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by Michael Caruso

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Donald Nally and The Crossing performed the second installment of their "Month of Moderns" Friday night in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. In spite of a monsoon-size downpour shortly before the scheduled start of the concert, an impressively large and demonstrably enthusiastic audience was on hand to hear Nally lead his choir and organist Scott Dettra in a roster of five contemporary choral works, the oldest of which was composed in 2002 with another receiving its commissioned world premiere.

That work was Lansing McLosley's "The Memory of Rain," written as part of "The Levine Project" of scores that employ as their text poetry by Pulitzer Prize winner Philip Levine. The series of commissions is sponsored by the Philadelphia Music Project, which is part of the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage. The program's other works were "Gloria (Everywhere)" by Kamran Ince, "My song is love unknown" by Francis Pott, "Padre Pio's Prayer" by James MacMillan, and "Now I have known, O Lord" by Gabriel Jackson.

Of the five works, my favorite was Jackson's "Now I have known, O Lord," composed in 2006 to a 10th century mystical Sufi text. Beautifully balanced between cleanly voiced chords and melismatic polyphony, and sung without organ accompaniment, the music proffers moods of soothing serenity contrasted against passages of surging turmoil and dramatic ecstasy. It was performed with immaculate tuning, exquisite balance, crystalline diction, broadly varied dynamics, and phrasing that was both revelatory and theatrical.

McLoskey's "The Memory of Rain" follows the starkly contrasting strains of Levine's poetry with music for choir & organ that effectively sets the traditional against the modern. Perhaps it's better to say that McLoskey uses the one to clarify and enhance the other so that traditional developmental devices seem freshly minted while modern strains of composition sound as though they're securely a part of classical music's continuum of development. Nally, The Crossing and Dettra gave it a reading memorable for its technical polish, intellectual integrity and emotional delineation.

The young Scotsman James MacMillan managed a minor miracle of his own by elevating a rather sentimental text by Francesco Forgione (Padre Pio) into a glorious work for choir & organ aptly entitled "Padre Pio's Prayer." Composed in 2008 for the 50th anniversary of MacMillan's parents, the choral writing is sumptuously expressive while the organ accompaniment is delicate and rather otherworldly, producing a texture that soars through its transparency. Pott's "My song is love unknown," written in 2002, manages somewhat the opposite effect by toning down Samuel Crossman's 1664 "The Young Man's Meditation," a poem of extravagantly intense Christian devotion. The choral setting is straightforward, leaving the histrionics to the organ part, stunningly rendered by Scott Dettra, formerly the organist at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in center city Philadelphia and now holding the same position at the National Episcopal Cathedral in Washington, D.C.