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Seneca inspires magic at Crossing choir festival



By David Patrick Stearns
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Magical effects, by accident or design, gave audiences some heady contradictions to wrestle with at the Month of Moderns festival Saturday by the Crossing choir.

As Kamran Ince's *Thyestes* ended, someone brushed a light switch, plunging Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill into darkness but for the bulbs on the singers' music stands. It was strangely appropriate: The Turkish American Ince took on a grisly text from the ancient Seneca play *Thyestes*, about the chaos of the universe's dismembering mankind, with musical choices curiously devoid of hysteria, punctuated by choral exhalations suggesting disillusionment beyond words.

Sophisticated vocal constructs grew like sand castles destined to collapse - words from a corrupt Roman era, music from 2011, a time of uncertain economy and waning humanitarian loyalty. Still, you didn't expect the earth beneath them to vanish into an abyss. And the lights' going out? It felt like an act of God underscoring an exposé of hopelessness.

That was only one side of the festival theme, "Seneca Sounds," conceived by music director Donald Nally. Writes scholar Emily Wilson, "Seneca has a far stronger obsession than any Greek tragedian with the possibility that the whole universe may be at a point of crisis." Whether or not Philadelphia composer Kile Smith had that in mind in the earlier movements of his new piece, *The Waking Sun*, his setting of Seneca texts often divided into two or three contrapuntal strands that strained against one another in new, ear-pricking ways.

The piece has a huge musical range: unsettling rhythms of the opening movement; playful, quirky syncopation describing the bacchanals of the second; then the final movement fanning out into 12-part vocal writing to characterize universal love. There the music hit an intensely charged sweet spot that seemed to hang in a climax, unable to turn back but not knowing how to move forward, becoming even sweeter before concluding.

The intricate orchestration for baroque chamber orchestra Tempesta di Mare played to the group's higher-personality members, theorbo player Richard Stone and concertmaster Emlyn Ngai. But the vocal writing is no doubt what prompted the hero's welcome from the audience that packed the church up to the organ loft. Objectively speaking, *The Waking Sun* is, for lack of any better word, a hit.

Gabriel Jackson is featured during Month of Moderns (it will end Sunday), and his *Not No Faceless Angel* was a moderate foil to Seneca-inspired extremes. His basic language is lush Anglican, in contrast to Smith's pared-back Anglican. Simultaneous disparity is the thing in choral writing these days, but Jackson's has more than most, and it somehow coexists brilliantly, along with the declamation of a Tanya Lake poem that evolves into nonmusical speech. An unaccompanied cello offered commentary alongside the chorus, while a solo flute came from the loft. It's an old magic trick. But how many concerts have so many?

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