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Poets inspire songs at Month of Moderns Festival



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The Crossing's 2010 Month of Moderns Festival no doubt won new friends for the much-honored American poet Philip Levine, whose words were the basis of newly commissioned compositions, in an endeavor that turned out to have challenges worth taking but *not* worth repeating.

And that's partly why the festival's trio of choral concerts was so engaging: Nothing came close to tanking, but artistic debates without black-and-white conclusions were surely possible. As much as Levine's plainspoken words led the designated composers into creative overdrive, you knew what was missing when Saturday's final program at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill turned to music inspired by a more abstract poet, Paul Celan. There, you could experience a healthy awe beyond words.

Levine's poem *Breath* is a meditation on mountain scenery that unexpectedly arrives at a re-appreciation of a long-term relationship. Composer Paul Fowler logically responded with vocal portrayals of natural phenomena, but you cannot build an entire piece on that. So the music also tried to go to the heart of the poem's introspection with an inward musical manner that felt too much like eavesdropping on an experience rather than having it directly.

Though Lansing McLoskey's Levine setting, *The Memory of Rain*, was impressive at last week's premiere, his older work, *Burning Chariots*, was sung Saturday and showed more clearly how good he is. He culled graphically unflinching antiwar texts, many of them Old Testament, and had them sung over dronelike effects that morphed in and out of aurally disturbing quarter tones - with great visceral effect.

In the Celan-based works, the poems do not read so easily on the page: They have no clear beginning-middle-end signposts and take you into seldom-charted emotional places - in contrast to the more self-sufficient Levine, who takes well-marked routes to common-experience places but in ways that make you appreciate them anew. Though Levine's poems have a rhythmic music, Celan's have little sense of fixed meaning - a more fundamentally musical quality - resulting in a freer expression from the composers at hand, and one less tethered to the temporal world.

Frank Havroy's *Psalm*, David Shapiro's *The Years From You to Me*, and Kile Smith's *Where Flames a Word* (all Celan-based pieces heard Saturday) were mercurial in manner and form, and they shared a harmonic sense in which innovation was born of intense expressive necessity. At times, the fusion of words and music was staggering.

Shapiro's fine piece (which was a premiere) was full of dreamy motivic echoes. Smith's peaked emotionally with a soprano-section outburst on the words, "I understand, I do . . ." suggesting a profound union of souls. Performances were particularly savvy with a clarity of diction that revealed the singular progression of each piece, thanks to conductor Donald Nally.

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