

SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL

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The Crossing: Donald Nally, cond., Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, 6.10. 2007 (BH)

The Crossing

Donald Nally, *conductor*

Scott Dettra, *organ*

John Grecia, *accompanist*

Great choral ensembles combine room-filling sound, immaculate intonation, good diction in a variety of languages, and the ability to project words even at a hush. Well, get ready: combining all these qualities is *The Crossing*, established in 2005 and poised to take off with a vengeance, with artistic direction from conductor Donald Nally. Recently the chorus master at the Welsh National Opera, Nally was chosen earlier this year to direct the chorus at Lyric Opera of Chicago, but thankfully he will continue his work in Philadelphia with this virtuoso ensemble of twenty singers. He offers an uncompromising commitment to contemporary choral music, superb musicianship, and insightfully written notes.

The first few seconds of Gabriel Jackson's *Creator of the Stars of Night* showed off what a friend called "some killer sopranos" at the last concert I attended in September 2006. But one might as well describe the "killer altos, tenors and basses," since they all share an impressive control and focus. (That focus would be amusingly tested later in the evening.) Jackson's style, which Nally calls "melodic minimalism," builds from a quiet opening, until the entrance of the organ rings down the work in a blaze. Scott Dettra, organist at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, brought unusual colors into the closing pages.

A Bach chorale was the inspiration for Erhard Karkoschka, whose *Vier kleine Finalsätze zu "Es ist ein Schnitter, heist der Tod"* deconstructs the Bach and reassembles it in a fascinating amalgam of styles. Each of the four sections concludes with "Beware, fair little flower," reflecting the fragility of life and its inevitable end. When the chorus intones, "There is a reaper, called Death," each singer is assigned individual syllables, but the initial spare texture gradually becomes thicker. The aleatoric second movement is the most arresting of the four, in which the singers are given pitches and vowels but are allowed to move independently, sliding through glissandi and creating subtle twisting lines that seem to melt into each other. The fourth section adds speech in "I defy you,

Death,” that begins somewhat like a vocal fugue.

To end the first half, Nally chose Jonathan Harvey’s majestic *Remember, O Lord*, written in 2003 for the Golden Jubilee of Elizabeth II, followed by *Behold God, our Defender*, which Herbert Howells wrote for her coronation. Harvey’s ascending scales are punctuated by silences, allowing the group’s impeccable chord tuning to hang suspended in the air. Howells’s anthem was a gloriously sung complement.

As a wedding gift, David Lang wrote *I Lie*, a minimal work for women’s chorus, with just five notes rearranged in Morton Feldman-like patterns. The Yiddish text describes a woman lying in bed, awaiting the return of her lover, and the overall tone is hushed and contemplative. Early in the work the words are parceled into tiny murmurs, but later the texture freezes into dense blocks.

Kaija Saariaho uses a taped electronic soundtrack with chorus for *Tag des Jahrs (Day of the Years)*, with texts by Friedrich Hölderlin corresponding to the four seasons. For “Spring,” the soundtrack begins almost imperceptibly, with washes of white noise, quiet squiggles, and glittering bell-like tones, before the chorus contributes its hypnotic, chant-like lines. “Summer” is slightly faster, and the difficult “Autumn” faster still, with the choir challenged to match the tricky meters in the electronics. During the austere “Winter,” a surprising, piercing drone suddenly leaped into the foreground that had a few in the audience covering their ears, until we all realized that the church’s fire alarm had been set off. After a few gasps, and a chuckling comment from Nally, the group began anew with the fourth section, but as the piece reached its soft, transcendent conclusion, flashing red lights could be glimpsed outside, i.e., the fire department. Thankfully they were intercepted before they burst in, chopping through doors and spraying water, and meanwhile, the singers recovered almost immediately, showing extraordinary concentration in summoning up Saariaho’s frozen mystery.

The evening ended with yet another James MacMillan blockbuster, *Magnificat and Nunc dimittis* with his typical mix of rapturous choral plateaus and gnashing organ chords, with Dettra in furious form. (The Crossing has a special rapport with MacMillan, and their performance of his *Te Deum* last year was breathtaking in its intensity.) For the cavernous opening to the *Nunc dimittis*, the basses could have reached down to the earth’s core for a note held with rock-solid composure, which returns for the peaceful yet ominous conclusion. The composer’s religious fervor is more than a little sinister, almost frightening. As a soothing encore, the group delivered his (much more tranquil) arrangement of *The Gallant Weaver* by Robert Burns, a prototypically Scottish ballad gently tugged out of shape.

Bruce Hodges

