



The Crossing brings Month of Moderns to Chestnut Hill

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Composer David Lang's "Statement to the court" will premiere on Sunday, June 27.



By Joe Barron
Staff Writer

The Crossing, Philadelphia's 16-member contemporary music chorus, has a wonderful way of bringing poets and composers together.

Last year, the group commissioned and premiered several settings of the poems of the German Paul Celan. Beginning this weekend, it continues with the Philip Levine Project, the centerpiece of its three-concert Month of Moderns series at Chestnut Hill Presbyterian Church.

The first premiere, David Lang's "Statement to the Court," takes place Sunday. Next will be "Memory of Rain" by Lansing McLoskey July 9, followed by Paul Fowler's "Breath" July 17.

For McLoskey, who teaches at the University of Miami, the commission was an opportunity to explore the work of a poet who was unfamiliar to him. After receiving a commission from The Crossing's founder and director Donald Nally, he read Levine's complete published work.

"I discovered immediately I needed to read everything by this guy," he said June 15 in a telephone interview. "It's wonderful stuff. It's a little bit acerbic, more than a little at times. Very dry, but then there'll be this turn of phrase that takes the underlying frustration or bitterness and turns it into something beautiful."

Levine, now 82, was born in Michigan, taught for many years at California State University and has won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. McLoskey lived in southern California himself for a time, and the geographical connection gave him a mental entrée to Levine's work. He discovered recurring references to rain, which struck him as odd, he said, because Levine wrote many of his poems while living in Fresno, Calif., where it almost never rains.

"I spent a lot of time there as a kid because my mom grew up there," McLoskey said. "When it does rain, there's a smell. It's a physical thing. It really fills the senses."

Not surprisingly, McLoskey chose for his setting a four-part, 39-line verse called "Clouds," which includes the lines "Today it will rain. On the road/ black cars are abandoned, but the clouds/ ride above, their wisdom intact."

Paul Fowler selected "Breath," a poem first published in The New Yorker magazine in 1971. Speaking by phone June 15 from his home in Boulder, Colo., Fowler said the poem caught his attention with the grandeur of its opening line, "Who hears the humming / of rocks at great height ..."

It is this same sense of spaciousness he finds in the music of such quintessentially American composers as Charles Ives and Aaron Copland, Fowler said, and that he tries to put into his own music.

"I tend to write sort of slower or more pensive music in a way — spacious music," he said. "I guess classical music, concert music, for me is my tie to, for lack of a better term, spirituality. Long views and open spaces are always the easiest way to align with that spirituality."

McLoskey and Fowler arrived at classical music from opposite directions. Fowler's parents were opera singers, whereas McLoskey began his musical career as a guitarist and songwriter for various metal and punk-rock bands in San Francisco. He never bothered much with the classics until he was asked to join a group of guys in leather jackets and Mohawk haircuts who called themselves The Ninth.

"I asked, 'What's up with the name?'" McLoskey said. "They looked at me and said, 'Dude, the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven. It's the original heavy metal. It's the original punk.'"

He went home and popped on his parents' recording of the symphony, and he was, in his words, "blown away." He might not have known it at the time, but his future was set.

He later spent 20 years as a performer of medieval and Renaissance music, which he said has had a greater influence on his vocal writing than his punk days. Indeed, the example of the Renaissance nearly scared him off writing for chorus — much as Brahms delayed writing his First Symphony for 20 years because he was afraid he wouldn't measure up to Beethoven.

"They don't call the Renaissance the golden age of choral music for nothing," McLoskey said.

The Crossing's Month of Modern series will also include a performance of McLoskey's "Burning Chariots"

and an encore of Kile Smith's "Where flames a word," written for last year's Paul Celan Project, as well as music by John Taverner, Arvo Pärt, James McMillan and Bo Holton.

— Follow Joe Barron's thoughts on music on his blog, *Liberated Dissonance*, at liberateddissonance.blogspot.com.

If You Go:

The Crossing's

three-concert

Month of Moderns

series will take place

at Chestnut Hill

Presbyterian Church,

8855 Germantown Ave.,

Chestnut Hill, PA 19118,

Sunday, June 27, 4 p.m.;

Friday, July 9, 8 p.m. &

Saturday, July 17, 8 p.m.

Tickets: \$25 at the door;

\$22.50 online; \$15,

students & seniors,

at the door or online.

Info: www.crossingchoir.com.