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## Happily following uncharted byways



By David Patrick Stearns  
Inquirer Classical Music Critic

Composer David Lang inspired the famous line in a Los Angeles Times review, "There's no name yet for this kind of music." But at the Philadelphia premiere of Lang's genre-less *Little Match Girl Passion* (which prompted the quote and won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize), one realized that most of the music presented by Donald Nally's choir, the Crossing, lies outside describable musical contexts.

The capacity audience at Sunday's business-as-usual mind-blowing concert in the austere environs of Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill seemed perfectly happy to also enter the enigmatically titled *Legend of the Walled-In Woman* by Latvian composer Eriks Esenvalds - whom nobody had heard of, much less heard - which proved nearly as great a discovery as Lang's well-established piece. "Hollywood harmonies and Gesualdo flexibility" as one audience member described it. Could you have imagined such a thing if you hadn't heard it? Some composers write music that recognizably reflects our world; Lang and Esenvalds create far less-precedented worlds.

Latviansonline.com and balticmall.com offer information about Esenvalds, 32, who could pass for a Banana Republic model, teaches high school in Riga, and is inspired by the elemental: His *Walled-In Woman* draws from legends and Albanian folk song dating back millennia. The tale of gods who demand female sacrifice to ensure the successful building of a castle is characterized by exotic grace notes and long, downward glissandos - stylized keening, in other words - plus a dreamy middle section in which harmonies expand, endlessly and in seemingly every direction, into a dizzying mass of sound.

Similar effects in a second Esenvalds piece, *The Sun Dogs* (referring to the light-ice-sun phenomenon of the far north), attain even more hallucinatory levels. These performances showed the Crossing at its peerless best, with conductor Nally often grounding the music with strong bass lines suggesting Russian church chant.

Lang's *Match Girl Passion* (also well performed, though it tested the Crossing's limits) is built on more fearless, less ingratiating musical juxtapositions - Bach's retelling of Christ's crucifixion and the Hans Christian Andersen tale about the match-selling street urchin who freezes to death while fantasizing about a loving Christmas. Lang alternates between recounting and reflecting on Andersen's plot, with a post-minimalist language that at times becomes so spare as to feel medieval. One short, punchy motif initially sounds like a nursery rhyme; as death approaches, it morphs into something intractable. Unlike some minimalists, Lang doesn't lull the listener. There's little musical symmetry. Various elements stumble over each other and narrative passages are often halting. Rather than underscoring the story's pathos (which takes care of itself), Lang uses more reflective passages for his singular, non-linear musical constructions, exhausting all possibilities whether we like it or not.

Does the character of the *Match Girl* have the stature that warrants a so-called passion, especially since we know only the barest sketches of her short life? Certainly she dies for our sins. Though Lang isn't one to manage listener reactions with great specificity, his method of presentation keeps the bigger questions from getting lost. What inhumane world allowed the *Match Girl* to reach this state? What would you do if you met her today? What if she only spoke Arabic?

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