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# Composer home team trounces out-of-town star

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Part two of the Month of Moderns festival by the Crossing choir started with international star Eric Whitacre, followed by new works by Robert Maggio, James Primosch, and Frances White. Becky Oehlers Photography

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How often is the best-known composer on a modern-music program the least significant? By far?

So it was at Saturday's part two of the Month of Moderns festival when the Crossing choir began its concert at Crane Arts with Eric Whitacre. Though he's an international star among choral-music composers, his lovely *Sainte-Chapelle* was outclassed by locals, and not ones you might expect.

One is always happy when local composers do great work. But blindfold tests on the new works by Robert Maggio, James Primosch, and Frances White would have proved their considerable worth whatever their geographical affiliations. The odd part: They were chosen in a competition based on existing pieces and proposals for new ones, though the new ones in some cases sounded little like previous works.

Though Maggio has moved toward lighter-weight musical theater of late, *The Women Where We Are Living*, for chorus and harp, is a masterly look at Alzheimer's disease taken from Dr. Alois Alzheimer's journal entries about a patient with encroaching brain deterioration, whom he met in 1901.

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Texts are both observations of and dialogues with the patient that show dwindling faculties, sometimes musically illustrated with canonic writing spinning round and round without leading anywhere. The patient's viewpoint also had increasing harmonic haze, in contrast to the doctor's clear, emphatic rhythms. The nine movements are, at times, symbolically truncated, cut off as a musical thought just before fruition.

Under Donald Nally, the Crossing sang with more than its typical comprehension: The singers seemed to live the piece from the inside out.

As director of the electronic music studio at Penn, Primosch might not seem the type to write the voice-only *Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus*. Yet his command of the medium was complete, with the standard Mass text meaningfully augmented with non-sacred texts by poet Denise Levertov about putting one's trust in the unknown. Melodies were enhanced by chants with fat-free, hard-edged Stravinskyan chords and partitioned voices, including a small band of soloists physically dispersed from the larger chorus. The irony of this "doubting Thomas" work is that, unlike the turbulent religious works of his contemporary James MacMillan, Primosch has a serene, assured core that creates a less-congested contrast, putting the agony of uncertainty in higher relief.

The composer I know least is White, whose *The Third Night* is based on Andrew Lang's 1897 *Pink Fairy Book*, specifically when the protagonist hears a princess ghost's inconsolable, often-fragmented questions about loss - seen in video projections by James Pritchett while being heard amid thick choral textures. As musicalized by White, ghost texts had eerie universality: Wasn't I just thinking that minutes ago? Is this piece reading my mind?

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