

By Shaun Brady

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The Crossing debuts new piece



Composer John Luther Adams, called “one of the most original thinkers of the new century” by the New Yorker, has lived in Alaska for the last 35 years, an environment often reflected in his music. Calling to talk about Adams and his newly commissioned work for Philly new-music choir The Crossing last week, conductor Donald Nally was enjoying some end-of-summer time at the beach. The two landscapes couldn’t be more different, but the mere fact of their proximity to nature links them to the concert-length work that The Crossing will premiere this weekend.

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“I’m really interested in John’s music and language,” Nally says. “He’s always describing our natural world, and I’m really interested in music that references or reaches out to the natural world. It seems to indicate to me or to magnify the distance that we are from that world in our everyday life.. But John lives in a much more remote area where he experiences that world more than I do living in Chicago or Philadelphia.”

The new piece, co-commissioned with the Latvian choir Kamer, is titled “Canticles of the Holy Wind” and alternates movements inspired by the sky, the wind, birds and other motifs from nature. Nally describes the 70-minute work as “very atmospheric. It’s designed to, over the extended period of a movement, allow you to disappear into your own space. Each movement has an idea that allows you to disappear into your own thinking as it creates a mood that exists and hovers for a while.”

The premiere of “Canticles of the Holy Wind” kicks off The Crossing’s 2013-2014 season, which will also feature newly commissioned works by composers Ted Hearne and Gavin Bryars, the latter in conjunction with local saxophone quartet PRISM. Nally finds a loose theme for the season in the choir’s December concert, which includes a Wolfgang Rihm piece inspired by 19th-century German philosopher Novalis’ poem “Astralis.”

“That piece is about an individual finding his way through the comfort and longing involved in intersecting with the world,” Nally explains. “That desire for companionship is an age-old theme, and it’s a large, loose theme through which we’re threading a number of pieces throughout this season. ‘Canticles’ is about the inevitability of the earth moving independently of human interaction, so it can’t help but remind us of the responsibility that we have to the birds, to the wind and the sky and the sun and the moon.”

The Crossing: “Canticles of the Holy Wind”

Sept. 15

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