

Courier Post  
Dave Allen  
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Music of the 21st century makes up just a small fraction of most musical organizations' programming. For one local group, though, that repertoire is at the center rather than on the margins.

The Crossing, a chamber chorus of roughly 20 voices, begins its second "Month of Moderns" Sunday afternoon in Philadelphia.

Last year's inaugural festival set the bar high, with big names in classical music alongside innovative composers hardly known in the United States, and the group has returned with a lineup of both emotionally and artistically demanding works.

Founded in 2005 by conductor Donald Nally and a group of singers assembled from the chorus of the Opera Company of Philadelphia and other professional groups in the city, the Crossing focuses entirely on repertoire from roughly the past 20 years. Some modern repertoire is known for its difficulty and obscurity, and this choir not only takes the fear out of modern music, but infuses it with a sense of joy.

"It was founded by a bunch of friends who wanted to sing together," says Nally, and that spirit of camaraderie comes through in performances of complex, stirring compositions. Though the choir is filled with professionals, its season runs differently from many other established ensembles. Owing to Nally's commitments as choirmaster for the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Crossing presents half of a season -- one concert in early January, titled "Crossing at Winter," and then the summertime "Month of Moderns" after Nally's season in Chicago winds down.

Rehearsals are packed into a short amount of time, and new works are frequently edited and fine-tuned by the composers during the period leading up to the performance. "The music never has time to get stale," says Rebecca Siler, a soprano from Haddon Township who has sung with the group since its founding.

"There's excitement and growth in the music up to and including the performance," she says. The choir's preparation, though, is evident the singers' concentration on producing pure, acutely-tuned sound. This focus is required to sing works that demand massive clusters -- groups of closely spaced notes that are difficult to sing in tune -- and wide-ranging chords stretching from deep bass to ultra-high soprano. Other pieces feature teeming passages where each singer acts as a soloist, creating a dense, swirling mass of sound.

In addition to these musical challenges, the singers also develop strong emotional connection to certain pieces. In January, the choir gave the local premiere of David Lang's Pulitzer Prize-winning composition "The Little Match-Girl Passion."

It's a simple, even sparse work, with vocalists doubling on percussion instruments, but filled with themes of faith, abandonment and despair. "All of us are riding the waves of emotion in the music," says Maren Montalbano Brehm, a mezzo-soprano from Willingboro. She recalls seeing audience members looking enraptured and even openly weeping during some of the group's performances.

Lang was commissioned to write a new work for this afternoon's concert, which features string accompaniment by the Philadelphia Virtuosi, and it's in line with the choir's yearly project of presenting multiple works that use texts by the same author. "If I dive into something, I want to go all the way," Nally explains. "I want to get all the way inside this poet or this idea."

Last season's "Month of Moderns" focused on German poet Paul Celan; this year's spotlight is on Detroit-born poet Philip Levine. Lang's piece, "statement to the Court," takes an oblique angle on Levine, drawing on a speech by early-20th century labor activist and Socialist Party politician Eugene Debs; themes of work and labor, as well as radical politics, have long been a part of Levine's works. "It talks a little about his background -- how he got to this place and decided to dedicate himself to this better vision," Lang says, in a video conversation with Nally. The piece eventually works its way around to what Lang calls "the articulation of an optimistic vision of the future."

Lang is a modern-music heavyweight, though; the rest of the month features composers less known in Philadelphia, including two other American composers -- Lansing McLoskey, from Florida and Paul Fowler, from Colorado -- who also set Levine's poetry for new commission. McLoskey describes Levine's language as "quite acerbic or bitter, even angry at times" and his poems as having irregular forms.

"Rather than fight it, I just set the text and didn't worry that much about pacing and climax," he says. "If a poem took a 45-degree angle turn, so did the music. If the poem was obsessive, so was the music."

Just as each setting of the same author takes a different approach, each Crossing concert has a slightly different shape, though the choir benefits consistently from its home base at the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, an acoustically remarkable space in the city's far northwestern reaches.

The church's pipe organ also will be featured on the July 9 concert, while the July 17 concert will present the choir unaccompanied.

#### IF YOU GO

The Crossing, 'Month of Moderns,' 4 p.m. Sunday,  
Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, 8855 Germantown Ave., Philadelphia.

Also, 8 p.m. Friday and July 17.

Tickets for all concerts \$25, \$15 for students and seniors. Visit [www.crossingchoir.com](http://www.crossingchoir.com)