

NOTEWORTHY/Chestnut Hill Local

by Michael Caruso for 9/14/2006

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill was the site of the one of the finest choral concerts I've ever heard. And, almost as inspiring as that piece of news, the concert was attended by a large and enthusiastic audience that energetically applauded both the music and the singing of it. And even better for local music lovers, the church's sanctuary proved itself a peerless venue for choral concerts. The performance marked the return to Philadelphia of one of the most gifted musicians ever to grace our fair country town with his remarkable talent. Donald Nally, who recently resigned his post as choral director of the Welsh National Opera, led his newly formed choir, The Crossing, in a program almost exclusively devoted to music composed within the past few decades. The oldest of these modern scores was Luigi Nono's *Donde estas Hermano?* (Where is your brother?), written in 1982. The newest was James MacMillan's English language setting of the Latin text, *Te Deum*, composed in 2001 for the celebration the following year of the golden jubilee of England's Queen Elizabeth II. In between The Crossing sang Bruno Bettinelli's *Madrigali a cinque voce miste*, Henryk Gorecki's *Totus Tuus*, Judith Weir's *Human Hymns*, Thomas Ades' *January Writ* and -- the only traditional piece -- Anton Bruckner's *Os Justi*.

The Crossing, comprised of 18 singers, is a congregation of singers from around the country and even the world who love singing for and with Donald Nally. In the strictest and driest sense of the word, it's a "pick-up chorus." But only in the confines of a dictionary's definition. To my ear, at least, it's the most refined yet focused choir in Greater Philadelphia. When considered in the context of the sad constriction of the once mighty Philadelphia Singers-- so dear to countless Chestnut Hillers who treasure the memory and legacy of the late Michael Korn -- it would be nothing short of a crime if the local musical movers-and-shakers fail to step up to the plate and find sufficient funding to enable Nally to establish The Crossing on a permanent basis.

Nally's ability to mold 18 singers into a single, cohesive musical ensemble is, if anything, more extraordinary than ever before. In Bettinelli's "O notte," he projected the score's inimitable lyricism through elegantly yet naturally shaped phrases. The choir's unforced tones, expressively varied dynamically, filled the sanctuary of Chestnut Hill Presbyterian with a sound that glowed with warmth. Balances between the vocal lines were exquisitely pristine while pitch held immaculately pure. The sumptuous harmonies of "Sia calmo il mio respiro" were carefully crafted while the inner voices glistened with a silken sheen.

"Filastrocca del villano" brought the trilogy to a rousing, folksy finale, proving that Nally can frolic with the best of them.

I've never been a totally convicted fan of Gorecki's Totus Tuus because I find the text so far beyond maudlin that I almost cringe when hearing the words. But there's no denying the beauty of the music they and the devotion behind them inspired, and there's no denying that Nally and The Crossing gave the score a sublime rendition Friday night. The choir produced a seamless wall of perfectly blended sound that set the walls, ceiling and floor of the church into waves of sympathetic vibrations that, in turn, achieved the same miracle of music in each listener's body and soul. The performance was like the aural version of a Madonna and Child by Rafael, glowing from the divine presence within.

After intermission, Nally and The Crossing made use of Chestnut Hill Presbyterian's magnificent Mander pipe organ. This warranted another pleasurable return -- that of organist Scott Dettra. The singing and playing in the two anthems by Weir was spirited, the provocative quality of the Adès was aptly delineated and the rendition given the Bruckner beautifully captured the late romantic Catholic mysticism of the score.

But it was in the performance of MacMillan's Te Deum that the evening's most stunning music-making was heard. The young Scotsman, born in 1959, is one of only a few hundred thousand Roman Catholics in the land of John Knox, yet he has become Scotland's most acclaimed young composer, having been commissioned by our own Philadelphia Orchestra, among others. Set in English rather than the original Latin, MacMillan's Te Deum is a mighty work of imaginative vocal/organ scoring, melancholy melodies, evocative harmonies, provocative dissonances, and shimmering textures. Nally, Dettra and The Crossing brought all its disparate strands together with precision and passion, rousing the rafters and soothing the spirit, invigorating the mind and touching the heart. The grandeur and intimacy of the score were movingly interpreted and powerfully performed by singers and organist under Nally's inspired command. Donald Nally is a musical treasure whose local ties should be maintained and sustained at all costs.