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by Michael Caruso

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Donald Nally and The Crossing launched their “Month of Moderns” Sunday afternoon in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. Despite the sweltering heat, the church’s air conditioning and Nally’s well-established brilliance at assembling fabulous programs of contemporary music drew an audience that nearly filled the main sanctuary.

This time around, the 23-member choir was joined by the 12-member Philadelphia Virtuosi, a string orchestra capable of achieving a level of tuning and ensemble almost the equal of that of The Crossing. Certainly their contribution to the afternoon’s music-making was extraordinarily efficacious.

The program opened and closed with pieces highlighting first the men of the choir and then the women along the Philadelphia Virtuosi. Arvo Part’s “Pilgrim’s Song” was heard at the start and John Tavener’s “The Bridegroom” at the end, with Benjamin Boyle’s Cantata: “To One in Paradise” and Bo Holten’s Tallis Variations rounding out the first half of the concert and the world premiere of David Lang’s “Statement to the Court” filling out the second.

Lang’s “Statement to the Court” is a part of the Levine Project, a series of commissions of choral works, most often using Philip Levine’s poetry as texts for the scores. This time around, the composer excerpted portions of a speech labor agitator Eugene Debs delivered to a judge just prior to his sentencing in 1918. It was an impassioned denunciation of the evils of uncontrolled capitalism – an exhortation that seems far less extreme in the wake of the BP oil spill.

Lang’s work was the only piece on the program to employ an additional sound effect alongside the singing and the playing. Unfortunately, the addition of a heavily and repetitiously banged drum not only added nothing to the music’s effect – it detracted from what was already a dangerously repetitious setting of a boldly varied text. A small number of melodic motifs were presented, re-presented and then re-presented once again throughout the score’s length. Harmonies were at a minimum, so the music consistently sounded stark and austere. Obviously it can be argued that Debs’ message was (and remains) stark and austere in its condemnation of unabashed greed. But just as the communication of a sense of tedium needn’t and shouldn’t be tedious, neither should a straightforward text be delivered without imagination.

The program’s most enthralling work was Tavener’s “The Bridegroom,” set to a text taken from the Eastern Orthodox Church’s liturgy of Holy Week and based on Our Lord’s parable of the ten virgins from the Gospel of St. Matthew. Tavener’s music captured that haunting spirituality that inspires the music of

Eastern Orthodoxy, be it Greek or Russian, so much more an intimation of the next world than the sensuality of the sacred choral music of Roman Catholicism from the time of the Renaissance onward.

Part's "Pilgrim's Song" set a reflective mood to open the concert but failed to move much beyond that. On the other hand, Boyle's Cantata: "To One in Paradise," set to poetry by Edgar Allan Poe, overflowed with variety kept splendidly in check by a firm sense of neo-classical structure and development. The 35-year-old composer was on hand to acknowledge the audience's overwhelming appreciation of his ability to proffer both innovation and tradition in his music.

Holten's Tallis Variations – the program's oldest work, coming from 1976 – was also an effective blend of old and new.

Throughout the entire concert, The Crossing sang with Nally's trademark immaculacy of tuning, balance, texture, breadth of dynamics, phrasing and diction – plus the intensity of a passionate commitment to new music. Not altogether surprisingly, Nally elicited the same high level of playing from the Philadelphia Virtuosi.