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## Crossing sings poetry set to music



By David Patrick Stearns

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The ever-ambitious modern-music choir the Crossing entered a particularly enterprising phase with its winter concert at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, launching *The Celan Project* - a product of founder/conductor Donald Nally's current fascination with Paul Celan, the Romanian Jewish poet who survived World War II concentration camps but committed suicide in 1970.

> Composers, local and otherwise, are being commissioned by the Crossing to set Celan to music. Works by those who have already done so, plus pieces in the spirit of Celan, were combined to great effect - greater than I imagined, and in unanticipated ways - in a program Sunday that sets the tone for a trio of Crossing concerts titled "Month of Moderns," on May 16, May 22 and June 5.

> Celan's verse often seems made for music. The startlingly original, deeply lyrical visual imagery has the immediacy of music. Layers of possible meaning tend to inspire composers to create all manner of fresh textures. Nally's program notes discussed the poet's more cryptic qualities that simply have to be taken for what they are, rather than be understood through outside references. Considering how music also has an it-is-what-it-is quality, one could argue that these composers complete what the poet couldn't do himself.

> Never did the composers, at least on Sunday, exploit the morbidity of Celan's biography. Lack of pathos, nascent or otherwise, gave the pieces an elevated poise, even *Variations on Celan III*, written in 1997 by German composer Erhard Karkoschka to words the poet wrote on the death of his son. The music employed musical elements from swooping vocal glissandi to the Bach chorale "Come Sweet Death," sometimes with layered simultaneity that could lose even the most sophisticated ears. Yet the piece won your trust for willingly leaving you behind in service of Celan.

> *It Is Time*, a new work by Philadelphia's David Shapiro, was more conventional: The composer's personality emerged somewhat shyly, starting out with fairly conventional, mellifluous sonorities for words that speak of love. When the choir broke into individual sections, the music became more crabbed and spare as the poet emphatically claimed his

place in a world that, only a few years before, wanted him dead.

> Like-minded non-Celan-based pieces filled out the surprisingly unified program, one that was like a series of interior monologues that also functioned as building blocks for some impressively individualistic musical architecture. Particularly emblematic of that was David Lang's *I Want to Live (where you live)*, the title being the piece's sole text, repeated in a huge range of choral guises - but not for the sake of convincing outside parties. This is a meditation, not a proclamation.

> Nally's performance approach was the opposite of the keen edges and intensely colored qualities I heard when Trio Mediaeval sang the piece a few years back at the Brooklyn Academy. This felt more like musical free-associating: Trio Mediaeval guided you on a journey already explored, while the equally polished Crossing seemed to take the journey with you.

> Other descriptive, even seasonal works - such as Bo Holten's *First Snow* and Paul Spicer's *How Love Bleeds: Four Carols for Dark Times* - maintained the concert's remarkably high level of inspiration, so much so that the final work, a perfectly good piece titled *Someday* by Santa Fe-based composer John Kennedy, was a letdown. Its inclusion promised to give listeners a rest with more conventional harmonies. But the piece's almost polemical extroversion felt preachy.

> It made you realize how good you had it in the rest of the concert, with music that bypassed one's usual perceptive portals (intellectual analysis, emotional cliches you've experienced elsewhere), sung by a group that embodied more than just the notes in creating an atmosphere that colluded with the venue's ambience. The church's spartan Christmas tree, the unstained glass windows revealing gray winter skies, the sills crowded with candles of all shapes and sizes were metaphors for the program - with similar but unique sources of light.

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