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An adventurous 'Crossing'

By David Patrick Stearns

Just because you can't immediately tell the difference between a modern electronic [music](#) score and a rogue fire alarm doesn't mean the music is bad or the fire alarm is ineffective - particularly when one chimes in with the other at a congruent tempo. That's what happened at the Saturday concert of the Crossing, Philadelphia's new-ish, superb, fearlessly adventurous choir in a program of almost nothing but 21st-century music. The music often burned from within but the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, contrary to the alarms, was completely unharmed.

Founded and conducted by Donald Nally (once of the Choral Arts Society, now of Lyric [Opera](#) of Chicago), the Crossing has a trim, 20-voice lineup and does everything right, from intonation to enunciation to keeping the lights bright enough to read the sophisticated texts to which the music is set. That doesn't mean all of the program was to everybody's taste. That can't happen in any honest assemblage of music from our fractious, already tumultuous new century. Kaija Saariaho's music, heard everywhere but not often in Philadelphia, made an important inroad, but James MacMillan, who has had good reception here, left me bewildered. Others might've felt the opposite.

The Finnish-born Saariaho was represented by *Days of the Years*, set to Friedrich Holderlin poems representing each of the four seasons. Most innovative was "Summer" unfolding with ceaselessly unresolved dissonances - no surprise to those who observed how Saariaho suffered in the heat during one August at Tanglewood. "Winter" suggested that static Saariaho is often the best Saariaho. As early as 1991, her ballet score, *Maa*, began with electronic footfall sounds repeated endlessly while the sonic environment around them changed. Erhard Karkoschka's "Four small ending sentences . . ." had the history of choral music morphing into itself. The 14th-century "hocket" technique (ideas passed from voice to voice) turned into atonal pointillism; the harmonic smearing effects of the 16th-century Carlo Gesualdo grew into the tone clusters of the 20th-century's Gyorgy Ligeti.

If you applauded such imaginative feats of integration, you were bound to be disappointed with MacMillan, whose *Magnificat and Nunc dimittis* went for shock techniques, his traditional choral writing punctuated by loud, nonsensical organ outbursts. At least one unrelated insight was to be had: MacMillan's reaching-for-the-stars soprano writing may simply be conservative Herbert Howells that's been harmonically unhinged.