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Choruses getting adventurous



By David Patrick Stearns

Inquirer Classical Music Critic

'Make it sound easy.'

So went conductor David Hayes' directive to the Philadelphia Singers for his concert this Saturday of minimalist-based composers, titled "Glass, Reich, and Bryars." The order is deceptively tall.

The ensemble, best known for singing big choral works from Bach to Stravinsky with the Philadelphia Orchestra, is collaborating with the perpetually edgy Relache ensemble and Orchestra 2001 in Philip Glass' *Persephone* and Steve Reich's *You Are (Variations)* - both of which turn many musical equations upside down. Instead of being the primary purveyor of musical information, the singers are cogs - though essential ones - in an intricate, mechanized, minimalist-based machine.

More than ever, Philadelphia choruses are exploring alternative aesthetics to a degree that was unusual only five years ago, and almost unthinkable in the late 1990s. Besides the Crossing's Month of Moderns festival in June, the Mendelssohn Club will sing Roberto Sierra's 2006 *Missa Latina* on April 24, and even the Philadelphia Gay Men's Chorus will drop its pop-slanted repertoire for Michael Shaieb's *Through a Glass Darkly* - dramatizing crystal meth addiction - April 16 and 17.

Persephone is a premiere of sorts: Though Relache premiered it shorn of voices in 1994, the choral parts were played by Glass on keyboard. And though the fully fledged piece has been out on disc for years, Saturday's concert at the

Annenberg Center will be the first live performance.

The piece began life inspired by T.S. Eliot, but after the poet's estate intervened, Glass went down the road of ancient mythological figures such as Persephone. What the music means isn't exactly obvious.

"What's different about this movement? Why does it have its title? What's going on here?" said chorus member Alyson Harvey. "I hope I come up with some notion about that myself."

Such comprehension can't be faked in choruses - a problem similarly faced by the Choral Arts Society. On March 13 and 14, it will perform *Ancient Liturgies*, an enigmatic, forgotten work by the late Joseph Castaldo (who ran what is now the University of the Arts) that explores the secretive, obscure religion of Mithraism, practiced in parts of the Roman Empire from the first to fourth centuries A.D. As with Glass and Reich, this atmospheric, ritualistic piece has few notes on the page - but they are notes that demand exactly the right sound.

"It's about creating transcendental effects," said Choral Arts director Matt Glandorf. "There are times you have to shout. You have to get beyond being prim and proper to get that. You have to engage the entire body."

The hardest part is singing softly. The composer, who died in 2000, demanded at the 1990 premiere that the sopranos sing on the border of audibility at times. "But the sound still has to be there," said soprano Patti McLaughlin. "It's very hard to do."

This flurry of experimentation by choral groups acting independently has to do with overarching factors. Standard repertoire doesn't draw as dependably as it once did, says Harler, who has regularly conducted works such as *Carmina Burana* at the Kimmel Center. And since a chorus' financial overhead is a fraction of the Philadelphia Orchestra's, more adventure is possible.

Also, there's a coming-of-age element among local choral directors. Some had to be drafted while in their 20s when substantial figures such as Philadelphia Singers founder Michael Korn died in 1991 and Choral Arts' Sean Deibler, who died this year, went into premature artistic decline due to personal problems. Both Hayes and Donald Nally (now of the Crossing), who replaced Korn and Deibler in various capacities, find their maturing taste in music taking them in progressive directions. Local foundations encourage that: Grants are available for new music - though they're not always so accessible. Relache co-artistic director Lloyd Shorter said "Glass, Reich, and Bryars" took three years from conception to realization.

But the audience is there - not large, says Harler, "but it's going to stick with you."

Also, audiences have a wider context for understanding the new works at hand. Glass' music is now heard on candy commercials. Numerous choral composers from the Baltic republics have expanded creative possibilities. While Castaldo's *Ancient Liturgies* might have seemed obscure to some ears 20 years ago - or even those who heard his *Viola Concerto* premiered by the Philadelphia Orchestra the same year - the rise of Hispanic composers and prevalence of world music means listeners can get beyond *Ancient Liturgies'* exoticism and contemplate meaning, as the singers are now. "It's a whole different way of getting to God," explains McLaughlin.

There's always the chance that there's no great meaning to reveal. Though Relache members say *Persephone* wasn't done justice by its recording, some Philadelphia Singers suspect it isn't all that deep. When Harler floated the idea of reviving the unsuccessful *Cantata of the Innocents* he commissioned in 1990 from a certain Argentinian Penn student named Osvaldo Golijov - now one of the hottest U.S.-based composers - the composer acknowledged that while the Mendelssohn Club might sing it better now, "the piece still sucks."

The reality of alternative aesthetics is that they may not have the typical payoff for singers - especially important with choruses with a large volunteer contingent. Though nobody doubts the depths of Reich's already beloved *You Are (Variations)*, the rhythms are treacherous even for the all-professional Philadelphia Singers.

"If you're off by one eighth note, you'll be off for pages," said Leslie Johnson.

"You have to nail every single bar," said Hayes.

The confounding paradox, however, is that what's on the printed page of a post-minimalist score seems wholly different from the mellifluous, hypnotic sound that comes off the stage. "It's going to be hard work," says Hayes, "but if we find the groove, it's going to sound joyous, confident, and fun."

And maybe even easy.

Choruses on the Edge

Philadelphia Singers 8 p.m. Saturday at the Annenberg Center. Info: 215-898-3900 or www.pennpresents.org.

Choral Arts Society 8 p.m. March 13 at Daylesford Abbey, Paoli, and 6 p.m.

March 14 at the Philadelphia Cathedral. Info: 215-240-6417 or www.choralarts.com

Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia Roberto Sierra's "Missa Latina," 8 p.m. April 24 at Baptist Temple at Temple University. Info: 1-800-298-4200 or www.mcchorus.org.

Philadelphia Gay Men's Chorus 8 p.m. April 16 and 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. April 17 at the Arden Theater. Info: 1-877-462-7464. www.pgmc.org.

The Crossing Month of Moderns festival opening 4 p.m. June 27, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. Info: www.crossingchoir.com

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