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A little something for everyone

The Crossing's Month of Moderns festival covered lots of stylistic ground in Part II.



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The end of the workweek isn't the best time for a concert of new and unfamiliar choral music. But Part II of the Month of Moderns festival by The Crossing took that into account, beginning with *In Nomine* by superb Danish composer Bo Holten, who doesn't write music so much as he amasses weather fronts of vocal sound.

A choir was divided Friday in Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill in what the composer says is a 20-voice canon in three simultaneous key signatures. Through this intense formal rigor, the composer achieved an exalted illusion of formlessness. Ingeniously, the three keys never clashed, but canceled out each other's gravitational pull, achieving resolution on a higher level. Initially, I experienced a kind of sensory overload that was a gateway into a state of mind in which good, bad or any other cerebral notions weren't possible. You wouldn't argue with the composer any more than you would criticize cloud formations. The words - the "Sanctus" of the Mass - were there if you wanted them, particularly near the end as they were clearly announced. With so much to access, you could take what you wanted from the piece, and have it be a personal experience of your own making. It was hugely inviting and I hope it lodges in my subconscious longer than the latest download on my C drive.

That piece set the tone for a Donald Nally-constructed program that was beautifully sung throughout - The Crossing surpassed even its own high standard - and covered so much stylistic ground that no one listener was likely to enjoy it all.

Not everything was choral. Scott Dettra played the solo organ piece, *Evocation II* by Thierry Escaich, that was built over a panting, regular rhythm, traveling into both menacing and congenial musical terrains - a great addition to the program. Less welcome was *Pictures of Hope* by Petr Eben, which might have worked well on a less sophisticated program but wasn't nearly as personal and imaginative as the music around it. For similar reasons, Stephen Stucky's *Whispers*, which ended the program, didn't make the strongest impression, though it acted as a bridge back to the real world.

You needed such a bridge after *Breathturn*, by Chicago-based composer Kirsten Broberg, 30, which set five Paul Celan poems, expressing life and death matters, in a continuous piece that made you rethink what constitutes singing. Conventional notions of tonality and atonality were skirted with a manner somewhere between speech and singing, perhaps like a group poetry slam. The ending had a huge, cunningly contrived dissonant chord whose poetic purpose wasn't immediately apparent but certainly worth contemplating. Most curious, in that respect, were two pieces by Danish composer Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen - *Statements* and *Examples* - that were mildly hypnotic, not through use of minimalist-style repetition, but with a scrupulous lack of musical events. That doesn't mean the pieces lacked substance. Obviously, one isn't likely to come to terms with this immediately. But I'm grateful to have had my notions about singing and music so completely challenged in the same program.

On to Month of Moderns Part III on June 5.

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