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Phila. choir gets what it wants with the Stones



The Rolling Stones began their two show stand in Philadelphia at the Wells Fargo Center on Tuesday night. (Michael S. Wirtz/Staff Photographer)

David Patrick Stearns, *Inquirer Classical Music Critic*
POSTED: Friday, June 21, 2013, 3:01 AM

'Yeah! Best yet!'

Such exclamations were heard from the Rolling Stones' sound engineers Tuesday afternoon when the Crossing choir finished its rehearsal of "You Can't Always Get What You Want."

The founder/director of the Philadelphia-based group was similarly pleased. "I'm impressed with my sopranos - they have high C's for five bars," said Donald Nally.

The bigger challenge came that night at the concert, when they began the song amid an anticipatory roar from the Wells Fargo Center audience. Eight minutes later, the singers took a concluding bow, graciously encouraged by Mick Jagger, and will do it again Friday night. It's the last show of the Philly stop for their "50 & Counting" tour, for which they've recruited choirs in every city.

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While Nally, 52, admits he never followed the Rolling Stones closely, he was unaccountably familiar with "You Can't Always Get What You Want," which occupies a singular place in the Stones' output. Recorded in 1968, it's the Stones at their grandest, with the London Bach Choir introducing the first verse - even though the song's origins were particularly casual.

Legend has it that Jagger and Keith Richards, in a Greek restaurant in London, kept asking for dishes that weren't available and were told by a surly waiter, "You can't always get what you want!" The song was born. But with the inclusion of a church-y sounding choir, the lyrics come off as a lesson that has to be relearned from cradle to grave - and with music that, for the Crossing, is like a paid vacation.

"To be singing a piece that's in C major and has only five chords in it . . . it's fun to just sink into it and make it physical and visceral and not be thinking, 'Is this a quarter-tone glissando?' " Nally says.

Hardly a church choir, the Crossing is a collection of professional singers (some with dreadlocks) that converges during discrete parts of the year (December and June) when higher-paid gigs don't get in the way of the extra rehearsal time needed for their typically cutting-edge repertoire.

In the group's Month of Moderns concerts on Sunday at the Crane Arts Center and June 30 at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, works by Latvian composer Santa Ratniece will require the singers to imitate bird sounds in chords that fly off in numerous directions. The group also has Christmas appearances scheduled at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and will make its Carnegie Hall debut in Zankel Hall next season.

The Stones heard about the Crossing through Julian Wachner, who directed his Trinity Wall Street Choir for the venerable band's Newark and Brooklyn shows, which launched the tour in December.

During this week's performances, the 24 singers are amplified by 12 microphones, all with individual earpieces with a click track allowing them to keep their bearings amid the thunderous context.

A key part of the package is an airtight nondisclosure agreement. Ask Nally what it's like to work with Mick and Keith, and he's legally (and uncharacteristically) obliged to stay silent.

It must be said, though, that the Stones continue Nally's commitment to living composers - a commitment that initially seemed unsustainable in reputedly conservative

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Philadelphia when the group was founded seven years ago.

"Now, we wake up in the morning and go, 'Wow . . . this is happening.' "

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You can watch a video of the Crossing with the Stones performing "You Can't Always Get What You Want" at the Wells Fargo Center on Tuesday night here. www.inquirer.com/stones video.

Contact David Patrick Stearns at dstearns@phillynews.com.



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