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A Haunting Tale, Perfect for Christmas

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

At holiday time, the Metropolitan Museum of Art draws countless visitors to its Medieval Sculpture Garden to see the splendid [Christmas tree and 18th-century Neapolitan crèche](#). The garden has also been a special site for holiday concerts. The museum has put much thought over the years into choosing appropriate seasonal music, especially early music.

[David Lang's](#) choral work "The Little Match Girl Passion" might seem at first a tragic piece for a Nativity concert. Yet, on Sunday evening, [the Crossing](#), the impressive 24-voice ensemble, ended a varied program of pensive, contemporary choral pieces with a performance of this nearly 40-minute score, which won Mr. Lang the Pulitzer Prize for music in 2008. I cannot imagine a more appropriate occasion and setting to hear this poignant and, by the end, consoling piece.

"The Little Match Girl Passion" tells the Hans Christian Andersen story of a poor child whose abusive father forces her to sell matches on the street. On New Year's Eve, shoeless, sick and nearly delirious, the girl freezes to death. Her body is found the next morning.

There are many ways to tell the story, as Mr. Lang writes in a program note. For him, Andersen's tale is "a kind of parable, drawing a religious and moral equivalency between the suffering of the poor girl and the suffering of Jesus." The girl "is scorned by the crowd, dies, and is transfigured," Mr. Lang explains. He wrote his own text, based on Andersen's tale; the Gospel According to St. Matthew; and passages by Picander, the librettist of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion." The result is a soft-spoken contemporary choral work in the manner of a Bach passion.

The piece is at once an understated narrative and an ethereal meditation. The [original version](#) was written for just four singers. The Crossing performed the choral version, which occasionally incorporates some percussion instruments (including chimes, small cymbals, a bass drum) played by members of the choir.

The tender and mysterious atmosphere of the piece is established in the opening section, "Come, daughter," which evokes the mood and words, though not the music, of the opening chorus of Bach's passion. The word "Come" is somberly intoned by some choristers, as others, in pleading phrases, sing "Help me, daughter/Help me cry."

Introducing a technique that Mr. Lang uses throughout, the phrase "Look, daughter" becomes an almost obsessive, cyclic riff, with the word "look" insistently repeated.

In the narrative sections, taken from Andersen, the chorus often delivers the words in short

segments of ascending phrases that stop abruptly, then start again. “Dearest heart,” paraphrasing a Bach chorale, is sung in almost holistic block harmonies. When the little girl’s story turns desperate, as she cannot ward off the cold and fears a beating from her father, the phrases are uttered in nervous, staggered bursts.

Eventually, the girl strikes some matches for a bit of warmth, during which she has visions of a Christmas dinner of roast goose and imagines her loving grandmother, who has died, all captured in music that finds common ground between modal contemporary harmonies and Medieval chant. Toward the end, the grandmother appears to the match girl and escorts her to heaven. The work ends with another Langian paraphrase of a Bach chorale, “We sit and cry,” which comes across like a benediction.

The singers of the Crossing, under their director, Donald Nally, have a rich, warm and beautifully focused sound, ideal for Mr. Lang’s score. Mr. Nally carefully balanced textures so that the overlapping voices and motifs came through clearly and naturally.

In the first part of the program there were sensitive and accomplished performances of diverse works by the Latvian composer Eriks Esenvalds; the Danish composer Bo Holten; Jonathan Dove and Andrew Gant, both British; and the American James Primosch.

The concert was sold out. Perhaps having the Crossing perform “The Little Match Girl Passion” before the Nativity crèche will become a Met Museum holiday tradition.