

Broad Street Review

The Crossing at Chestnut Hill Presbyterian

BY: Dave Allen 01.06.2009

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The Crossing: Works by Bo Holten, Erhard Karkoschka, David Shapiro, Paul Spicer and John Kennedy. Donald Nally, conductor. January 4, 2009 at Chestnut Hill Presbyterian Church. www.crossingchoir.com.

Taking chances at The Crossing

DAVE ALLEN

The Crossing, a 20-voice chamber choir dedicated to performing 20th-Century and contemporary music, didn't give any concerts last fall. The start of the New Year marked the start of its season, and its concert on January 4 was easily worth the wait.

Now in its fourth year, The Crossing conveys a depth of vision and a commitment to innovative programming that many older, more-established ensembles would envy. This season the choir has two special seams running through its concerts: settings of poetry by Paul Celan, the famed Romanian poet and Holocaust survivor, and works by the Danish composer and choir director Bo Holten.

The three works by Holten on Sunday's program were alternately safe and daring. First Snow, which opened the concert, was light and unforced, as the women's voices invoked falling snow with a simple pattern— an octave leap followed by a descending scale— while the men's voices churned solemnly beneath them. Conductor Donald Nally, former choir director at St. Mark's Church in Center City and now choirmaster for the Lyric Opera of Chicago, needed only to set the piece in motion, and the luminous sound poured out of the singers.

A dizzying challenge

Holten's Hermit Peak had a much more dizzying construction, with harsh consonants swirling like high winds. Though the piece was occasionally disorienting, the singers carried it off with strength.

Holten's third piece, A Time For Everything, was the evening's clear favorite, using a playful variation on the Biblical verse from Ecclesiastes that Pete Seeger famously adapted into Turn, Turn, Turn in the '50s. An orderly, chiming introduction quickly gave way to more convoluted tangles of both words and dissonances, and the choir repeated the phrase, "A time to search, to lose your mind," with increasing volume and anxiety. The lyrics then splintered apart, with voices intoning bits of all three stanzas and rising to a powerful swell.

The choir returned to calmness in the final chorale, reciting the entire text in a peaceful, homophonic setting. If the chaotic middle section mirrored everyday life, then the final repeat captured a more idealistic vision: one more time, with feeling.

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Difficult music, excruciating themes

Celan's poetry appeared in three settings, two of them by the Czech composer Erhard Karkoschka that retained Celan's original German text. Much of Celan's writing is excruciating in its original sense, dealing with wrenching themes of mortality and existence through deep imagery and thoughtful, questing metaphor. Karkoschka's *Variationen mit Celan-Gedichten III* was similarly difficult, effectively turning the singers of the Crossing into 20 soloists. The two pieces made great demands through the use of glissandos and wordless hums and by breaking up words into syllables scattered across the group. The singers handled all of these elements with poise, amplifying the sense of otherworldly strangeness in Celan's poetry.

The end of the second setting, an epitaph Celan wrote for his infant son, had some fuzziness in the men's attacks; it seemed they were coming apart when they should have been at their tightest.

A second Celan setting, *It Is Time*, by David Shapiro of Mount Airy, received its world premiere Sunday, with the composer in attendance. His setting was darkly luminous, with the ebb and flow of group-wide crescendos and decrescendos providing an unpredictable feel to the poem's longing, wishful text. The recurring phrase, "Then time returns to its shell," imparted a kind of time-warp effect to the piece, rendering the rapture and serenity of the ending even more stunning.

The sprightly feel of wassail songs

The rest of the program might have suffered a bit in the shadows of Holten and Celan but certainly had its bright spots. Paul Spicer's *Four Carols for Dark Times* maintained the sprightly feel of wassail songs while delivering weighty lyrics. David Lang's *I Want to Live* grew from countless iterations of a single phrase— "I want to live where you live"— that gradually split apart. The women of the choir brought a light touch and feathery releases to this Minimalist work, which displayed the same finely honed, Bach-inspired writing that won Lang the 2008 Pulitzer Prize in music for his *Little Match Girl Passion*.

The program closed with John Kennedy's *Someday*, an unfortunately clunky piece, weighed down by an unwieldy text. But the encore reprised the closing chorale from *A Time For Everything*, which was deep, rich and even more moving the second time.

Next to the choir's clean, well-balanced sound, Nally's conducting was equally impressive. He elicited a strong performance from the singers without wringing it out of them. His gestures were large but not showy, with the choir's sound rushing past like water over a wheel. Several months will go by before The Crossing's next concert— Nally has duties in Chicago in the interim— and it should be anticipated with delight. This is clearly The Crossing's year.