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Two concerts find harmony in congenial spaces



MATTHEW MURPHY

The Crossing choir sang "Canticles of the Holy Wind" Sunday at Crane Arts in Northern Liberties.

David Patrick Stearns, *Inquirer Classical Music Critic*

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Were you to see and *not* hear the Crossing's U.S. premiere of the John Luther Adams choral work *Canticles of the Holy Wind*, the sight would be mouths and eyes wide open in a state somewhere between rapture and terror, amid video projections of quiltlike patterns morphing into flocks of birds.

And that's more or less what one *heard* Sunday at Crane Arts. The music operated at a level of imagination conveying rarefied states of perception - and in complete harmony with Dan Cole's video in the Ice Box space, a large, blank white room. Singing was a mass of seamlessly harnessed sound, unclouded by vibrato, growing this way and that, sometimes erupting into noises from birds of yet-to-evolve species.

It was hardly a typical concert, but more and more I wonder if there is any such thing. On Friday, a harp recital by Elizabeth Morgan-Ellis included dancers, video projections, and a panorama of images created by shadow puppets at the Maas Building, a former brewery also in Northern


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Liberties as part of the Fringe Festival.

The Inquirer

Both venues offered basic space with no set seating. At the harp concert, listeners moved their chairs between pieces. At Crane, the Crossing was divided into four choirs (yes, 16-part vocal writing) that changed configurations around the audience in a darkened room. Both concerts were packed. Receptions were attached. Is this Philadelphia? It felt like Berlin.

Repurposed industrial buildings with tabula-rasa spaces allow enterprising musicians to rethink their concerts in ways that make audiences hear more intently - the opposite of a resident-company model where musical content is subtly influenced by the venue's identity. Here, content (even when it's nothing radical) appears to dictate the venue.

The Kimmel Center and Academy of Music experiences don't suffer in comparison - though even Opera Philadelphia is exploring an alternative space in November with *Svadba*, at the new FringeArts building. But let's be honest: Video hasn't often worked well in those places. Screens seem small, are set apart from everything else, and, especially in Verizon Hall, often feel remote, like a drive-in movie. Different elements can seem to fight for attention.

In the two events last weekend, video was projected on the walls. Novelty of presentation didn't steal focus from the content. Well, usually: Though harpist Morgan-Ellis (a Temple grad) and her chamber ensemble delivered strong-minded, well-rehearsed performances, I was so drawn into Andrew Huston's shadow show during Anne Neikirk's *locoMotives* that I now must revisit the music on its own.

But Andrea Clearfield's French-impressionist-flavored *Rhapsodie* (2009) melded effortlessly with Huston's visual fantasia on Claude Monet lily-pad paintings, morphing into sunbursts and far less-imaginable things, that I heard the music in ways I hadn't before.

One couldn't have felt more inside the total sight/sound package at Crane Arts. Objectively speaking, Adams' *Canticles* draw on the tight, cluster-y harmonies of Ligeti vocal music and employ the gentle ostinatos and poetically open-ended phonemes of Meredith Monk. The washes of sound were built with distinctive harmonic meticulousness that weren't traditional but seemed to burrow into your head. Birdcalls were evident, but not in Olivier Messiaen-style flocks; Adams is a resident of Alaska, and his birds are more aggressive individualists.

Thanks to the composer's clarity of purpose (and vividly titled movements like "Sky With Nameless Colors"), *Canticles of the Wind* is one of the few new pieces I've heard without any cognitive barriers, but not because the music was familiar. Adams hit some sort of basic essence



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that I might not have felt from performers set apart in a proscenium-stage auditorium.

This is not to say every music organization should find itself a warehouse. These concerts aren't for everybody. And not every repurposed brewery is going to be as congenial as the Maas Building. At a concert I heard in an Estonian munitions factory, for example, the obvious make-music-not-war message was eclipsed by creature discomfort for both musicians and listeners.

Contact music critic David Patrick Stearns at dstearns@phillynews.com.



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