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Review: The Crossing goes sacred without sanctity



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In the final concert of its Month of Moderns festival, the Crossing choir delivered its version of a feel-good program Sunday, moving from its usual Chestnut Hill venues to St. Clement's Church near Logan Square. Texts were nothing radical, and many of the composers were on their Sunday behavior, expressing themselves straightforwardly, always with one foot in some sort of tradition. Make that one toe, in some cases.

The most obvious differences between these sacred-slanted concert works and church-service music are affirmation and certainty. Church music has little ambivalence and nothing but answers; no Crossing program is ever going to be dominated by traditional resolutions, harmonic or philosophic.

Some of the pieces, such as Gavin Bryars' Glorious Hill, have been around for a while. That piece represents a possible meeting between modern minimalism and the ascetic dignity of the 12th-century composer Perotin. Words and music were intoned with great deliberation, though vocal lines had a wider, modern vocal range and quietly insinuating ostinatos that sometimes lurked behind the melody with a magical, pulsating effect.

James MacMillan's Padre Pio's Prayer lacked the more excruciating expressions of ecstasy (extreme high notes and dissonances) heard in his best-known works, though squiggly organ effects popped in from alien keys, and the quiet organ postlude — played by Scott Dettra on the church's rich-toned instrument — suggested the difficulties that can come with a faith-based life (Padre Pio, for one, had stigmata).

In the program's one premiere, Francis Pott's To every thing there is a season adapted some of the same texts from Ecclesiastes used in Pete Seeger's "Turn! Turn! Turn!", though obviously with different effect, employing fairly conservative harmonies (it was co-commissioned by the Association of Anglican Musicians as well as the Crossing) but without attempt to shoehorn words into any symmetrical sameness. The overriding concern was maximum clarity of expression. A fine piece. Again, the ending was far from any religious certainty — downright dark.

The most ambitious piece was Pott's My Song Is Love Unknown, adapting 17th-century writings by Samuel Crossman. It might be described as a 21st-century reinvention of the 19th-century ballad, recounting the crucifixion with a lot of personal sentiment along the way. The composer recast the text, reiterating lines that were particularly meaningful to him, and generally used it as a launching point for dramatic choral statements that bordered on being operatic. Lots of open questions at the end.

With director Donald Nally's extensive past preparing opera choruses in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Cardiff, Wales, one shouldn't be surprised that his approach is more high-definition and less meditative than the existing recordings of many of these works. I like Nally's more, particularly in the opening selection, the Estonian Toivo Tulev's Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice, the wildest piece on the program with note clusters creating harmonies I'd never imagined, much less heard. Clearly, it was an alternative view of rejoicing. The other Tulev work, Summer rain, was more an act of descriptive eccentricity.

Nally's tendency to let audiences float out of his concerts on a choral cloud was apparent in the expansive melodies of the concluding Gabriel Jackson piece, Now I Have Known, O Lord, based on words from the 10th-century Sufi mystic al-Junaid and probably the evening's most frankly communicative text. The Crossing captured the radiance of the choral writing, but did so not by clothing the words in pretty sounds. Beauty arose from rendering the music with a relatively lean clarity, so that one could appreciate the smallest details of how each chord was voiced. The Arabic-sounding ornaments seemed decorative at first but became a more intense part of the total picture. Some of the

harmonic resolutions were staggering, such as a high soprano note so magnetic that everything resolved up to it.

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