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The Crossing: Bonhoeffer 3/10/2013

- Posted by [Sharon Torello](#) on March 12, 2013 at 5:00pm
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Flexible seating is one of the attributes that draws ensembles to perform in the

beautiful Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral in University City. I knew there would be dancers at this new presentation by the Crossing Choir so I was not surprised by the large open space in the front that appeared to be dedicated to that function. Another use, however, would shape both the musical performance and the environment to emphasize specific emotions in subtle ways. Dimming lights and tones from a vibraphone started the premier of Thomas Lloyd's "Bonhoeffer".

Voices of the male members of the Crossing Choir joined in from the rear of the cathedral and the surprise of the performance began as the group of men split in two and processed up the aisles. Their somber and purposeful procession was choreographed in a somewhat random pattern to evoke a meditative walk rather than the normal, structured march one would expect. The male chorus would participate in a number of choreographed configurations and movements throughout the concert. Sometimes they formed a circle around conductor, Donald Nally, other times they sat down to direct the audience's attention to the dancers, but the configuration that had the most amplifying effect with me was at the end of Scene VIII. The men in the chorus paired off, facing each other and sang the words "I have done wrong...you are forgiven..." to each other in the form of a confession. The statements started with one pair of individuals then spread throughout the chorus with ever increasing voices and then diminished in the same fashion. Coordinating all these moving parts while facing different directions must have required a great deal of practice, but the Crossing Choir is so skilled and attuned to each other that they can react much like a school of fish. Each member maintaining their part while mutually following the others in perfect harmony.

Dancers, Tim Early and Carrie Ellmore-Tallitsch added another level to the production, but the emphasis was clearly on the music. They represented the relationship between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer which was threaded throughout the piece in the form of conversations; both real and imaginary. Much of the music in "Bonhoeffer" was set to text from prison letters and papers. Music was important in Bonhoeffer's life so various influences were revealed; including a brief recording of the spiritual "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child". The instrumentation and a trio of female soloists (representing von Wedemeyer) also provided an important supporting role. The unusual selection of violin, cello, piano, and percussion provided a wide spectrum of sound and the spare but very effective use of the organ brought additional drama to a few scenes.

Dramatic confrontations and conflicts were demonstrated in two different scenes by interpolating two different works such as Bach's "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme" and the Nazi anthem "Deutschland Erwaken". Lloyd's ingenious use of this technique provided an emotional delivery of the musical arguments.

The presentation was listed as "a choral theater piece", but perhaps due to my lack prior knowledge of Bonhoeffer, I struggled to maintain context between the scenes. I raced ahead in the program in an attempt to fill in the gaps, but it was a bit like trying to take a sip of water from a fire hose. I was moved by the individual scenes, and the performance by the musicians and dancers was spectacular, but, in my view, the piece worked a bit more like a loosely constructed song cycle than well defined story. Preparation for new works greatly helps me to understand and appreciate them during premiers and I was guilty of not doing my homework of reading the information supplied prior to this concert by The Crossing. A live or video presentation by the composer would have even more potential, however, because it opens the possibility of demonstrating the many musical references within the work. Hopefully I'll have another chance to digest this work in the future.

Disclaimer: This article is an observation from the viewpoint of a "regular member" of the audience, not a critical review.

For other reviews of The Crossing:

[The Crossing at Christmas 12/21/2012](#)