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Bryars premiere highlights end of 'Month'

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Donald Nally, director of the Crossing, of Philadelphia. His singers delivered a striking initial performance of Gavin Bryars' "The Fifth Century."

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Eternity, infinity, and other ultimate abstractions are described in such entrancing detail by 17th-century poet and theologian Thomas Traherne that he seems to have personally visited the afterlife's "transparent temple of infinite luster" to know what he knew. Such is the intriguing basis of *The Fifth Century*, a 45-minute work by British composer Gavin Bryars, premiered Saturday by Philadelphia choir the Crossing and PRISM Saxophone Quartet at Crane Arts.

Ambitious and subtle, and at the same time not for everybody, *The Fifth Century* doesn't attempt to describe eternity's "mysterious absence of time and ages" but gives Traherne's words an ethereal showcase. It's a significant addition to the output of this 71-year-old British maverick. Bryars operates in a narrow framework of polyphonic choral sound with muted, coloristic use of saxophones. Similar in manner to Haydn's *The Seven Last Words of Christ*, Bryars' piece avoids

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conventional events and dramatic contrasts but gives most movements a distinctive tint and narrative, making each one its own world.

One movement is built on burbling ostinatos from the saxophones. Another creates a chant-like effect with the bass voices of the Crossing. In yet another, a rhythmic trudge from the saxophones created a foundation with voices succumbing to and transcending earthly cares. High treble sounds (whether from voice or sax) seemed to look down from the sky while voices reacted in numerous interesting ways.

Another movement ached with harmonically unresolved lyricism, like a voice that knows the great beyond but can't get there. Bryars' sense of invention waned in the last 10 minutes or so; one wondered if the piece was truly completed. But with deft shaping by The Crossing director Donald Nally, the ending (solo voices in quiet, open fifths) achieved understated gravity.

The other big news was *Hymns from the Western Coast* by Tonu Korvits, an Estonian composer with music that often started with basic hymnlike outlines but opened up to encompass realms of tragedy without horror - creating a sense of earthly contrast to the infinite sky of *The Fifth Century*.

The most inventive use of the saxophone/chorus combination was in Stratis Minakakis' *Monteverdi Responsories* using motifs from a Monteverdi madrigal but with chorus and saxophones languidly orbiting around each other.

The concert capped what has been the most consistent of the Crossing's Month of Moderns festivals yet. And with the chances any ensemble takes with pieces whose ink is still wet, consistency is something of a miracle.

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