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The Crossing: Part Two of Month of Moderns in Chestnut Hill



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As meticulously prepared as The Crossing almost always is, the choir's bent toward ambitious programming of untried new works means that even the most confidently projected performances have bemusing, puzzling moments. For instance: Could the ultraserious British composer James MacMillan really have wanted his *Padre Pio's Prayer* to have a calliope-style organ part?

Don't misunderstand: Part Two of The Crossing's Month of Moderns festival, on Friday at the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, was as absorbing as any of the group's many excellent concerts. And part of the luxury of such repertoire is that the usual artistic questions - what is it? what does it mean? - have been examined by few previous audiences.

Crossing founder/director Donald Nally makes the musical front line the place to be, especially in an era where possibilities of expression are changing from a comforting hymn-based manner to something that acknowledges often-torturous, highly personal paths to wisdom. In a few of the works heard Friday, composers used a single sustained tone as an anchor for a marvelously unfolding lyric vocal line, especially Kamran Ince, the Montana-born, Turkey-raised composer whose *Gloria (Everywhere)* mined a Rumi text in inspirational and sensual ways - with the anchor tone having its own morphing process through various degrees of radiance.

The same notes can mean wildly different things when sounded at an unexpected amplitude, which was probably what made the MacMillan piece seem particularly incongruous. In the British-made recording of the piece by The Sixteen, the organ is in the background with quiet flights of digressive musing. Maybe because of acoustical misjudgments, the foreground approach favored by organist Scott Dettra on Friday created a confusing collision.

The concert's world premiere was Lansing McLoskey's *The Memory of Rain*, which took on the concrete imagery of poet Philip Levine with mixed success. Initially, the composer sought to just musically enshrine the words with a simple sonic frame that was not so interesting. Later in the piece, he began to layer different texts using contrasting sections of the chorus, using motifs with a few well-chosen notes as the basis for an unfolding harmonic universe, similar to the best moments of Morton Feldman's *Rothko Chapel*. The organ writing effectively framed the voices, creating almost cinematic effects with the musical counterparts to close-ups and wide shots. As it is, it is an important work. With revisions, it could be more important. The next Month of Moderns concert is Saturday.

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