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NOTEWORTHY/Chestnut Hill LOCAL by Michael Caruso for 9/20/2007

Once again, the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill will be the season venue for one of the region's most exciting and compelling musical ensembles. The Crossing, the chamber choir founded and directed by Donald Nally, will present four concerts in the church, located at 8855 Germantown Avenue, with each program proffering a challenging roster of mostly new or unusual scores, both accompanied (on the church's magnificent Mander pipe organ) and unaccompanied.

Donald Nally remains one of the most highly regarded and warmly considered of all locally connected choral directors, perhaps the most so since the passing of Michael Korn a decade and a half ago. Nally led the Choral Arts Society, the Opera Company of Philadelphia Chorus and the music program of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in center city Philadelphia. He left Philadelphia to take on the post of choirmaster of the Welsh National Opera in Cardiff and is now the choral director of Chicago's Lyric Opera. The Windy City's opera company, along with the New York City Opera and the San Francisco Opera, occupies that second tier of opera ensembles in America, just below the peerless Metropolitan Opera. It proffers an extensive season of both traditional and contemporary works and has been the venue of choice for an American debut of many of the world's leading operatic singers.

When I spoke by phone with Nally a short while ago, he was already in his fourth week of rehearsals, well in advance of opening, preparing the choir for both Verdi's "La Traviata" and Puccini's "La Boheme."

"We need to learn the entire season during the first five weeks," Nally explained. "Once the season opens, we're performing regularly, so it's got to be finished before opening night of the season." Nally said that his choir is comprised of 48 fulltime singers with an additional 12 brought in for certain operas that require a larger chorus to balance a larger orchestra in the pit.

Speaking of The Crossing's season, Nally acknowledged that much of the music the choir is set to perform will be unfamiliar to most folks in the audience.

"That's part of our goal, our mission," he admitted. "We don't want to sing the music every other choir is singing. Fortunately, I've brought together a group of singers who want to do this kind of repertoire even if it means that we're not likely to make lots of money singing it! But all the same, we're not doing crazy things because, even when the music is new or simply new to us and our audiences, it's always firmly rooted in the great traditions of choral music stretching back for many centuries. I think our audiences have come to recognize that fact and even to trust us to find music that's both unfamiliar yet familiar, as well."

The Crossing's season is set to open on Saturday, October 6, at 8 p.m. in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill with a program that includes the local premiere of Erhard Karkoschka's Four Kleine Finalsätze zu "Es ist ein Schnitter, heisst der Tod," as well as Kaija Saariaho's "Tag des Jahres," David Lang's "I lie in bed" and James MacMillan's "Magnificat" and "Nunc Dimittis."

Speaking about the Karkoschka score, Nally described it as taking a pointilistic start far away from the original German Lutheran chorale theme and then, step by step, returning more and more closely to the chorale's original shape.

"It's as though each piece of a puzzle falls into place, one by one," he said.

Nally added that the principal appeal for him of Saariaho's "Tag des Jahrs" was its composer's Finnish heritage, since Finland is one of his favorite European countries. "He's also very 'hot' right now, more for his operas than anything else. His music is highly influenced by electronic music and sounds, which he modifies, and sounds almost tonal at times but isn't really.

"David Lang's 'I lie in bed' is typical of his minimalist style," Nally continued. "Two chords permeate the entire work, which is based on a Yiddish text."

Nally described the two MacMillan scores on the program as major works that feature an organ accompaniment, which will be performed by Scott Dettra, whose tenure as organist at St. Mark's Episcopal Church is fondly remembered and who is now the principal organist at the National Episcopal Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

The Crossing's Christmas concert is scheduled for Friday, December 21, at 8 p.m. The choir will be joined by Piffaro, the Renaissance Wind Band, for an Epiphany Vespers on Sunday, January 6, 2008, at 4 p.m., and The Crossing's season will conclude on Friday, April 25, at 8 p.m. All concerts will take place in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. Tickets are \$20 and are available at the door or can be reserved at [www.crossingchoir.com](http://www.crossingchoir.com).