

NOTEWORTHY/Chestnut Hill LOCAL by Michael Caruso for 6/23/2011

Donald Nally conducted The Crossing's second concert in this year's "Month of Moderns" Saturday night in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. The program of two world premieres and a third choral beauty composed way back in 2005 drew a crowd that literally packed the church's main sanctuary. Perhaps even more impressively, the vast majority of those who attended the performance stayed afterwards for the reception where they could converse with the performers and the one local musician (Kile Smith) of the three composers who was in attendance regarding the music and what it meant to them. So much for the notion that modern music doesn't speak to its listeners!

The two world premieres are part of The Crossing's "Seneca Sounds" project that commissions contemporary choral composers to set ancient texts to music. The two scores premiered Saturday night here in Chestnut Hill were "The Waking Sun" by Philadelphia's Kile Smith and "Thyestes" by Montana-born Kamran Ince. The third ("older" in comparison to the two world premieres) work was "Not no faceless angel" by the Bermuda-born Gabriel Jackson. The three came together to fashion a compelling portrait of musical invention securely placed within the context of the great choral traditions stretching back to Gregorian chant plainsong.

Smith's "The Waking Sun" is the longest of the three and also the one featuring the fullest accompaniment. Seven members of Tempesta di Mare Baroque Orchestra accompanied The Crossing under Nally's direction in a work that begins rhythmically energetically and harmonically astringently but that little by little over the course of its six movements leaves its dissonances behind to become more and more consonant, abandons its sharply etched rhythms in favor of more and more lyricism. By its conclusion, "The Waking Sun" is a soothing lullaby of the soul's peaceful ascension into heavenly rest.

Ince's "Thyestes" sets one of those ancient Greek legends that reveal the primitive barbarism at the foundation of western civilization. One can only wonder if such events ever really took place and, if so, whatever can be learned from their retelling. All the same, Ince's unaccompanied score is a masterpiece of concise structure, eloquent word-setting, evocative harmonies, and exquisite voicings.

Jackson's "Not no faceless angel" in many ways was the loveliest of the three works. His ear for harmony is remarkable in that the many vocal parts come together so naturally that they seem to hover in the air just waiting to be set down on paper by the composer.

In all three scores, Nally displayed his peerless ear for tuning, balance, phrasing, and dynamic intensity ranging from the softest to the loudest singing. The choir sang impeccably and immaculately yet with so much excitement and inspiration that the performance sounded spontaneous.