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## NOTEWORTHY/Chestnut Hill LOCAL

by Michael Caruso

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Donald Nally and The Crossing saved the best for last. The final installment of their “Month of Moderns” was performed Saturday night, July 17, in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. The concert drew what seemed to be the largest audience of the three programs in the series and it proffered the finest renditions of the finest music of the entire set.

This time around, Nally and his chamber choir sang unaccompanied. There were no strings; there was no organ. Just 22 of the most carefully chosen singers known to Donald Nally and heard by me in 35 seasons of concert-reviewing. The roster of pieces included two world premieres and an encore performance of a premiere from last season’s “Month of Moderns.” The oldest score sung Saturday evening was composed in 1997 while two were written in this very year of 2010 – and one of those was completed just in time last week to fill a hole in the program created by the unavailability of another work. Donald Nally and The Crossing have raised the bar on an acceptable use of the term “hot off the presses.” They’ve also raised the bar when it comes to choosing great contemporary choral music and giving it outstanding renditions.

That “hot off the presses” piece of music was David Shapiro’s “The Years from Me to You.” Set to poetry by Paul Celan and intended as a companion to the 41-year-old New Jersey-born composer’s “It’s Time” (itself a part of The Celan Project of the 2009 “Month of Moderns”) “The Years from You to Me” was originally intended to be premiered on The Crossing’s newest recording being made this week. The most distinctly salient characteristic of the music is its flowing polyphony, a texture of vocal lines that often produces closely voiced harmonies that are simultaneously anguished and ecstatic. Without doing so discernibly, the music follows a form that progresses naturally yet dramatically, artlessly yet concisely, achieving its conclusion quietly yet powerfully. The Crossing sang it splendidly Saturday night. Tuning, blend, balance and texture were flawless; diction, dynamics and phrasing were expressive. Despite not having seen the music more than a few days before concert-time, Nally interpreted it and led its rendition with consummate technical mastery and emotional commitment.

The concert’s other Celan Project score was Kile Smith’s “Where flames a word,” given its premiere during last year’s “Month of Moderns.” Smith has a lock on combining the new with the old. He creates new worlds of sound for a choir yet molds these sounds into developmental procedures that hark back to the earliest days of polyphony in the centuries before the Renaissance. His harmonic language always sounds rooted in either medieval modality or major/minor tonality, yet it also always sounds breathtakingly free in its myriad modes of emotional and spiritual expressivity. The music seems to unfold from the spark of its own motivation yet it also always remains faithful to its text. It’s a miracle of

technical wizardry disguised as spontaneity. And, once again, Nally and The Crossing performed it beautifully with tones that glowed as though fired from deep inside the heart and soul.

The concert opened with Lansing McLoskey's "Burning Chariots," composed in 2003 at the start of the war in Iraq and employing 12 different languages in its Old Testament texts. McLoskey uses single long-held notes and repeated ostinato figures for mesmerizing effects – almost hypnotizing the listener into a state of higher discernment. Although not an official part of The Celan Project, Norwegian composer Frank Harvøy used Paul Celan's poetry for his 2005 "Psalm." Here the tuned music is often surrounded by hushed whispers for sweet yet haunting effects. Paul Fowler's "Breath," receiving its world premiere as part of The Levine Project, is remarkably delicate in its layered voicings and subtle in its chromatic harmonies – all the more so coming from a composer who is only 32 years old. The program's final work was "Villarosa Sarialdi" by the Swedish Thomas Jennefelt. A glorious example of minimalism in choral music, it utilizes a made-up language that manages to achieve an incredible level of expressivity simply through the sounds of its syllables. Nally and The Crossing gave all four of these works exemplary renditions – polished yet impassioned. I don't think I've ever before heard a choir sing so consistently beautifully "live" in concert.