



# Hill world premiere: no discernible rhythm but potent

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<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/author/michael-caruso/>



**by Michael Caruso**

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, striving to be more than just a single denomination congregation but rather to welcome the greater community, both near and far, hosted the opening concert of "The Month of Moderns" last Sunday afternoon. The series of three performances — the second and third are set for Sunday, June 21, 4 p.m., and Saturday, June 27, 8 p.m. — features Donald Nally and The Crossing in programs of contemporary choral music.

The principal work Sunday, June 7, was the world premiere of the commissioned "I Enter the Earth," by Joel Puckett, who was in attendance along with an audience that virtually packed the church. The concert also included Michael Gilbertson's "Where the Words Go," Matthew Brown's "Another Lullaby for Insomniacs" and William Brooks' "in memoriam reducere studemus."

Puckett's "I Enter the Earth" uses a text from Joseph Campbell and is set for choir with piano accompaniment, here splendidly played by Chestnut Hill pianist Laura Ward, a founding member of Lyric Fest. It begins with the choir humming as though its sounds were coming from far beyond the universe, almost causing time to stand still through the technique of no discernible rhythm.

With melodic slides producing harmonic glissandi, it offers an amazing variety of texture and nuance, all the while projecting the text with precise clarity. Eventually short repetitive modules of melody propel the music to a well-built climax that beautifully resolves, almost redefining what harmonic dissonance and consonance mean. More amazing, still, was the rendition Nally and his singers gave it. The seemingly impossibly close linear harmonies proved no problem at all for the members of The Crossing.

Gilbertson's "Where the Words Go," set to a text by Kai Hoffman-Krull and unaccompanied, is voiced in that comfortable range that allows singers to delineate the text without distorting it and to project the melodies and harmonies of the score with singing of tonal warmth, perfect tuning, balance and blend, and intimately shaped phrases. Brown's "Another Lullaby for Insomniacs" boasts a score that not so much

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sets A.E. Stallings' text as embellishes the meaning of the words by going beyond that meaning to mirror and even enhance the sound, color and shape of the words. Nally and his singers gave both works powerfully moving and bracingly imaginative readings.

Brooks' "in memoriam reducere studemus" (we try to remember) was composed, in part, to recall the death of Austrian 12-tone composer Anton Webern just as World War II was about to end. By combining a modern text with one from the 9th century, it speaks in a plethora of musical voices that seem to come from different starting points but that join forces to recall events and express feelings that transcend all times.

Its harmonic language ranges far beyond conventional tonality, and yet it holds together to both transport and embrace the listener. As with all the other pieces on the program, including the disappointing "A Century of Aprils" by David Shapiro, Brooks' opus received a sterling performance. Nally and The Crossing remain among the most assured masters of the contemporary choral repertoire by singing not just the notes of the score with impeccable technical command but the heart and soul of the words.

**FINNISH CHOIR:** The Tapiola Choir of Finland will perform in concert Sunday, June 21, 6 p.m., in the First Presbyterian Church of Germantown, 35 W. Cheltenham Ave. The choir's East Coast tour is being sponsored by the Finlandia Foundation National in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Finland's most famous composer, Jean Sibelius. The Philadelphia Orchestra's legendary music director, Eugene Ormandy, championed Sibelius' music throughout his 44-year tenure at the helm of the "Fabulous Philadelphians." Admission to the concert is free, but a free-will collection will be taken.

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