

Reflection/anticipation

Some thoughts on Friday's concert by [The Crossing](#):

- thrilling and exhausting gestures in John McCabe's *Scenes from America Deserta*: wordless glissandos, dense layering, lots of sibilance and chattering syllables. Busy rather than stark. Much more tumultuous than expected for something intended to evoke a desert.

- two calmer pieces to cool things down. Paul Fowler's *Potter's Clay*, for women's voices, is smooth and chant-like, working and reworking "Om mani padme hum" into a dissonant pile-up, then repeating the initial portion of the English text. Gives the sense of resolve and insight forged in contemplation. Men rejoin the women for Phillip Moore's *I saw him standing there* and the blend seems off; the men might still be drained from the McCabe. The middle section of the motet has the most interest; a vital, rhythmic dance that recalls the madrigals that many promising singers first take on during high school as an introduction to high-level, unaccompanied singing.

- Kile Smith's *Where flames a word*, the final world premiere in the Celan Project, and the first to incorporate a prose work by Celan. Gives a sense of immanence and of tremendous, overwhelming size and the struggle to comprehend it. Middle section, the prose setting, has text that reflects a struggle for language, a conflict between "green" and "white" language, and the build-up of clusters suggests language at war, green and white each fighting for their own space.

-Exact quote from conductor Donald Nally, not long into first movement: "Every so often, and because the composer is in the room, we're going to go back and do it again. There's a wonderful moment... that we just screwed up."

-Despite that, the Smith piece was really impressive: a strong sense of lapping waves, of drawing closer to that nagging, inscrutable secret that seems to haunt Celan. One odd thing: ending on the word "delusion" with a sweet, major chord. Are we to come away thinking of peace and harmony as a delusion? Is this resignation in the face of the struggles Celan evokes? Not sure.

-First half: totally killer. How did they get through it? How do they have the energy for the second half? Anyway, here they go again: "Rain and Rush and Rosebush" by Bo Holten (also in attendance!) A flitting, dramatic work, with a very hard-working soprano soloist and trio of narrators/commenters with an immaculately blended sound. The piece has a kind of fairytale-ish back story but it's much deeper and stranger than most fairytales. Kind of cold at points, but with lots of fluid, intertwining lines that maintain momentum.

-Arvo Pärt's *I am the true vine*: holy moly. The blend, the focus, the consistency, the adherence to text, it's all there. There's a gravity to the words but a lightness in phrasing, static but radiant. In short: it was simple, beautiful, ethereal, and right.

-Concert closed with *Voices of Autumn* by my one-time college professor Jackson Hill (sadly, not in attendance). Apparently not taxed by the Pärt or all that came before: the same blend and focus are there, and the ornamentations, inspired by Buddhist chant and Japanese court music, are tossed off with poise. As with the Pärt, I'm reminded of a massed organ sound, with stops being pulled to generate minute changes in color and texture.

All this was motivated by the fact that I'll be seeing The Crossing again tonight at the opening concert of the Chorus America conference, which is being held in Philadelphia. The Crossing will be joined by the Princeton Singers, and I believe they will reprise the Smith piece, as well as the David Shapiro piece from earlier this year, and a work by British composer Joby Talbot that I missed out on seeing last month. More reports to come.

Posted by Dave Allen at [3:58 PM](#)
