

NOTEWORTHY/Chestnut Hill LOCAL by Michael Caruso for 1/3/2008

Donald Nally brought his chamber choir, The Crossing, to the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill on Friday, December 21, for a program of contemporary Christmas music. The performance, heard by the largest crowd yet to attend one of The Crossing's concerts, not only introduced local choral music lovers to a bevy of new works -- it established a new level of choral singing for the region.

Although he is now fully involved as the chorus director of Chicago's Lyric Opera -- one of the world's busiest and most acclaimed opera companies -- Nally has kept his hand in Philadelphia's choral music scene by having founded The Crossing. Chestnut Hillers have been particularly fortunate in that Nally has chosen Chestnut Hill Presbyterian as his choir's venue of choice. Chestnut Hillers have responded in kind by filling the pews with more and more enthusiastic music lovers each and every time the choir comes to town.

Right from the very first work on the program -- Andrew Gant's arrangement of "What child is this" -- Nally established an extraordinarily high level of tonal blend and balance, breadth of dynamics, elegance of phrasing, clarity of diction and delineation of spirit. Swells from soft to loud and back again were conceived broadly and executed precisely. The singing was almost exclusively free of vibrato, so the individual voices blended with and matched each other with pristine purity and potent projection, even at the softest dynamic level.

James MacMillan's "Tremunt videntes angelis" (Angels tremble at the sight) was sung with a moving feel for its sense of ancient ritual. The men proffered dark timbres while the women offered the opposite extreme of lightness and transparency.

Judith Bingham's "The clouded heaven," with the organ accompaniment played by Mark Anderson of the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, was given a rendition that pulsed with threatening waves of pungent melodies and clouded harmonies. Dan Michael Dicie's "Star until glory" sported passages that evoked medieval plainsong and that were sung by the men in flawless ensemble. The unexpected dissonances of John Paynter's "The Rose" were proffered so lyrically that their angular harmonies didn't disturb as much as challenge, while the carol-like simplicity of "How far is it to Bethlehem" by Colin Mawby carried the listener back to that faraway miracle. Kerry Andrew's "Hevene Quene" recalled the stark austerity of medieval

organum -- harmonies based on parallel intervals -- while the dramatic chromatic harmonies of Kenneth Leighton's "A Christmas Carol" brought the first half of the program to a thrilling finale.

Leighton's "O leave your sheep" set a gentler tone to open the concert's second half while John Tavener's "A nativity" enabled the listener to enter into the mystery of the Incarnation through harmonies and voicings that sounded timeless. David Shapiro's commissioned "Et incarnatus est" continued the narrative line with melodies that seemed to float. Jonathan Varcoe's "Lullay lullay little child" glowed with perfectly tuned counterpoint and breath-taking softness. The closely voiced harmonies of Jonathan Dove's "Welcome, all wonders in one sight" were sung sweetly and effortlessly.

Rounding the circle, Nally led R. Brant Ruggles' arrangement of the traditional "What child is this" with poignant conviction, then offered Gorecki's "O Magnum Mysterium" (O great mystery) as a fitting, flawless epilogue to a concert that reminded one and all that Donald Nally stands peerless among the region's choral conductors -- a technical magician and an interpretive master.