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3 Latvians conquer Chestnut Hill

Their music, and the performance of it by the Crossing choir, were electrifying.



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The Latvian invasion of Chestnut Hill, prompted by the Crossing choir's Baltic-dominated concert Sunday, was complete, successful, and welcome.

Three current composers - Maija Einfelde, Peteris Vasks, and Eriks Esenvalds - traversed idiosyncratic harmonic terrains in pursuit of whatever elemental truth they perceived in the texts they set to music in the final concert of the Crossing's Month of Moderns festival at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. So arresting was the music - and so good the performances under music director Donald Nally - that you couldn't help feeling that your inner life might never be the same.

Though titled "Seneca Sounds" (inspired by the ancient Roman philosopher), the festival sounded more like "Seneca Apocalypse" at the start of the Esenvalds piece, *Seneca's Zodiac*, which was commissioned by the Crossing and heard Sunday in its world premiere. It tells of constellations falling out of the sky, one by one, starting with tribal exclamations that would seem to proclaim the end of the world.

All manner of otherworldly sounds were generated by the combination of choral voices, tuned water glasses, combs with wax paper, and tiny pencil erasers wedged into the strings of the piano. If the text was about an unimaginable occurrence, the music successfully strove to be equally unimaginable, ending with a lot of heavy exhalations from the chorus and the eerie, music-of-spheres whistling of the tuned glasses.

Vasks, the oldest of the three composers, is one of the few to emerge from Soviet-dominated Latvia with an original creative voice intact. His piece, *Mother Sun*, was written in 1975 and is built on a vague, nursery-rhyme-ish tune, knitting together a piece that maintains little emotional distance from the unstoppable fierceness of the rising sun that's described in the text. It ends with a thick, intensely voiced chord, equally ecstatic and excruciating but impossible to

imagine before having heard it.

Einfelde's 1996 *At the Edge of the Earth* (are these Latvians ever frivolous?) began with mezzo-sopranos at the bottom of their register, and progressed with melodies that made their way across an obstacle course of harmonic dissonance, coalescing into a swarm of sound suggesting a cauldron of vocal trills.

Common characteristics are hard to identify among the three composers, though all exercised great freedom in ordering events in something other than a conventional beginning, middle, and end, and just as freely explored foreground and background effects. The latter was especially entrancing in Vasks, who was apparently contemplating the hum of the universe.

After such musical tumultuousness, Gabriel Jackson's 1995 *Lux Mortuorum: Crystal points tug on million year filaments* was blessedly less complicated than its title. Counterpoint was at a minimum, with the words by Richard George Elliot about the chaos of the universe supported by chords that felt like a series of musical pillars, thick, gnarly ones. A much simpler source of repose came from the encore, the straightforward, almost hymnlike *Long Road* by Esenvalds - a piece that sealed his place in the affections of the Crossing's audience.

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