



The Crossing's "Month of Moderns"

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Kile Smith may be more comfortable with Christian texts, but his foray into Stoic philosophy displays all the inventive expressiveness that marks his Christian works.

"Month of Moderns, Concert Two." Smith, *The Waking Sun*; Ince, *Thyestes*; Jackson, *Not no faceless angel*. The Crossing, chorus; Tempesta di Mare, orchestra; Eve Miller, cello; Mimi Stillman, flute; Donald Nally, conductor. June 18, 2011 at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, 8855 Germantown Ave.
www.crossingchoir.com.

Smith: *Trees without forest*.

Kile Smith's music for the stoic heart

TOM PURDOM

In the past three years, Kile Smith has created three highly successful works based on texts and ceremonies drawn from his own Christian faith. For his latest work, commissioned by Donald Nally's The Crossing, Smith set texts by the Roman poet Seneca and ventured into the very different world of the Stoic philosophers.

He didn't seem quite as comfortable with this latter material. The six texts Smith selected examine different aspects of Seneca's work, but they don't add up to an integrated worldview. But *The Waking Sun* is still a powerful work that displays all the inventive expressiveness that marks Smith's Christian pieces.

The Crossing is a 20-voice chorus composed of some of the Philadelphia region's deftest vocalists, and Smith's choral writing showcases their ability to handle complicated interactions and create complex sonic tapestries. What's more, every section of *The Waking Sun* creates a different mood and employs a different stylistic approach.

Stolen ambrosia

A portrait of Cupid, "that wanton, smiling boy," receives a touch of country music. The next section depicts the punishment of Tantalus, who stole ambrosia from the gods, with vocal and instrumental music that creates a limpid, timeless image of Tantalus suspended in the midst of irresistible food and drink, with everything forever out of reach. A section composed in the style of a sturdy early American "fuguing tune" celebrates the Stoic ideal of the upright man who has freed himself from fear and desire.

Smith's instrumental accompaniment employs Baroque instruments because *The Waking Sun* was originally supposed to be performed with a Baroque oratorio. The period instruments may have crept into the project for non-musical reasons, but their soft voices make them an ideal partner for a small chorus. Tempesta di Mare's Baroque experts produced fully audible blends and contrasts but never overwhelmed the voices.

The Smith premiere occupied the first half of the second concert in the Crossing's "Month of Moderns"— an annual series that's become a major event on Philadelphia's new music calendar. The concert's second half featured a premiere by the American composer Kamran Ince and a 2005 piece by the British composer Gabriel Jackson.

On eating one's sons

Ince's setting of two passages from Seneca's play *Thyestes* combines a horror story with a science fiction scenario. The first half describes, in detail, the butchering and roasting of Thyestes's sons so they can be fed to their father,

who unknowingly eats them at a fake peace dinner offered by his brother. The second half portrays the desolation of a world in which the zodiac has left the sky and the sun ceased to shine.

The Jackson piece was composed for the choir of the Royal College of Musicians Junior Department. It takes its text from a poem by a British poet, Tanya Lake, who sang in the choir at the time. Its most attractive feature musically was the accompaniment. For most of its length, the chorus was accompanied by a beautiful cello solo, powerfully played by Tempesta's Eve Miller. Then, at the very end, just a few bars before the final note, a flute played by Mimi Stillman replaced the cello.

Packed reception

The vocal writing in both these pieces seemed straightforward compared to the vocal writing in Smith's *The Waking Sun*, but it fulfilled the primary purpose of a musical setting: It reinforced the words and the general mood the author sought to create.

Chestnut Hill Presbyterian sports a reception room that's as large as most auditoriums, but the crowd packed into it after the concert was so large that it generated maneuvering problems. The roar of high-spirited conversation bouncing off the walls created a vivid testimony to the liveliness and sense of adventure that animates the current new music scene.