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Traditional and original Xmas concerts at Hill church

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by **Michael Caruso**

Two weekends ago I had the opportunity to attend three concerts in two different Chestnut Hill churches. I heard Vox Renaissance Consort in the Episcopal Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields and then Piffaro and Tempesta di Mare in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill.

This most recent weekend gave me the opportunity to hear two concerts in the third of Chestnut Hill's three churches that regularly host performances by the region's leading musical ensembles. St. Paul's Episcopal Church — the most architecturally stunning of the three — was the site of "The Crossing at Christmas 2011" Friday night, Dec. 16. Then on Saturday evening, Dec. 17, St. Paul's hosted the Ama Deus Ensemble's rendition of Handel's "Messiah."

In a testament to Chestnut Hillers' well-earned reputation for supporting great music that stretches all the way back to the days of the late Michael Korn and the Bach Festival of Philadelphia, both concerts were exceedingly well attended. A good-sized crowd heard "Messiah," but the church was literally packed to the rafters for The Crossing's concert.

It would be difficult finding two programs more unlike each other than these two, especially within the genre of holiday programs. Along with ballet's "The Nutcracker," "Messiah" virtually defines the term "holiday warhorse." "The Crossing at Christmas 2011," on the other hand, defines the notion of breaking new ground within a given tradition. Whereas only a handful of those in attendance Saturday evening were likely to be hearing Handel's choral masterpiece for the first time, only a small portion of The Crossing's program had ever been performed in Philadelphia prior to Friday night. Yet interestingly enough, it was The Crossing's performance that elicited the most enthusiastic response from its sold-out audience while the audience hearing Ama Deus' "Messiah" offered supportive yet not intense applause.

The two renditions also differed greatly in regard to the work of their respective conductors, Donald Nally for The Crossing and Valentin Radu for Ama Deus. Whereas Radu went after the big picture, allowing imperfections of ensemble to sort themselves out once they happened, Nally avoided even a hint of anything less than technical perfection.

Nally, who is interim music director at Chestnut Hill Presbyterian Church and lives in West Mt. Airy, continues to amaze local audiences through his choir's flawless pitch, immaculate tuning, peerless blend and (most importantly) interpretive commitment. Robert Convery's setting of Christina Rossetti's poetry for his "Christmas Daybreak," commissioned for The Bridge Ensemble in 1996, was the highpoint of the program.

The words are riveting in their originality and overwhelming in their passion, and Convery gave The Bridge Ensemble (The Crossing's predecessor) a musical rendering of them that matches their achievement. Nally and The Crossing responded with singing of both technical purity and interpretive intensity.

The concert's "big piece," however was Zachary Wadsworth's "Gabriel's Message," a co-commission by The Crossing and the Choir of St. Paul's Church. Set for two choirs and organ (played by Scott Dettra Friday night), it's a lovely score that delineates the story of Christ's Nativity with sensitivity and imagination. Not surprisingly, Nally led the combined choirs and Dettra with his usual expertise.

The notably pleasant surprise, though, was how seamlessly St. Paul's Choir blended into The Crossing. Zachary Hemenway, St. Paul's music director, provided a worthy companion ensemble that did itself and him proud Friday night under the leadership of the region's most demanding choral conductor. The two choruses sang as one, enabling Nally and Hemenway to add yet another exquisite item to the repertoire of contemporary Christmas music.

'MESSIAH'

Valentin Radu's "take" on Handel's "Messiah" is idiosyncratic. His tempo choices are not necessarily outside the realm of modern-day views on how the oratorio was conducted by Handel, himself, two and a half centuries ago, but what Radu did Saturday evening within those tempi is another matter. His penchant for melodramatically slowing down toward the end of individual numbers and then stopping altogether right before the final chord causes untold damage to the fabric of the music and the delivery of the text.

Had it not been for some excellent solo singing, the evening would have been a troubling musical experience. Tenor Timothy Bentsch delivered his recitatives and airs with stylistic authority and vocal amplitude. Chestnut Hill soprano Andrea Lauren Brown sang with tonal eloquence while West Mt. Airy alto Jody Kidwell invested her recitatives and airs with dramatic intensity.

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