Celan's German is so personal and inventive that Smith referred to him as the "German James Joyce" when I queried him after the concert.

Smith's piece used English translations, which only increased their opaqueness in my case, and I listened to his piece primarily as pure, wordless music. Smith treated the unaccompanied voices just as unpredictably—and effectively—as he treated Renaissance instruments in the *Vespers* and modern instruments in the horn concerto he wrote for the Classical Symphony. He's composed a number of good pieces over the years, but lately he seems to be on a roll.

Smith's work had been written specifically for this performance, but the other pieces were all just as unfamiliar. Nally is exploring an aspect of the repertoire that seems to have developed its own subculture.

The American desert

The opener, John McCabe's *Scenes in America Deserta*, redeemed five unpromising texts with some great effects. The texts were all evocations of various aspects of the American desert, taken from a classic book on the subject, and the effects included tinkling bells from the sopranos, harmonies straight out of spirituals, and a deliberately dull, heavy finale.

You could hear the rhythms of spirituals, and their bouncy exchanges between sections of the chorus, in a 2004 liturgical work, *I Saw Him Standing*, that Phillip More (b. 1943, England) wrote for the 25th anniversary of a London chorus.

Asian devices

Asian references provided another motif that ran through the program. *Potter's Clay*, by Paul Fowler (b. 1978, Wisconsin) is a piece for a woman's chorus that sets a Buddhist mantra chanted by the altos against a childlike poem, *Life is like a potter's clay/ Changing from day to day*, sung by the sopranos; it includes some beautiful soprano writing and it was sung by some beautiful soprano voices. *Voices of Autumn*, by Jackson Hill (b. 1941, Alabama), used a number of Japanese musical devices and contained suggestions of chanting Japanese monks and a final precisely executed long note that faded like a gong.

One of the most striking moments was a long soprano vocalise in *Rain and Rush and Rosebush*, by Bo Holten (b. 1948, Denmark)— a setting of a wonderful poem by Hans Christian Anderson that lays out the good and the bad in the world. The vocalise would have qualified as a solo at most concerts, but that would have violated the spirit of the choir's efforts. The brief solos scattered through many of the pieces were part of the general complexity and unpredictability. They couldn't have been listed in the program, and they were all elements of larger structures.

The Crossing is a class act, from the quality of the voices and the selections right down to details like the format Nally has adapted for the program notes. Each text was preceded by a commentary with three subheadings: "Written for," "We found it," and "In this work." Program notes are particularly important when you're listening to unfamiliar music, and the format delivers useful information briefly and efficiently.