

The Crossing season climaxes with 'Month of Moderns'

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Many composers have set the same texts to music, but the texts are generally well-known, obvious choices. Heinrich Schütz, Igor Stravinsky, Charles Ives and Steve Reich all fashioned choral music from Psalm 150, for example, and each of them left his own, unmistakably personal stamp on it.

When the words are more obscure — an English translation, say, of a poem written in German by a Romanian Holocaust survivor living in Paris — the odds in favor of multiple settings grow longer.

Yet two new choral works that will receive their first performances in the coming weeks have, with serendipity and a little prodding, fooled the oddsmakers.

The Crossing, the exquisite 16-member choral group that makes its home at the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, will present the world premieres of Kirsten Broberg's "Breathturn" May 22 and Kile Smith's "Where Flames a Word" June 5. The works are the standouts of the Crossing's three-concert series titled, collectively, "A Month of Moderns." (The first concert took place May 16.)

In commissioning the pieces, Donald Nally, the Crossing's founding director, asked Smith and Broberg to set to music the words of Paul Celan, the terse, enigmatic poet who survived the Nazi Holocaust only to commit suicide in 1970.

He allowed them to pick any text they like, but after reading through hundreds of poems and prose pieces, both found themselves drawn to the same four-line verse: "I know you, you are the deeply bowed/I, the transpierced, am subject to you./Where flames a word, would testify for us both?/You — all, all real. I — all delusion."

In Smith's work, the verse is the last of three settings. In Broberg's, it is the second of five. The contrast will make interesting listening, although, as always with the Crossing, it will be only one of many attractions.

Broberg describes "Breathturn" (a translation of Celan's coinage "Atemwende") as a journey from angst to affirmation, and "I know you" appears early, in the music's more angst-ridden half.

"I'm really interested in transformation between different states in my music," Broberg said last week by

telephone from the Midwest, where she was preparing for a move from Chicago to Minneapolis. “I really think the poems have that sort of mentality.”

In the line “where flames a word,” she said, she splits the singers up so that each begins the word “flame” on a different beat. The result, an alliterative series of effs, is intended to sound like the striking of a match.

“There’s a great sense of musicality in the text, a lot of alliteration,” Broberg said.

The same line receives a more traditional, church-chorus treatment from Smith, a graduate of Philadelphia Biblical University who regularly composes religious music.

“It’s almost hymnlike,” he said last week. “It gets real big, and it’s pretty straightforward rhythmically right there.”

Nally discovered Broberg’s music on her Web site, decided he liked what he heard and commissioned her by e-mail, Broberg said. In the process, he reintroduced her to Celan’s poetry, some of which she had read, but which she did not know well, she said.

Smith knew nothing of Celan before his Crossing commission, although, as the curator of the Fleisher Collection at the Free Library of Philadelphia, he has access to a trove of literature just outside his office — one of the great advantages of working at the library.

“When I started to look into him, I found out how big a name he was,” Smith said. “He’s sort of like James Joyce, only in German. I was taken with him from the start.”

The composers relished both the challenge of setting Celan’s words to music and also the opportunity to write for the Crossing.

“I’m just really honored to be working with such fine musicians,” said Broberg, who became familiar with the group’s sound through a CD Nally sent her.

She is confident the singers will not only get the notes right, but also respect her expressive aims, she said.

Smith, who lives in Northeast Philadelphia, has seen the Crossing frequently on its home field, the little acoustic jewel box of Chestnut Hill Presbyterian, and he has an even better idea of the group’s capabilities.

“Well, they’re phenomenally good, and they have this creamy sound,” he said. “They make really hard stuff sound really easy, which composers can take advantage of — sometimes with impunity, unfortunately for them.”

The Crossing’s May 22 concert featuring Broberg’s “Breathturn” will also include music by Stephen Stuckey,

Bo Holden and James MacMillan. The June 5 program with Smith's "Where Flames a World" will include music by Arvo Pärt, Holton and Paul Fowler.

Info: www.crossingchoir.com.