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Review: Norwegian Girl Choir shimmers



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The fun never ends — fun, that is, of a singular kind.

Having just mounted a substantial Month of Moderns Festival, the Crossing choir and its leader, Donald Nally, offered a free postscript concert Tuesday — a collaborative program, roughly 90 minutes with no intermission, with the touring Norwegian Girl Choir at Christ Church in Old City.

Neither organization is the sort to take it easy in the summer heat. In his international explorations, Nally unveiled important works by seldom-heard Norwegian composers Alfred Janson and Asbjorn Schaathun. Under the direction of Anne Karin Sundal-Ask, the Norwegians (officially known as Det Norske Jentekor) had their own mixture of new works and unusually substantial folk song arrangements. Only days before, on June 30 at a United Nations concert, the group had been asked to omit a recently written piece by composer Maja Ratkje that contained texts disparaging a number of world leaders (George W. Bush said to be among them). That piece was not scheduled for Philadelphia, but the incident says much about the group, which obviously doesn't exist only to sing extremely well (which it does); it also functions as an artistic entity that does more than maintain the status quo.

The well-sequenced concert began with the Crossing by itself, starting with Janson's setting of Shakespeare's Sonnet No. 76, dating from 2000. Luckily, the composer didn't maintain the respectful distance from Shakespeare's text that one so often hears in Anglo composers. Appropriate to a sonnet that begins "Why is my verse so barren of new pride?...," the music felt like the kind of lonely, self-scrutinizing inner dialogue an artist is likely to have at 4 a.m. The chantlike monophonic lines were broken up by odd, antic commentary from the rest of the choir, repeating words in both veiled tones and exclamations.

In Schaathun's *Verklarung*, each word of the German-language Georg Trakl text came in a long-sustained note, giving the illusion of individual sheets of sound creating a harmonic collage with one another. It was like nothing else I've ever heard, the closest point of reference being the tone clusters of Ligeti's early choral works, though with a strong sense of inner dramatic movement thanks to shifting inner harmonies.

The Norwegian girls made an arresting entrance from the side pews of Christ Church singing a pair of traditional wedding songs — to great effect. In the rest of the program, one lovely piece seemed to melt into another (thanks partly to the humidity), including *Shimmering* by Ola Gjeilo and a series of traditional works arranged by Knut Nystedt, portraying the turning points of life through the lens of various church ceremonies, as well as melancholy love songs. Time and again, one heard sad, descending chord progressions — perhaps a trope in the larger Norwegian consciousness.

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