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The Crossing offers something new for Christmas

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Wolfgang Rihm's "Astralis," given its second U.S. performance by the Crossing, had textures reminiscent of electronic music. (ERIC MARINITSCH / Universal Edition)



GALLERY: Donald Nally conducts the Crossing choir....

By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Music Critic

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Christmas musical traditions can seem like habits that accumulate as listeners hope to extend the holiday warmth of childhood into their adult lives. Yet the side effect is a relatively narrow repertoire. As wonderful as much of it is, can there be room for something new?

The answer is yes as long as the Crossing is counted in. At New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Philadelphia choir is creating an annual tradition with David Lang's *The Little Match Girl Passion*. Closer to home, music director Donald Nally went out on more fragile limbs, often successfully, at the Crossing@Christmas concert Friday at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Chestnut Hill.

All modern works, the program was anchored by such cold-weather Baltic composers as Eriks Esenvalds (*O Emmanuel*) and Toivo Tulev (*Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!*). Beyond considerable artistic virtues, this music serves a purpose similar to that of the votive candles northerners maintain for extra light during these dark months. The Crossing's superb blend and intonation added its own radiance.

With such a foundation, the concert's two halves were anchored by something I never previously envisioned: Nondevotional texts sung during processions as plainchant antiphons. The first was excerpts from the Job parable, the other Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." Each gave its half of the concert a decisive tint; together they created an overall emotional arc of moving out of anguished darkness into light.

Such chalk-and-cheese moments (artistically valid but not easy to parse for lack of context) continued with Gabriel Jackson's *Ave, regina caelorum* with an often syncopated setting of the sacred text with amplified guitar that sometimes crept toward the Jimi Hendrix zone.

Several works had choral textures resembling electronic music, especially Wolfgang Rihm's *Astralis*, heard here in its second U.S. performance. "What is believed to have already happened can be seen coming from afar" is the sort of abstraction contemplated in the text, set to music with such a narrow range of sound and manner one might call it minimalism of sorts, mostly written for the

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same vocal range and keeping a mid-distance from the ear with little contrasting rhetoric.

Nally took the piece at its word without the extroverted contours heard from other conductors, creating an effect that was often mesmerizing but also remote - tough for a 25-minute work. One onlooker suggested a surround-sound effect might reveal the music's deeper subtleties. Certainly, one can't be too close to a piece like this. Such arrangements work for Morton Feldman, whose music comes from a different philosophical planet but doesn't sound that different. In any case, one's ear subsequently needed the unhinged, pushing-the-boundaries soprano writing in Tulev's *Rejoice!* - and all its exultation.

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