

Posted: Tue, Oct. 23, 2012, 3:01 AM

In Philadelphia, choral music with stories to tell



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Just because Philadelphia choral organizations are laudably focused on new music more than ever these days doesn't mean their concerts are anything alike.

Sunday's Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia's Center City concert had new works by Robert Moran that settled in comfortably with Bruckner. On Saturday, the Crossing's concert at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill was more political than poetic, articulated in a fashion far more removed than the 13 geographic miles separating the two.

The Crossing's program betrayed no allegiances to any political party, but director Donald Nally was definitely addressing eternal issues of class struggle, most especially in David Lang's *Statement to the Court*, premiered by the Crossing in 2010 but reprised Saturday in a far better performance. Lang built the piece around a speech by Eugene Debs, the great American socialist who spoke out against child labor as an instance of how America dodges its fundamental ideals.

The words tumble around each other in a naturalistic state of impetuosity but still speak clearly, while the piece's musical evolution mirrors that of many social movements. The beginning has a few lone voices in the wilderness that gather motivic momentum - though fitfully - in a journey that's anything but smooth. My first encounter with the piece left me feeling a bit lost. Now, *Statement to the Court* emerges as a rich, distinctive piece by a composer who is creating one arresting work after another and shows no signs of peaking.

The compulsively avant-garde John Cage was anything but folksy, but nonetheless based his 1979 *Hymn and Variations* on two hymns by William Billings that are splintered according to various prescribed musical formulas. You heard a series of notes with an audible kinship to each other, often devoid of their linear musical progression. The experience was similar to an eye exam: You peer at some familiar object, switching lenses, colors, and eyes. Once you got the hang of Cage, you were ready for the piece to be over, but that's where the beauty of the Crossing's singing made the piece nearly irresistible.

The new name here was Ted Hearne, a student of David Lang's, represented on the program by the 2010 *Privilege* and 2012 *Ripple*. Lang-style word collisions were evident. Hearne is still finding his voice and, to judge from his best-known piece, *Katrina Songs*, is looking for it in both classical and pop genres.



DEREK V. SMYTHE

Robert Moran's "Angele Dei," a Mendelssohn Club offering, was written for the Basilica.

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Based on words taken from one of the Iraq war logs, *Ripple* felt experimental, so splintered as to lose its message in the process. *Privilege* is a song cycle with penetrating verses by Hearne and David Simon, some of them coming off like enigmatic urban haiku, but most hauntingly in a song about apartheid titled "We Cannot Leave," full of long-held notes and descriptive effects as the so-called freedom train is leaving the song's protagonist behind.

Mendelssohn Club's concert was dominated by its venue, the Cathedral Basilica of SS. Peter and Paul, whose acoustics were good for the unaccompanied chamber choir version of Choral Arts Society a few weeks back. But each end of the much-larger Mendelssohn Club seemed unable to hear the other. In unaccompanied passages of Bruckner's *Mass No. 2*, the choir drifted from its original pitch, so much that when accompanying instruments did come in, the entry was hardly seamless. Frustrating!

Moran's *Angele Dei* was newly written for the space, and had two other conductors joining director Alan Harler to keep dispersed singers and instrumentalists in line, allowing pointillistic antiphony among singers to make a splendid, impressive effect. But even Moran's 2011 *Trinity Requiem* (written for the 10th anniversary of 9/11) is a piece with a soothing exterior but a highly personal rhetorical handling of the text underneath. Here, the wash of choral sound significantly masked the piece's content.

The majesty of the building combined with canny presentation - in the *Requiem*, the sonorous, cohesive Philadelphia Boys Choir began in the loft and proceeded up the main aisle - created a pleasant event. But future choirs should carefully consider what works here.

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