

DAVID PATRICK STEARNS 

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Project gives a poet pause

His work does not yield easily to music.



By David Patrick Stearns
Inquirer Classical Music Critic

The often-fruitful marriage between music and poetry hits potentially fascinating snags with Philip Levine.

The so-called working man's poet - whose expansive verses are filled with visions of Detroit in the snow and the sounds of Charlie Parker - is the focal point of The Crossing's Month of Moderns festival, which begins Sunday. The choir's ultra-literate founder/director Donald Nally seeks out combustible pairings of words and composer.

Few poems, however, are as sturdy and self-sufficient as Levine's, which have won the Pulitzer Prize and any number of other awards. Is there any room for music?

The poet himself, now 82 and splitting time between Brooklyn Heights and Fresno, Calif., was as shocked as he was flattered to hear what Nally was up to.

"When he came here and let the cat out of the bag, I said, 'What?' " he recalled in Brooklyn a few weeks ago. "It's good for the two arts - poetry and music. But I don't see the poems in a musical setting."

Nally, whose handpicked professional vocal group invites challenging new works, admits that Levine is the opposite of last year's season project, setting the elusive poems of Paul Celan. "It's prose ordered into poetry - more concrete and in many ways more challenging," Nally wrote of Levine's work in an e-mail. "This seemed a good contrast for our audience."

The first concert (4 p.m. Sunday at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill) features the best-known of the three composers to receive a Levine Project commission, Pulitzer winner David Lang. He chose not to set any Levine poetry in his *Statement to the Court* but instead chose something in the spirit of the poet's politics - a rather more prose-y speech by socialist Eugene V. Debs.

Clearly, the music prompted by this kind of literary stimulus isn't likely to be typical. A rehearsal of the Lang revealed sentences set to blocks of repeated notes but in conversational rhythms, with solo voices soaring above the rest to convey more idealistic matters.

For the other two, who embraced Levine more directly, the challenges started with the realization that music magnifies words out of proportion. Is that appropriate for Levine's aesthetic, in which the monumental and trivial are sometimes cheek-by-jowl?

"I believe in the democracy of objects and experience. Death is more important than smoking a cigarette. But nothing is so unimportant that it can't find a home in a poem," said Levine. "A lot of poets spend a lot of time telling you this is important. My attitude is that if you're reading this, it's important."

But imagery based on the smell of gasoline - and witty lines about how TVs seem to talk to themselves - "is *not* something you'd put in Debussy," said composer Lansing McLoskey, whose Levine-based work is on the festival's second program, on July 9.

McLoskey read Levine's complete works before putting any notes on the page. "I read and reread them over and over and found that there were certain things that Philip returned to, that popped up in his poetry again and again: rain and memory," said McLoskey. "It's like he's setting a calendar, saying, 'It was 1 a.m. Wednesday in early April.'"

Hence the composer's title: *The Memory of Rain*. But with so much text to set - Levine's poems are long - McLoskey devised something similar to the motets of medieval and renaissance times, layers of words and music stacked atop each other.

The third composer, Paul Fowler, chose Levine's "Breath," which deals in part with the inner rhythm of rocks. As someone who lives in the Rocky Mountains, Fowler responded to that. His approach: "I compose environments that house ideas. I like to create the environment inspired by the poetry, and allow the poetry to speak for itself. In most cases, the text sings its way into my mind." His piece, also *Breath*, will be premiered July 17.

Left to Levine's taste, the music probably would sound a lot like classic jazz, the genre that dominates his own musical life, along with Erik Satie piano music, LPs of which were left by a previous tenant in an apartment he once rented. In one of his happier musical collaborations, Levine offered a composer fragments of unfinished poems with hopes that their lack of completeness would more readily accommodate music.

He has sometimes wondered - when the music was all finished - what his words were doing there. When big-voiced opera singers articulate his populist texts, he longs for the resurrection of Billie Holiday. "But hey, if one of my poems helps somebody create that piece of music, I'm all for it."

"Being a writer, I know how often you sit with nothing - which is what you do most of the time, after all. So when I come upon somebody who wants to use my work, I say 'Take it.' I'm sure there are a lot of people who make money out of licensing the rights to their works, but I say, 'Forget it! Take it! That's what it's there for.'"

Month of Moderns

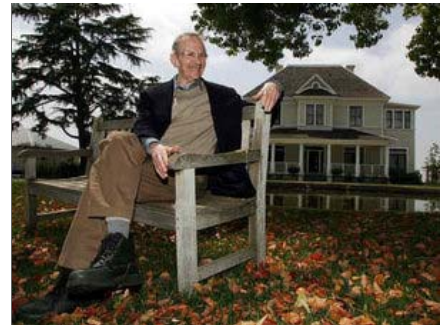
Concerts at the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, 8855 Germantown Ave. Tickets: At the door, \$25; online, \$22.50; seniors and students, \$15. Information: www.crossingchoir.com.

Sunday, 4 p.m.: David Lang's commissioned Levine Project world premiere *Statement to the Court*, plus works by Bo Holten, Benjamin CS Boyle, Arvo Pärt, and John Tavener. With the Philadelphia Virtuosi.

Friday, July 9, 8 p.m.: Lansing McLoskey's commissioned Levine Project premiere *The Memory of Rain* for organ and choir, plus works by Francis Pott, Kamran Ince, James MacMillan, and Gabriel Jackson. With organist Scott Dettra.

Saturday, July 17, 8 p.m.: Paul Fowler's commissioned Levine Project world premiere *Breath*, plus works by James MacMillan, Lansing McLoskey, Frank Havrøy, Christopher Trapani, Thomas Jennefelt, and Kile Smith.

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GARY KAZANJIAN / Associated Press

Pulitzer-winning poet Philip Levine: Composers' interpretations of his "prose-y" verses will be played in Philadelphia.