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Donald Nally, and a choir with intelligence

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Three days before Christmas, even the most refined classical music lovers are, like everyone else, lucky not to be hospitalized for exhaustion or jailed for holiday rage. But even Friday night's engulfing rain didn't keep audiences away from Donald Nally's new-ish professional choir, the Crossing, which had the midsize Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill three-quarters full for a concert of Christmas music most people haven't heard or heard of.

When Nally took his opening bow amid whoops and cheers - clearly congratulations for his recent appointment to chorus master at Lyric Opera of Chicago - you realized you were amid a cult of the best kind, drawn no doubt by Nally's reputation (his previous positions included Choral Arts Society and Opera Company of Philadelphia) and glowing reports of past performances by the Crossing, though there have only been two.

I was even more impressed with this concert on several levels: The program was meticulously and cunningly chosen on musical and literary merits, but also sequenced to avoid vocal and mental exhaustion. As a result, the brain-sizzling harmonies of James MacMillan's *Seinte Mari moder milde* were heard amid traditional harmonies and strophic-verse hymns of sorts. Indeed, this concert had a more consistently high level of performance than any of Nally's that I've heard. Organist Scott Dettra was no doubt a factor.

The chorus has plenty of surface allure - not just vocal prettiness, but a collective sound that, in moments of mounting expressive intensity, grew not just in volume but amplitude, suggesting that there were suddenly many more than 18 voices at work. Diction was good, but in a natural, undrilled way.

What I love most about the choir is its intelligence. Populated by longtime professional colleagues of Nally, the Crossing already has a collective memory bank, a sense of pulse and of weighting a phrase that has to come from collaboration.

In this season of musical redundancy, Nally's Anglo-dominated program hadn't a single piece I'd heard. Though some of England's best composers were splendidly represented - Judith Weir's *Illuminare*, Jerusalem and Jonathan Dove's *The Three Kings* both created complex musical constructions out of the thin air of voice - the program also had names unknown outside the choral subculture. Some of the music was folksy, such as *Angelus ad*

Virginem by Michael Emery, some paragons of rarefaction, such as Lo, How a rose e'er blooming by Benjamin Boyle.

That last piece was commissioned for the Crossing, its words adapted from a 15th-century German carol extolling the beauty of nature in winter - and kept aloft with harmonies that skirted strong major/minor-key affiliations and the emotional implications that go with them. So the music inhabited an emotion-free zone, not cold or cerebral, but warmly detached from day-to-day humanity. When it ended, you felt like you'd been on vacation.