

'Sila' sends Philly choirs - and a cast of many others - outdoors at Lincoln Center



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John Luther Adams wrote "Sila: The Breath of the World." The Crossing choir will perform. (EVAN HURD)

By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Music Critic

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Having written orchestral works that contemplate the essence of rivers and oceans, Pulitzer Prize-winning composer John Luther Adams is heading toward the source of it all, with an hour-long piece so expansive it

can't be contained by a typical concert hall - and can only go outdoors.

Sila: The Breath of the World contemplates the force behind all of nature. (The title is the Inuit name of the abstract deity behind wind, rain, and life.) Friday and Saturday in New York, as part of the Mostly Mozart and Lincoln Center Out of Doors festivals, the piece will bring together, in Hearst Plaza outside Lincoln Center, the Philadelphia chamber choir the Crossing, the JACK Quartet, and any number of other contemporary-music mainstays.

What it will sound like is hard for anybody to say. "John is one of those people, you look at his scores and you scratch your head," said Donald Nally, founder and conductor of the Crossing. "Then you do it and it's captivating and wonderful."

On a recent afternoon at the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, the members of the Crossing sat in a semicircle, attention focused on smartphone apps that gave them their pitches. Pitch can be elusive in a piece that employs so-called natural tunings, as opposed to the slightly altered tunings typically used in Western scales.

What came out were static, long-held tones - vaguely similar to chants of Buddhist monks - creating planes of otherworldly sound. This is only one component of the piece, and one that will sound different amid the acoustical properties of Lincoln Center's wading pool, where the Crossing will be stationed.

Yes, the singers will get their feet wet. "They're going to give us water socks - which are worn for sea kayaking or really rough tubing on a river," Nally reports. "I think there's a concern about glass or whatever in the pool."

The composer, who was on hand at Chestnut Hill and pleased with what he heard, is a breezy, relaxed presence in a print shirt and hipster hat. Having lived much of his life in Alaska, he is now, at 61, receiving the kind of recognition that has made him something more than "the other John Adams" (not to be confused with the composer of *Nixon in China*).

"This piece is going to be celebratory," he said. "I'm not interested in doing what I've done before or what other people have done. That's why I do what I do. It's about exploring new territory and sound worlds that come with it. That's part of the job."

In a world where so much is so virtual, *Sila* truly requires the audience's physical presence to achieve anything close to the intended effect. A departure from orchestra works such as *Become River* and *Become Ocean* that have brought Adams recent recognition, *Sila* draws on lesser-known pieces such as *Inuksuit* (for up to 99 percussionists) that do, in fact, exist on recordings, though in that format you know you're missing a lot. Possibly everything.

Similarly, *Sila* reverses the performer/audience equation. With sound coming down from several directions (including the wading pool), the audience is invited to move around and discover the mixtures of sound they like best.

"When you're inside the concert hall, we're generally trying to seal ourselves off from the world and concentrate on a few carefully produced sounds. It's a turning inward," Adams said. "Outside . . . we're challenged to listen to as many different things as



GALLERY: John Luther Adams wrote "Sila: The Breath of the World."... (EVAN HURD)

possible. The sound isn't just in front of us. It's a more extroverted kind of listening. You can shape your own experience and find your own way.

"Maybe if you're really lucky, you'll get lost."

"You'll be immersed as intimately as you want to be," said music director Doug Perkins, who spent part of the winter workshopping *Sila* at the Curtis Institute, where he was in residence with the chamber sextet eighth blackbird. As freewheeling as it sounds, *Sila* is in fact the product of intense planning. The Crossing has done other Adams works, and, during that period, it turned into a logical choice for this Lincoln Center commission.

Lest the piece seem too conventional, Perkins won't be acting as a conductor in the usual sense: "I'm cheerleader, hand-holder, and organizer. We're playing large-scale chamber music. I'm coaching and empowering."

Some of that empowerment will be directed toward the composer. Winning the Pulitzer can make artists retreat into safer forms of expression. Adams feels a certain degree of immunity from that. "I'm 61, not 41. Maybe if it happened 20 years ago, it would be different. But I am what I am," he said.

That said . . .

"I did, a couple weeks ago, have a day or two of crisis of faith: 'Is this going to be a colossal flop? What am I doing?' " he said.

Rest assured, he's not mirroring the *civilized* world. "I've spent most of my life living and working in Alaska. I've spent a lot of time on the tundra of the Arctic. I've heard the Earth hum and sing out there. And a lot of my recent work is somehow trying to get in touch with something bigger, older, and deeper than human culture, back to something more elemental."

Performances: 6 p.m. Friday and Saturday at Lincoln Center, New York. Admission: Free. Information: www.mostlymozart.org/events.

dstearns@phillynews.com.

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