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'Path of Miracles' was the event of the season

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Joby Talbot composed "Path of Miracles."



GALLERY: Joby Talbot composed "Path of..."

By **David Patrick Stearns**, *Inquirer Music Critic*

POSTED: June 30, 2015

Extraordinary buzz surrounded the final concert in the Crossing's Month of Moderns Festival on Saturday: The program contained only Joby Talbot's *Path of Miracles*, a piece the choir first sang in 2009 and has only gained in international stature since. Torrential rain and absent SEPTA trains couldn't dampen that.

Inspired by pilgrimages to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela (and the Iberian chants and melodies that were part of the landscape), the piece immediately emerged as a major contribution to the choral literature. Reasons for its impact became even more apparent Saturday in one of the Crossing's strongest concerts ever. It was one of the events of the season.

The four-movement, hour-long piece is set to ancient devotional texts, many about St. James, but also the evils of the world with the devil appearing to pilgrims in the form of the saint himself. The program's annotation told how texts related to self-flagellatory customs such as carrying rocks to make the journey more difficult and then burning one's clothes upon arrival.

The restless, often fantastical music with dark undertones and incantory ostinatos was intensified by the Crossing's cognitive clarity - seconded by the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill dry-ish acoustics. Laid bare, *Path of Miracles* more than held up. Even the piece's Gesualdo-on-acid crescendos at the beginning inspired increased respect when heard under the Crossing's microscope.

The British group Tenebrae approached the piece (which it premiered) almost as a series of solo moments. With the Crossing, it was a true choral work, but achieving a precision of expression that you hear in solo voices with the added advantage of choral colors shaded to

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heighten the psychological intensity. Each movement had its own color and character, from the first movement's layered effects to the second's plain-spoken word settings.

Another ongoing-interpretive element from director Donald Nally was austere harmonies morphing into sudden bursts of ecstatic lushness-with a catch. Often associated with repose, such catharses instead challenged you to follow the piece to its next spiritual level. Even the ending wasn't conclusive. Harmonies seem to flow into eternity - or until the next encounter with the piece, which should be much sooner.

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