

# recording reviews

**The Journal** of the Association of Anglican Musicians

Volume 26, number 7, September 2017, pp. 18-19.

Marjorie Johnston

***Bonhoeffer: A Choral- Theater Piece – Thomas Lloyd.*** The Crossing: Donald Nally, Conductor; Malavika Godbole, percussion; John Grecia, keyboards; Rebecca Harris, violin; Tomas Mesa, cello. Adrian Peacock, Producer; Paul Vazquez, Engineer (Albany Records: Troy 1636), Amazon \$19.71; also see Apple Music and other audio streaming options.

Those who follow the Grammy Awards in Classical Music may already be aware of the phenomenal recording chosen for review here, as it was nominated for Best Choral Performance in 2017. I asked a colleague who is well acquainted with all of the nominated recordings for his thoughts, and he stated: “As a choral singer and Grammy voter, I always pay close attention in the Best Choral Performance category, and the competition for last year’s award was quite tough. I was especially happy to discover Donald Nally and The Crossing’s committed reading of Lloyd’s *Bonhoeffer*—a work new to this listener—which deserved to be at the top of the list.”

Agreed: this recording should be at the top of many lists. Composer, church musician, and fellow AAM member Thomas Lloyd, has written a powerful and poignant work that is really unlike anything I’ve heard. He writes that his creation was conceived as a “concert work in a theatrical context,” and his subject is the twentieth-century Lutheran theologian and poet, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The structure of the piece layers reflective meditations with dramatic scenes from Bonhoeffer’s life, referencing classical works in an unsentimental way and boldly incorporating renowned recordings of two Negro spirituals.

Bonhoeffer studied at Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan in 1930, and was introduced to Negro spirituals when he visited Harlem; he closely associated the suffering of American slaves with the suffering of Jews in Nazi Germany. He left the safety of Union to return to Germany, where he became a double agent involved in the Stauffenberg Plot—an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Lloyd’s musical telling of the story beautifully includes the perspective of Bonhoeffer’s fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer, whom he met while leading Lutheran and Catholic Churches in resistance to the German leader. Much of their romantic relationship took place via letter or brief visits while he was imprisoned at the concentration camp, Flossenbürg.

The fifteen-movement, semi-staged work includes very clear stage directions, but even without a visual experience the listener is engaged immediately; I was completely unaware that 70 minutes had passed when the last note sounded. Members of The Crossing who have performed the piece have learned that it benefits from the visual experience, making the men of the chorus portraying Bonhoeffer’s seminarians more accessible to the audience. We live in a time when choral singers are called upon more and more to present staged pieces, and not just in opera choruses. Kile Smith of Philadelphia’s *Broad Street Review* observed the advantages of a live performance when he reviewed the premiere of *Bonhoeffer* in 2013, writing, “*Bonhoeffer* is not a performance. It’s a liturgy.”

The religious poet’s letters and those of his fiancée, along with the writings of his fellow prisoners, contribute to the “libretto” and the music is devastatingly effective. Bonhoeffer’s utter devotion to God’s

will and his complete assurance of God's love were noted by virtually everyone who encountered him. Lloyd's well-placed use of major and minor seconds, open intervals, and parallel motion was compelling, and I found that the choices about which bits of text to repeat provided insight as to what was important to the character who was singing. In movement VIII (a scene from Finkenwalde, the illegal seminary Bonhoeffer directed), the Beatitudes are framed by recordings of "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child" sung by Paul Robeson and "Walk together, children" sung by the Hall Johnson Choir. The setting of the text, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me," shows great contrapuntal writing, which skillfully transforms into a hopeful, yet questioning polytonal sound for "Rejoice and be glad...." Anyone needing a fresh take on the Beatitudes will appreciate hearing this.

In fact, the entire work offers a fresh take on things. Listening to this piece is not only thought-provoking, but it elicits empathy: I wonder about other Bonhoeffer-like people out there who didn't write or have others write about them, who also had unwavering faith and made honorable choices during World War II. I wonder what it was like to be Bonhoeffer's girlfriend—it certainly makes modern-day complaints about long distance romance and poor communication seem trivial. One could ruminate for months on the excerpt from Meditation VII, "how the center of our own lives is outside ourselves...." In a phone interview, I asked e

Crossing's conductor, Donald Nally, if any revelation had presented itself to him while getting to know this piece, and he said, "I had always thought of Bonhoeffer's philosophy as if it were married to martyrdom, and I love the fact that this piece looks at both the connections and the separations between those two issues."

e musicians who premiered this epic piece on the recording are stellar. e instrumentalists play a pivotal role in advancing the narrative, and the solo and ensemble singing by e Crossing is exactly what one would expect from a group founded and led by Donald Nally—polished and appropriate in every way. I have long admired Nally's work as the former chorus master of Lyric Opera of Chicago, and now in his current role as the Director of Choral Organizations at Northwestern University. I had the privilege of singing under his direction in other professional choirs in Chicago and firmly believe that Donald Nally should be a household name among professional musicians and classical music supporters. Nally is in that upper echelon of musical artists who combine a freakishly refined ear with intellect, literary erudition, and good humor.

*Bonhoeffer* has not yet been performed by ensembles other than The Crossing, but I would especially commend it to university music schools with strong voice and choral programs. Nally agreed, saying that a piece such as this is not out of reach of college musicians. He points out to his students that the vast majority of voice performance students will not have operatic careers, and can be much more marketable as choral singers with strong musicianship. He added, "Musical skill is everything— not just reading but style—what you do to make a piece of music come alive. Having a variety of ways of using the voice in different eras of music is vital." He concluded by saying that this important new work stands out because it contemplates theological and ethical questions without being a sacred piece.

There is a video of a performance on YouTube, but until the opportunity to attend or produce a live performance of *Bonhoeffer* arises, I encourage all of my AAM colleagues to get to know this exceptional recording.