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# The Crossing opens its festival with a Baltic stunner

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**The Inquirer** The Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral was darkened and the the Crossing choir was positioned in a circle, facing inward, with sound seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere. But even a healthy sense of trepidation had no place at Saturday's opening of the group's annual Month of Moderns festival, in which artistic director Donald Nally unveiled his latest stunning Baltic discovery, *Chu dal* by Latvian composer Santa Ratniece.

Spiritually oriented texts, long disdained under communism, are often a route to blazing originality among Baltic composers; this piece meditates on bodies of water high (Mongolia's Namtso Lake) and low (the Dead Sea).

The piece's long-term harmonic plan was hidden by numerous crosscurrents of heterogenous sound suggesting whispering, dramatic exhalation and, in the bass writing, ritualistic chanting by Buddhist monks, all creating an organism whose sound was familiar but whose sense of gesture and movement was not. Beyond that, words fail to decrbe this 12-minute epic. Ratniece will be heard in the two subsequent Month of Moderns concerts, Sunday and June 30.

The biggest piece on the program was a world premiere by Gene Coleman, a Philadelphia-born composer mainly represented by recordings suggesting his medium is experimental jazz. Luckily, his piece *Water of the Last Moment* was sympathetic to voices, although a stretch in a narrative made from tightly packed vocal harmonies, electronic accompaniment generated by two laptops, and, most otherworldly of all, an 8th-century Chinese mouth organ called the *sho*.

The festival's theme, "The Gulf (between you and me)," uses the 2010 BP Gulf of Mexico oil spill to discuss societal alienation and was taken to heart in the Pierre Joris text of Coleman's piece, which examined aspects of the disaster in each section.

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The electronic rumbling that shook the seats certainly suggested a wounded planet. But the dramatization was open-ended in such ways that the piece could be heard as an update of possibilities in the choral medium, utilizing traditional scales in passing but creating clearly discernible poetic imagery.

Often, such experimental works can't sustain an extended musical span. Yet Coleman's did, even generating surprise in a musical language where usual rules didn't apply, progressing to ever-newer terrain with extreme vocal registers that never alienated the ear.

Those two pieces inevitably stole thunder from the rest of the program, which included Gabriel Jackson's excellent *A Ship With Unfurled Sails* and Tamar Diesendruck's *Other Floods*, which leapt down curious musical rabbit holes I was unable to follow.

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