

## Classical music: Philadelphia-based chamber choir to bring 'Consolation' to Princeton

**Ross Amico | For The Times of Trenton** By **Ross Amico | For The Times of Trenton**

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When the Philadelphia-based chamber choir The Crossing appears at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study for two concerts next weekend, it will bring with it consolation – and "Consolation."

Area composer Kile Smith's "The Consolation of Apollo" will appear on a double bill with David Lang's Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Little Match Girl Passion." The ambitious program will encompass the full range of human potential as embodied in complementary works set around the Christmas holiday.

The concerts will take place at IAS's Wolfensohn Hall on Oct. 10 & 11 at 8 p.m. Admission is free, but reservations are required.



Kile Smith

Courtesy photo

Based on Hans Christian Andersen's unbearably poignant short story, about a child who finds hope in happy memories as she attempts to sell matches under grim circumstances on New Year's Eve, Lang's work channels the sensibility of a Bach passion, conveyed in his own post-minimalist style. The piece was recognized by the Pulitzer committee in 2008.

In programming the 40-minute work, The Crossing's artistic director, Donald Nally, was looking for a companion piece of comparable length, written for the same forces, on a subject that would pull the listener in perhaps a more uplifting direction. For Nally, the most hopeful thing he could think of was the historic Apollo 8 Genesis reading.

"(The idea) started with the Apollo 8 broadcast and my interest in where the space program has gone – or frankly not gone – and the beauty of what we achieved," he says, "and the difference of what we are and what we could be, both individually and collectively."

The reading was televised on Christmas Eve, in 1968, with astronauts Bill Anders, Jim Lovell and Frank Boorman

reciting the first 10 verses from the King James Version of the Bible, as their spacecraft orbited the moon, with viewers treated to a grainy, black-and-white image of the now-iconic earthrise. The astronauts concluded by wishing everyone a Merry Christmas. "God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth," said Boorman. While this did not please everyone, the message of hope and brotherhood is hard to deny.

Nally pitched the idea to Smith, who had already produced several successful works for The Crossing, including a highly praised setting of the "Vespers."

Smith immediately fell in love with the text, which is a transcript from the telecast and features overlapping dialogue between the astronauts, interpolations from mission control and behind-the-scenes technical direction.

He was especially intrigued by the dissonance he perceived between classical mythology, suggested by the name of the spacecraft – Apollo, who guided the sun across the stars – and the reading of the astronauts of the Biblical creation text, as the first men ever to look down on the Earth from the vantage of the moon.

"It was really wild when I started thinking about it," Smith says, "because actually what they're doing is they're blasting past mythology. They're bringing God into it, and yet we have Apollo, so you have the God of the Bible and the Apollo of Roman myth. The more I thought about it, Boethius just came to me."

Boethius was a Roman philosopher of the early sixth century, whose treatise, "The Consolation of Philosophy," became one of the most influential writings of the Middle Ages.

"He was an amazing person, because he really combined classical thought with Christian theology," Smith says, "although 'The Consolation of Philosophy' is really just a work of philosophy – good and evil, the Wheel of Fortune, life is unfair, good things happen to bad people, bad things happen to good people, he addresses all of this.

"It occurred to me that there might be something in Boethius that addresses this dissonance, that philosophically addresses our position on Earth, our position in the universe, even our position in perhaps a lonely universe, looking at the Earth, our position as even having power to be able to fly into the sky and to do amazing things and to fly beyond ourselves."

In addition, it was Nally's idea to supplement the transcript of the Apollo telecast with classic and romantic poems about Apollo, to which the composer added.

Smith was originally brought into contact with The Crossing through a commission by Piffaro, the Philadelphia-based Renaissance wind band, which resulted in "Vespers," a 65-minute sacred work that is reverent and beautiful, joyous and reflective, wholly aware of tradition, yet unmistakably contemporary. The collaboration led to a recording of the work, issued on the Navona Records label.

Smith is retired curator of the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, housed at the central branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia, where he served for 30 years.

He is not only a composer, but also a perceptive and entertaining writer. He supplies articles as contributing editor for Philadelphia's Broad Street Review, delivers lectures, writes CD reviews, maintains a blog and regularly churns out copy to promote his radio shows.

He is the host of "Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection," which airs on WRTI, out of Philadelphia, the first Saturday of every month at 5 p.m., and "Now is the Time," a program devoted to contemporary American music, which is broadcast over the station's HD2 signal every Saturday at 9 p.m. WRTI can be heard at 90.1 FM.

His packed schedule includes duties as composer-in-residence for the Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia, Philadelphia's Lyric Fest and Montana's Helena Symphony. Over the next month or so, performances of Smith's works will take place in Helena, Chicago and Rio de Janeiro.

A number of the performers in The Crossing have roots in Princeton, including Nally, who earned a master's degree in choral conducting at Westminster Choir College.

#### **EDWARD T. CONE CONCERT SERIES: THE CROSSING**

**What:** "The Consolation of Apollo" and "The Little Match Girl Passion"

**When:** 8 p.m. Oct. 10 and 11

**Where:** Wolfensohn Hall, Institute for Advanced Study, 1 Einstein Dr., Princeton

**Admission:** Free, but reservations required

**Info:** [www.ias.edu](http://www.ias.edu)

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