

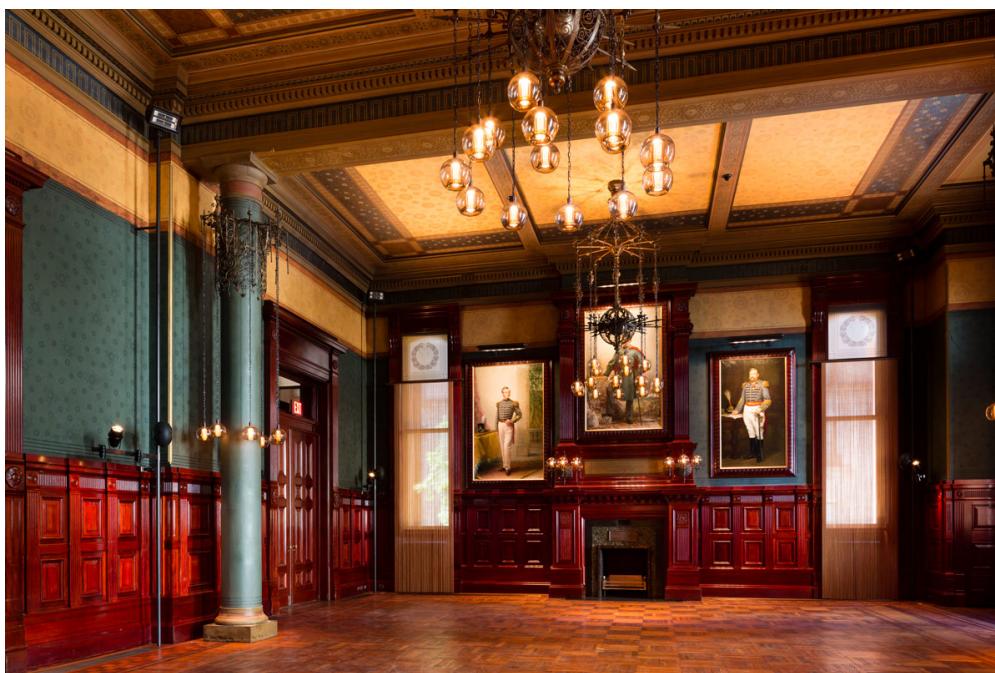
When Singing Becomes a Revolutionary Act

By [Bruce Hodges](#), *Musical America*

September 24, 2018

Between politics and other world issues, there's a lot to be angry about right now. And with anger can come a bewildering array of emotions, all elegantly, meticulously articulated by The Crossing—a 24-voice, virtuoso choir based in Philadelphia—on September 19 at the Park Avenue Armory.

Titled “Of Arms and the Man” (from Virgil’s *Aeneid*) the program was divided into two halves, the first in the Armory’s Board of Officers Room, the second in the Veterans Room—each restored in recent years to its gilded age opulence. As conductor Donald Nally observed in the program notes, the two spaces serve “as a backdrop to what we actually do in such facilities [an armory], which is train people to kill other people.”



The Board of Officers Room at the Park Avenue Armory

Despite that sober comment, the evening was often mellow, sometimes optimistic, occasionally funny. Artistry was the common thread. Founded in 2005, The Crossing is now one of the country’s premier choral groups, which has performed all over the country, and commissioned over 70 new works. In 2018, it won a Grammy award for Best Choral Performance for Gavin Bryars’ *The Fifth Century*, a collaboration with the PRISM saxophone quartet.

As audience members entered the Board of Officers Room, David Lang’s delicate *depart* (2002) was in progress, and the evening ended with Lang’s *last spring* (2015) and its haunting plea for more time to witness another season. As connective tissue between each of the works, three superb cellists—Alexander Hersh, Arlen Hlusko, and Thomas Mesa—performed brief interludes composed by Nally, a unifying device that also enabled the singers to find the initial pitches of the following pieces.

Two works by Gabriel Jackson showed his mastery of line combined with sumptuously complex chords, here precisely delivered. *Our flags are wafting in hope and grief* (2014, words by Doris Kareva) musically illustrates the ambiguous emotions that emerge in the wake of rage: “We live with regret, we live with doubt.”

Jackson’s shimmering palette was illustrated even more effectively in *Rigwreck* (2013), a piercing meditation on greed and arrogance inspired by the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disastrous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. In addition to his typically spacious, pungent harmonies, Jackson uses quasi-

spoken passages, fast patter sequences, and brief, sober silences. The phrase “conscious liar” was blurted out with blunt force.

The New York premiere of Ted Hearne’s *Animals*—commissioned by the Armory and the ensemble—was one of the night’s high points, showing the Crossing at its best in Hearne’s thrilling colors. Starting with a shriek and just two sentences quoting Trump on immigrants (“These aren’t people. These are animals.”), Hearne quickly overwhelms the words with a blizzard of animal sounds—tropical birds, monkeys, coyotes, dogs. One singer did a spot-on wolf howl. But amid the barking, screeching, and hissing, perhaps the most touching moment was the faint sound of a cat, as if dying or slinking away.

Three works, all from 2016, were commissioned by a memorial fund created in honor of Jeff Dinsmore, the ensemble’s beloved co-founder who died in 2014. Louis Andriessen wrote *Ahania Weeping* from texts by William Blake, using grave rhythms that emphasized Blake’s mournful words. In contrast, David Shapiro’s *Sumptuous Planet* (text by Richard Dawkins) is upbeat and declamatory, with a thoughtful admonishment not to take the Earth—and life in general—for granted. And near the end of the night came *Empire of Crystal* from Benjamin C.S. Boyle, who used a fragment from Italo Calvino’s book, *Invisible Cities*. Its final uplifting line: “Why do you hide from the emperor the grandeur of his destiny?”

Perhaps recalling Dinsmore coaxed out even more emotion and intensity from the singers, who nonetheless sustained complex cluster chords with absolute steadiness and accuracy; their collective sound bloomed in the rooms’ intimate acoustics.

Completing the evening was Kile Smith’s “Conversation in the Mountains” from *Where Flames a Word* (2009), its delicate utterances of words by Paul Celan ornamented by silence. Suzanne Giraud’s *Johannisbaum* (2011) uses rhythmic chanting, coupled with a scurrying, yodel-like motif. And in Sebastian Currier’s 2003 *Night Mass*, the Sanctus reaches an ecstatic climax on the title word, before the vocal lines gradually subside into a place of rest, evoking gently tolling bells.

In the notes, Nally quoted a few lines from Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s *Populist Manifesto No. 1*: “Don’t wait for the Revolution / or it’ll happen without you / Stop mumbling and speak out.” In “Of Arms and the Man,” this brilliant group turned singing into a revolutionary act.

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