



## NOTEWORTHY/Chestnut Hill LOCAL by Michael Caruso for 1/8/2009

Donald Nally conducted his chamber choir, The Crossing, in concert Sunday afternoon in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. The roster of works for unaccompanied chorus didn't include a single piece of music composed more than a dozen years ago. The church was nearly packed by an enthusiastic audience, making the concert one of the most important of the many to have taken place in Chestnut Hill so far this season.

That The Crossing is one of Greater Philadelphia's performing ensembles most committed to presenting new music goes without saying. Donald Nally has made performing new music a linchpin of his career. He did so when he directed the Choral Arts Society of Philadelphia, when he directed the music program at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in center city Philadelphia, and now that he is the director of Cincinnati's Vocal Arts Ensemble.

More impressive still, regarding his work with The Crossing, is that he has built a loyal and large following among local choral music lovers despite consistently programming music mostly unknown to his audiences written by composers mostly unheard of by those audiences. Most delightful of all, he has chosen the clear yet resonant setting of the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill as The Crossing's home base and has found that local audiences have flocked to The Crossing's concerts. Chestnut Hillers may be traditionalists in many ways, but they're not necessarily conservative -- at least when it comes to new music chosen by Donald Nally!

The Crossing's program was a cornucopia of beautiful new music -- and I do mean "beautiful." With the exception of only one score, the entire roster of pieces was characterized by new music that created its own sound-world of melodies, harmonies, contrapuntal textures and rhythms but that nonetheless struck the ear with the impact of immediate accessibility even as it left its mark of undeniable originality. Of course, the fact that it was all sung spectacularly well didn't hurt its chances for a successful first hearing.

Danish composer Bo Holten's three works -- "First Snow," "Hermit Peak" and "A time for everything" -- were my personal favorites. The first proffered sweet, gentle wordless melodies sung by the women, evoking the falling snow of a quiet evening. Their descending scales came together to form ever-changing harmonic progressions that spoke an other-worldly language, lulling you into a soothing trance. The second offered sharp, thrusting tones of fast-paced harmonies. The third begins graciously from a low start, building its harmonic structure with the flawless care and precision of the ancient Egyptians building a pyramid. After a period of ever-increasing, insistent tension, its mood is transformed into a simple yet elegant simplicity that leaves the listener with a smile on his or her face.

Needless but necessary to say, Nally conducted all three pieces with peerless technical precision and heartfelt expressivity. The flawless tonal blend and immaculate tuning were never an end in themselves. Rather, they were employed by Nally to elicit from The Crossing's 20 singers the sounds through which he and they could project the mind, heart, spirit and soul of the composer.

Both Erhard Karlkoschka's "Variationen mit Celan-Gedichten III" and David Sharp's "It is time" (in its world premiere) are part of the "Celan Project" of commissioning new musical settings of Paul Celan's poetry. The harmony of the former's first movement is thick with dissonance and an occasionally shrill tone, but it provokes a haunting mood that resolves with consonant beauty. Its second movement runs the gamut of vocal ranges to sooth the listener on



Northwest Philadelphia's Leading Community Newspaper Online

# { The Chestnut Hill Local .com }

8434 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19118



its way to a gentle finale. Shapiro's work is angular and a tad too emotionally chilly for my tastes but distinctive and memorable all the same.

The four movements of Paul Spicer's "How Love Bleeds" proffer disconcerting texts that undercut the usual joy of the Christmas season but that have inspired music of remarkable harmonic and textural clarity.

And the one exception to the music's high standard? John Kennedy's "Someday," which fully deserves the epithet of "Vatican II Drek" for its similarity to the simple-minded liturgical music that's come in the wake of the so-called reforms of liturgy and its music. Nonetheless, it was a small price to pay for hearing a concert of so much wonderful new music conducted and sung with so complete and efficacious a commitment to the highest standards of music-making through exquisite singing. Donald Nally is a magician of a choral conductor.