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LOCAL/Chestnut Hill Christmas Concerts 2007

by Michael Caruso

Music has been a part of the celebration of Christmas since that choir of angels sang out the good news of the birth of the Saviour to the shepherds two thousand years ago. And it's played an important part in making Chestnut Hill the most special destination in the region for enjoying the season through the sound of music.

The **"Epiphany Vespers"** concert will launch a new relationship for Piffaro. The band will be joined by The Crossing, the chamber choir founded and led by Donald Nally, formerly the music director of the Choral Arts Society, the Opera Company of Philadelphia Chorus and St. Mark's Episcopal Church in center city Philadelphia.

"Epiphany tends to be overlooked," Wiemken pointed out, "yet it's the other bookend that completes the Christmas season beginning in Advent. We spoke with composer Kyle Smith about writing a work that would fit into the context of an historic Reformed Vespers service. Naturally, we needed a choir to work with us and, after hearing The Crossing in concert last December in Chestnut Hill Presbyterian Church, we decided to approach Donald Nally about collaborating with Piffaro on this project, and he took to it immediately."

Wiemken explained that Smith composed a traditional Vespers liturgy by using texts from three Psalms, the Magnificat of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and hymns drawing on melodies from the era. The choral singing will be accompanied by Piffaro, with old instruments playing new music. He added that Piffaro's musicians are particularly excited by this engaging prospect and that the Chestnut Hill concert will be recorded for eventual commercial release. For ticket information, call 215-235-8469 or visit www.piffaro.com.

THE CROSSING

Not only will The Crossing join Piffaro for that January 6th Epiphany concert, but Donald Nally will conduct the highly acclaimed chamber choir in its own Christmas concert on Friday, December 21, at 8 p.m. in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill.

Nally explained that The Crossing's program would proffer many works with which the audience is not yet familiar but that it will find itself challenged and entranced by these new works.

"Although I tend to stay away from picking a 'major piece' on the program," Nally said, "in the back of my head I do tend to construct the concert around the idea of a service to give the evening a sense of developing drama. For this program, it will start and end with a setting of 'What Child Is This' -- a traditional version by Ruggles to end the concert and a new arrangement by Andrew Gant to open it.

"The program will also include Judith Bingham's 'Clouded Heaven,' which is lyrical and exotic, and build toward Kenneth Leighton's 'A Christmas Carol.' That will be the oldest piece on the program,

composed back in 1954, but it's still a contemporary response to the traditions of Christmas music. I think of it as characteristic of our choir -- singing contemporary statements on traditional themes and texts. It's a very dramatic work for baritone solo and organ accompaniment."

Nally pointed out that, for the first time, The Crossing will be joined by Mark Anderson, director of music ministries at Chestnut Hill Presbyterian Church and the virtual designer of the church's splendid new Mander pipe organ.

The program will also feature works by James MacMillan, Kerry Andrew, Thomas Ades, Jonathan Dove, John Tavener and David Shapiro.

"David composed several pieces for both the Choral Arts Society and the Bridge Ensemble," said Nally, latterly referring to The Crossing's predecessor. "This new piece is entitled 'Et incarnatus est' and I gave him free rein within the parameters of our short rehearsal period. So it will be a surprise for me when I open the envelope! I love his music because it seems to bloom from inside as though the text were his own."

Summing up, Nally said, "These are all pieces I think our choir does spectacularly well. They're contemporary settings of traditional melodies and texts -- and I think our audiences have come to trust us to bring them unfamiliar works on familiar themes, works that they'll come to know and love as we do. At least I hope so!"

For ticket information visit www.CrossingChoir.com