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The Crossing, the 18-member choir conducted by Donald Nally, chose its unusual name because it seemed to describe the lives of both the singers and their leader, and the sacrifices some of them were making to make the venture work.

Nally himself, who used to direct the choir of St. Mark's Cathedral on Locust Street, was living in Wales when the group came together in 2005. He returned to Philadelphia for a reunion with some of his chorus buddies, and over drinks, they decided, in a what-the-heck? moment, to put on a concert.

For Nally, the crossing was literal - 3,000 miles of ocean. Even now, as the choral director of Chicago's Lyric Opera Company and a resident of the Second City, he must travel hundreds of miles to take part in what has become a labor of love.

"We just missed singing together," Nally said in an interview last week. "We were not trying to make any statements. It just kind of made sense. At this point in our lives, too, we were willing to make sacrifices to sing together."

Though most of the singers still live in town, some, like Nally, have moved on since their Philadelphia salad days, and they too must traverse a good distance to The Crossing's home at Chestnut Hill Presbyterian Church, where Nally will conduct the choir's spring concert Friday evening. "Chestnut Hill Presbyterian has made their church our home in a very generous way," Nally said. "And we love that acoustic. We're the primary benefactor."

More symbolically, "The Crossing" captures the adventurousness of the group's programming. Nally and his singers love contemporary music, drawing on a diverse and expanding repertoire from composers across the globe. Friday's program will include works by the Estonian Arvo Pärt, the Scottish-born Thea Musgrave, the Swede Lars Johan Werle and the Englishman Kenneth Leighton, one of The Crossing's favorites.

"For me, doing modern repertoire is a dream," Nally said. "It's challenging. It speaks of today. It's the composer's voice of 2008 that I want to be involved in. It takes enormous skill to pull off this repertoire and make it mean something. It's not enough to get it right." And, as listeners who attended The Crossing's candlelight Christmas concert last year will attest, they do have skill, and they do get it right. What the choir's name does not convey - what no word could convey, really - is its extraordinary sound. Words such as "celestial" and "ethereal" do come to mind, but even they don't quite hit the target. Eighteen focused, professional-grade voices produce a timbre that is rich without being heavy, transparent without being dainty. Perhaps "gorgeous" comes closest.

"I really think the sound the group makes is the result of many, many factors," Nally said. Among them are his personal conducting style, the demands of the pieces being sung and the way the singers themselves respond to the music and to each other, he said. "We're also older than we used to be, I think that we understand better what everybody's individual responsibilities are," Nally said. "People take responsibility. They try to bring it so there's an equilibrium across the board."

Ever since the Renaissance replaced chant with polyphony, Western music has grown rhythmically and harmonically more complex, and even the populist reactions that seem to occur every 50 years or so have failed to stop the trend. In short, what makes new music of any age so difficult is the simple problem of keeping everyone together. Werle's "Canzone 126 di Francesco Petrarca," Op. 6, which The Crossing will perform Friday, provides an extreme example. It begins in the sound world of Monteverdi, Nally said, then begins to break up the text, assigning separate syllables of single words to consecutive voices. By the end, words and text coalesce again.

The Crossing thrives on those kinds of challenges, and Nally was especially enthusiastic about the piece. "It captures the poetry in an extraordinary way - fragmenting and coming back together, this incredible atmosphere of the beauty and pains of unrequited love," he said.