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The Crossing: Month of Moderns III 6/30/13

- Posted by [Sharon Torello](#) on July 2, 2013 at 7:30pm
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It only makes sense that newly created music should embrace current events as a topic, yet I was still surprised that the theme of The Crossing's "Month of Moderns" series was the Deepwater Horizon disaster. The concert Sunday afternoon would cap an ambitious project that included three new music commissions set to newly commissioned poetry by Pierre Joris,

performances of related works, and years of preparation for the three main concerts. As if that were not ambitious enough, five [special presentations](#) were also scheduled in June to give audience members related experiences beyond the program notes. Two of the composers, Gene Coleman and Chris Jonas were featured in concerts with their own ensembles. The third commissioned composer, Gabriel Jackson, took part in an interview hosted by The Crossing's conductor, Donald Nally. An evening of poetry by Pierre Joris was held at the The Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral, and artwork inspired by "The Gulf" was displayed at The Crossing's home - the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill.

Composers Gabriel Jackson and Santa Ratniece were featured in all three Month of Modern's concerts, as was the poetry of Pierre Joris, and all three were in attendance for this final concert. This is one of the treats of attending contemporary classical music. The chance to thank the creators directly. The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill was almost full. For seven years, The Crossing has been delivering performances of extraordinary precision and challenging works so they have developed a devout and well deserved following. As a matter of fact, their name rose to rock star status as they [performed twice](#) this month with the Rolling Stones! Of course that little "treat" was quite a diversion from their normal repertoire, but who could refuse a request from Mick Jagger to sing with his band? The funny thing about that diverse mix, however, was that the rock music was older than most of the music performed in The Crossing's own concerts.

The members of The Crossing spread out across the front of the sanctuary and were clearly heard in the back of the church. Though Jackson's "Rigwreck" was the featured work of the concert, I have to admit that I preferred the selections following the intermission. The first of these, James MacMillian's "Gallant Weaver" was a whimsical piece with gaelic influence that was in stark contrast to the tone set by the horrible disaster of the BP oil spill in the first half of the concert.

The next work, John Cage's four(squared) completely surprised me by it's zen quality. According to the program notes, Cage "assigned a series of pitches to each section of the choir with a time parameter within which each pitch should start or stop". The long sustained tones were accomplished by staggered breathing to "hand off" the tone between choir members to maintain the tone beyond the point where individuals would need to pause to take a breath. This was done with such precision that it was undetectable. Adding to the difficulty was that, like most works by Cage, "chance" was built into the equation so each performance would be unique. In this case, the time parameter for pitches can change resulting in a different alignment of the notes, thus producing different harmonies between performances. The singers must be able to ignore those differences and stay on their assigned course laid out by Cage's score and the direction of the conductor. Even though the piece sounded like it was in slow motion, I was surprised how quickly the seven minutes passed by.

The final piece, Santa Ratniece's "Saline" started with breathing from the choir, followed by whistling. The extended techniques were so effective that as I closed my eyes I could clearly hear the sounds of birds and wind echoing off cliffs or canyon walls. It was truly remarkable. As other sounds, like a deep drone, were introduced, it was clear that there were eastern influences in the music. Though it wasn't until well into the piece that more musical tones and words were introduced, the piece produced clear images in my head were most clear in the absence of words.

A friendly reception followed the concert and The Crossing treated the large crowd with a jubilant encore performance of their rock star debut song by the Rolling Stones: "You can't always get what you want". Well in this case we certainly did get what we wanted, and more.