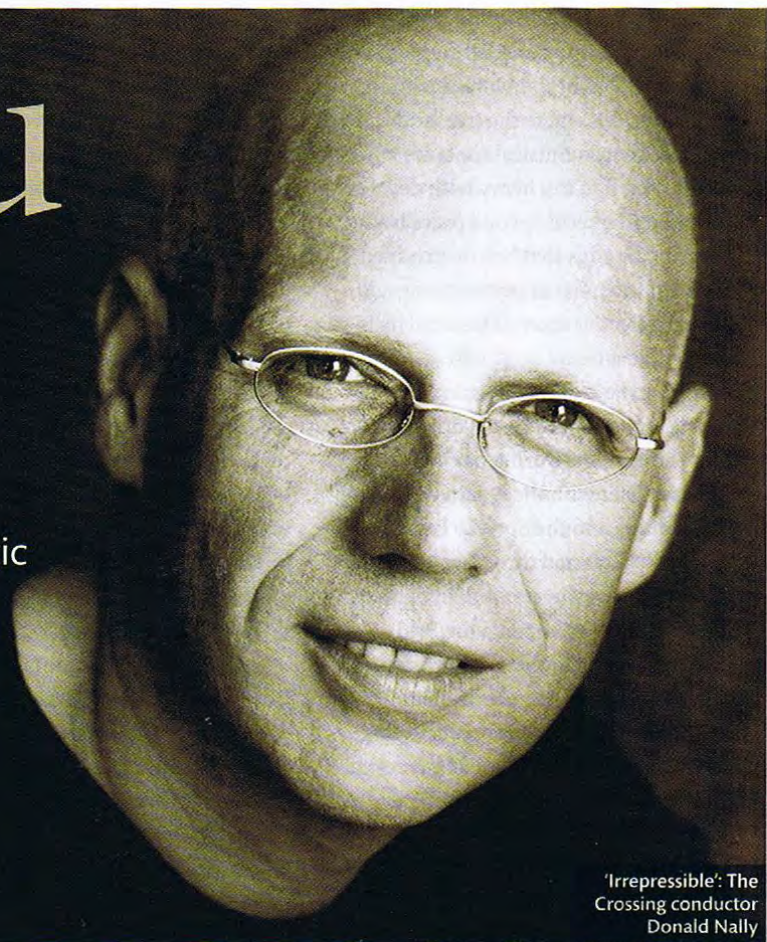


# As you like it

Vigorous programming and a realistic approach to funding mean that Philadelphia's vanguard choir The Crossing can now 'make music the music it wants, in the way that it wants'. Conductor Donald Nally talks to **Andrew Stewart**



**'Irrepressible':** The Crossing conductor Donald Nally

PHOTOGRAPH BY

Philadelphia made headline news last April when its venerable symphony orchestra filed for bankruptcy. The city's prized cultural asset, on the ropes but not out for the count, may yet win its battle to survive. Meanwhile, a strikingly fresh Philly ensemble continues to supply local audiences with corrective doses of artistic daring and corporate optimism. The Crossing offers a welcome tale of good cheer, one shaped by its members and personified by the irrepressible character of conductor Donald Nally. What began as an expression of mutual friendship has evolved since into a potent force in American choral music. The friendship, it should be said, remains intact, preserved alongside the group's desire to explore and broaden the contemporary chamber choir repertoire. This particular Philadelphia story contains heart-warming messages for composers, cultural commentators and audiences present and future.

The Crossing's two dozen professional singers and conductor, above all, stand for making music. The choir's business,

Nally tells me when we meet in London last summer, is to promote compelling performances of new work; it is not about generating bumper pay days and gilt-edged pension packages for musicians and administrators. Classical music and its performers, he suggests, must develop smart new oper-

**'[After] living alone in a log cabin... I concluded that I am a musician from first to last. The Crossing helped me realise how much music mattered to me'**

ating models to sustain concert life through and beyond turbulent economic times. Nally, who left Lyric Opera of Chicago in July after four seasons as chorus master, is critical of the threat of industrial action raised by staff unions during present pay negotiations with the company's management. The spectacle of well-paid musicians complaining to the American media about their attractive salaries and working condi-

tions, he suggests, is unlikely to generate public sympathy in an age of rising unemployment, business closures and home repossessions. 'The situation there highlights the difference between new ensembles that form because of the music and then find the money to continue, and established

ensembles that, somewhere along the line, have passed responsibility for finding the money supporting their art to somebody else. The latter is no longer working.'

The Crossing has managed to thrive without an extensive or expensive administration. Its performers take responsibility for the choir's direction, their decisions enacted with help from non-singing board members. Any surplus income >

derived from box office and other sources is ploughed back into concerts and new commissions. 'I've been involved with opera institutions where the tree is so imbalanced that its musical roots are overshadowed by a top heavy with development and marketing people,' says Nally. The conductor adds that he's determined to maintain the spirit of personal engagement and collective interest fostered by his Crossing colleagues.

Nally's journey to The Crossing has been long and eventful. He set down his present choir's roots during parallel stints as chorus master with the Opera Company of Philadelphia and the Spoleto Festival in Italy. Nally attracted three dozen freelance professional singers from Spoleto to Philadelphia in 1996 to form the Bridge Ensemble. The venture proved a costly mismatch of box-office optimism and ticket sales reality; its founder recalls that after 18 months he had 'spent all my retirement' and was forced to close the Bridge.

Opera duties and work as artistic director of the Choral Arts Society of Philadelphia secured Nally's place in the mainstream of American musical life.

He remained there until 2002, when he became chorus master of Welsh National Opera. His transatlantic crossing delivered significant opera and concert conducting opportunities, a critically acclaimed staging of Handel's *Jephtha* among them. It also supplied a surfeit of opera chorus mastering work. 'It's a hard and necessary job,' he reflects. 'But you don't have control over the things that really matter. What the public hears and sees depends on the conductor and director. The older you get, the more you disagree with what many of them do. I made really good friends at WNO but I also became very disillusioned with making music.' Nally quit his Welsh job to contemplate his future. 'I moved to Maine to live alone in a log cabin, and then went to San Francisco. I concluded that I am a musician from first to last. The Crossing, which was just getting going at the time, helped me realise how much music mattered to me.'

After 18 months minus regular work, Nally was moved by financial need and an abiding love of the theatre to accept Lyric Opera's job offer. He scored a palpable hit in 2008 as conductor of the Chicago

company's first choral concert and received good notices for his work as chorus master. And yet Nally became increasingly unhappy with opera's creative process. 'At last I understood that I needed to take responsibility for the expressive element of the art and not hand it over to someone else.' He served his Chicago notice term and returned home to Pennsylvania to focus on The Crossing, by now an established and vital part of Philadelphia's contemporary music scene. 'I think The Crossing took off because we allowed things to develop organically,' Nally recalls. 'The reason we gave our first concert was because I was living in Wales, the singers were living throughout the States and we missed each other! Because it was so well received, we decided to do more concerts. We're now making the kind of music we want to make, as we want to make it.'

Since its debut in November 2005, The Crossing has attracted constructive criticism and extensive local media coverage. Philadelphia's classical and jazz radio station WRTI recently began broadcasting every Crossing concert, while David Patrick Stearns, music critic of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, continues to chart the choir's evolution. When Nally asked reviewer why he so rarely wrote about his ensemble's performance, Stearns replied that it was thanks to the superior quality of their work that he was able to concentrate on the often complex music contained in their programmes. The compliment underlines Nally's knack for extracting the best from his choristers; he explains that The Crossing is committed to putting in the amount of rehearsal time that complex new scores require: 'I would not condemn anyone here, because of the cost and unpredictability of preparing contemporary music. But audiences do hear a lot of pieces that are under-prepared. We have to perform works with extended vocal techniques or complex rhythms, which take time to rehearse. There are no buttons to press for quick results!'

The Crossing has become a first choice for an impressive spread of organisations based in Philadelphia and beyond, from renaissance wind-band Piffaro to the and song presenters Lyric Fest to the Network for New Music and Internat

**'We tend to perform works with extended vocal techniques or complex rhythms... there are no buttons to press for quick results!'**



STEVEN HYDER  
Apart from the crowd: Philadelphia's choral ensemble The Crossing

Contemporary Ensemble. The group also promotes its own concerts, including an annual Month of Moderns festival, collectively covering an uncanny breadth of work by living composers. Nally laughs when I ask him about the process of selecting pieces for future programmes. 'Let's just say it takes a lot of hard work,' he says.

Repertoire choice and the quality of its performance mark out The Crossing from the American choral crowd. The choir's first concert comprised works by Thomas Jennefelt, Edwin Fissinger and Benjamin Boyle, a bold programming statement enhanced since with a repertoire record rich in world firsts. The artistic strategy has attracted two Chorus America/ASCAP Awards for Adventurous Programming, complete with cash to underwrite the cost of new compositions. Nally and his team have commissioned and introduced substantial new works by, among others, Eriks Ešenvalds, Gabriel Jackson (who had a 'rock star' reception from the audience, says Nally), David Lang, Francis Pott, David Shapiro and Kile Smith. Their list

of US premieres contains scores by major European composers – Jonathan Harvey, James MacMillan, Bo Holten and Kaija Saariaho – and names little known on either side of the Atlantic. 'We're not tied to the modern American choral programming model,' comments Nally. 'Morton Lauridsen and Eric Whitacre have been more responsible for the resurgence in choral music in America than I could ever have imagined. But The Crossing doesn't do much of that music. We've never sung Whitacre; maybe we will, but it will have to be the right piece. We've always programmed what we believe in – it never enters my mind to do anything other. I think the audience within and without Philadelphia recognise they're always going to be stimulated by our concerts.'

A trawl through The Crossing's forthcoming projects confirms its commitment to repertoire refreshment and innovation. Next May's Month of Moderns programmes contain large-scale new scores by Curt Cacioppo, Lewis Spratlan and Francis Pott, with further Crossing commis-

sions to come in 2013 from avant-garde composer Gene Coleman, jazz saxophonist Chris Jonas, and Joby Talbot. James Dillon's *Nine Rivers* was already in the choir's rehearsal works when I met Nally. 'It's for 16 solo voices, orchestra and percussion ensemble and is absolutely insane! Four years ago, we would have walked away but now we're tweaking it, getting better and better. It's fascinating to see the group develop in that time. We're careful not to stop where a rehearsal of a piece by Brahms might start! We talk about interpretation, content and what we want to achieve with a piece. The singers wouldn't come back if we failed to get the results. There's too much individual preparation and group work involved for us to be satisfied with just getting by. People can tell whether the singers are really engaged. Our audiences come to us because we're different.' Crossing supporters, he concludes, are not interested in hearing an unrehearsed Mozart Requiem or listening to a group going through the new music motions. ■

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