

DAVID PATRICK STEARNS 

Posted on Tue, Jun. 29, 2010

Could they all just get along? Mostly, they did



By David Patrick Stearns
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Nobody can accuse the Month of Moderns festival of foisting a single school of modern composition on its listeners.

The first of the three concerts by the Crossing choir Sunday at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill touched all sorts of aesthetic bases: Radical minimalism rubbed shoulders with an openhearted manner influenced by Samuel Barber. Thanks to Crossing conductor Donald Nally, the program's sequencing was masterly and performances made you love everything. Well, almost.

Statement to the Court, a world premiere by David Lang, was the big news. This Pulitzer Prize-winning member of the downtown New York experimental Bang on a Can composer collective is becoming a consistent Philadelphia presence thanks to the Crossing, the Mendelssohn Club and, this fall, the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival. Why not? Philadelphia seems ready for it. Though his language is minimalist based, one never knows what conventional notions of composition he'll embrace or discard.

Statement to the Court sets to music the 1918 speech of Eugene Debs as he was about to be sentenced for his supposedly seditious anti-World War I protests. The beauty of Debs' idealism is timeless and, in hindsight, charts the distinctively American pendulum swing between humanitarian and mercantile ethics.

The text was sung in sensibly segmented phrases with repeated notes and rhythmic energy that felt poetically explosive. Spiritual references came in outbursts of thick harmony that seemed all the more intense for being surrounded by severity. Particularly poetic moments had solo voices breaking out of the chorus. The ending was arresting. After the line "I am now prepared to receive your sentence," the music halted with an abrupt defiance of everything we know about how a piece should conclude. It's major Lang; how major will be determined in subsequent encounters.

Even more hearings will be needed to appreciate the contrapuntal complexities of *Cantata: To One in Paradise* by Benjamin CS Boyle, who inventively mined the Edgar Allan Poe poem "Thou wast all to me, love" for a far-reaching, multi-movement piece. Though the music is as dense as Bach's cantatas, the solo vocal writing is expansive and lyrical - Crossing tenor Daniel O'Dea was wonderful - with subterranean agitation appropriate to Poe.

John Tavener's *The Bridegroom* and Arvo Part's *Pilgrim's Song* are relatively well-known pieces by two like-minded musical ascetics whose work is so denuded that every idea has to achieve something close to expressive and functional perfection. They don't always accomplish that but did in these works.

Though Danish composer Bo Holten finds great expression within his brand of distilled musicality, the 1976 *Tallis Variations* maintains a 16th-century English vocal manner with hostile, atonal invasions from string orchestra. A high Anglican version of Elliott Carter? This I did not love.

No matter what the composers threw at the Crossing, the singing wasn't just well prepared but highly comprehending. The Philadelphia Virtuosi, in its first Crossing collaboration, kept its collective head above water amid some seriously challenging string writing. Choral/orchestral balances hadn't been worked out in the tricky church acoustic.

Subsequent Month of Moderns performances are at 8 p.m. July 9 and July 17 at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, 8855 Germantown Ave. Information: www.crossingchoir.com.

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TOM STOELKER / Staff Photographer

The Crossing choir rehearses for the first of three concerts at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill.