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by Michael Caruso

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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill will play host to Donald Nally and The Crossing for their annual "Month of Moderns." The three concerts are scheduled for Sunday, June 27, at 4 p.m., Friday, July 9, at 8 p.m., and Saturday, July 17, at 8 p.m. Tickets can be purchased at the door or online at www.crossingchoir.com.

The three concerts feature world premieres by composers David Lang, Lansing McLoskey and Paul Fowler. The first, Lang's "Statement to the Court," is set for June 27. It uses writings by Eugene Debs for its text. The second and third premieres are part of the Levine Project, which supports the commissioning of new choral music set to poetry by Pulitzer Prize Laureate Philip Levine. The first of these premieres is McLoskey's "The Memory of Rain." It will be heard on the July 9 concert. Fowler's "Breath" will be performed on the July 17 program. Additional funding for "The Month of Moderns" has been provided by the Philadelphia Music Project, the Samuel Fels Fund and the Philadelphia Cultural Fund.

Nally, who is the chorus director for Chicago's Lyric Opera, admitted that using Eugene Debs' address to the judge in support of free speech upon his conviction in a labor dispute was an odd choice, even for David Lang, who he described as a "marvelously crazy dude." At the time of our interview several weeks ago, Nally had not yet seen the completed score. "He described it to me in detail, and I trust him to have found the right musical language for the text and for The Crossing's different types of voices. Our singers are musicians first and vocalists second. They bring their voices to the music and not the music to their voices." The opening concert pairs The Crossing with the string ensemble, the Philadelphia Virtuosi, and in other works by Holten, Boyle, Part and Tavener.

Organist Scott Dettra will join Nally and The Crossing for the second program. Dettra was formally the organist at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in center city when Nally was its music director. "One of the highlights of that concert will be Francis Pott's 'Love Unknown.' The English really know how to do big sacred choral music. McLoskey's 'Memory' is also a big work." The unaccompanied final program will feature, alongside the Fowler premiere, James MacMillan's rarely performed "Sun Dogs" as well as an encore of Philadelphian Kile Smith's "Where flames a word," commissioned for the 2009 "Month of Moderns."