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The Crossing choir decodes the unknown



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By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Music Critic

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Who is meeting whose match here?

Philadelphia contemporary-music choir the Crossing is making its way through *Sound From the Bench*, a fearlessly angry work by Brooklyn composer Ted Hearne whose Sunday premiere will include two electric guitars and percussion in the unlikely venue of the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. Choir and electric guitars: hardly



Composer Ted Hearne premieres his "Sounds From the Bench" with the Crossing choir. (TIMO ANDRES)



GALLERY: Composer Ted Hearne premieres his "Sounds From the..." (TIMO ANDRES)

natural bedfellows.

"Make it strange and funny," Hearne says at a weekend rehearsal. The early-30s composer sings to the choir the kind of phrasing he wants. The group captures it exactly.

"You see, we have Rolling Stones experience," said director Donald Nally, whose group backed up the band on "You Can't Always Get What You Want" when its latest U.S. tour stopped in Philadelphia.

"We can do the dance, too," he added with mock ennui.

If ever a piece required rolling with the punches, it's this one. At various points, the choir has such less-than-sonorous exclamations as "They want winners!" "Money money money money!" The piece is about the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision that equated money and speech, and gave First Amendment rights to corporations allowing them to spend unlimited sums to advocate for or against the election of candidates. Think "corporate personhood."

So listeners at the 4 p.m. Sunday opening of the Crossing's annual Month of Moderns Festival shouldn't be expecting the soaring vocal lines of the Fauré *Requiem*. As if they ever do.

Best known for his *Katrina Ballads*, Hearne is used to setting to music words by the likes of politicians, New Orleans hurricane victims, and even Barbara Bush. *Sound From the Bench* taps poet Jena Osman, whose words include excerpts from legal briefs and from an instructional manual for ventriloquists (in sections about how people speak through their companies).

None of it takes easily to music. "But when I look at it, all sorts of fireworks go off in my brain," Hearne explained, "I don't want to write music that's tied up in a bow. I write music that's messy. The music should ignite your curiosity, not quell it."

The concert starts the Crossing's busiest summer ever. Now in its sixth year, the Month of Moderns Festival is a summer tradition, with two other concerts - June 28 and July 12 at Crane Arts in Northern Liberties - featuring new works by local composers Robert Maggio and James Primosch as well as Gavin Bryars.

Also coming up are a Kennedy Center date for the Chorus America National Conference with composer Eric Whitacre and, more provocatively, a new work by 2014 Pulitzer Prize winner John Luther Adams titled *Sila: The Breath of the World*. It will be premiered outdoors at Lincoln Center plaza in New York on July 25 and 26, and rehearsals will take place in Philadelphia, furthering the widely discussed notion in New York that new work increasingly is happening outside of that cultural mecca.

Hearne is an exemplar of Brooklyn composers who freely mix acoustic and electric sounds, as well as vernacular and that increasingly wide-reaching terrain known as classical. His references in conversation, however, are the sort that make classical music people nervous: his work with "noise artist" Philip White and an electric guitar quartet called Dither. He rhapsodizes about

rap.

Rest assured, though, that what comes out in his eclectic mix seems to have little to do with such influences (his also include Igor Stravinsky and Dutch minimalist Louis Andreissen). The only semblance of rap in *Sound From the Bench* is what might be called that money chant .

And his taste for electric guitar is a genuine artistic choice, meant to create a contrast with acoustic sound to make points "about what it is to be human." He doesn't play the instrument. And writing for it can be a headache partly because of balance problems between amplified instruments and acoustic voices.

"That's where I like to live as a composer - pushing people's buttons in that way. They have one skill set and I try to bring them to the other side," Hearne says.

On a practical level, there are music-reading issues: "So many electric guitarists can't connect with the musical notation," Nally says. Many elements of music elude being written down, one reason Hearne was in Chestnut Hill dealing with the shades of sound quality that he's after.

"We don't have a way to write it down specifically the way we can with rhythm and pitch," he said. "It's more a matter of a soul sensitivity."

Despite his intense input, Hearne doesn't believe listeners should make assumptions about his personal position on the issues dealt with in his piece. Even the anger one feels in his music isn't necessarily what it seems, but stems from his views on what classical music should be.

"We get into the idea that classical music is there for us to forget about the world, to retreat into a personal comfort zone.

"And I disagree."

MUSIC

The Crossing

4 p.m. Sunday at the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, 8855 Germantown Ave.

Tickets: \$18-\$27. Information: www.crossingchoir.com.

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