Happily following uncharted byways

Composer David Lang inspired the famous line in a Los Angeles Times review, “There’s no name yet for this kind of music.” But at the Philadelphia premiere of Lang’s genre-les Little Match Girl Passion (which prompted the quote and won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize), one realized that most of the music presented by Donald Nally’s choir, the Crossing, lies outside describable musical contexts.

The capacity audience at Sunday’s business-as-usual mind-blowing concert in the austere environs of Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill seemed perfectly happy to also enter the enigmatically titled Legend of the Walled-In Woman by Latvian composer Eriks Esenvalds - whom nobody had heard of, much less heard - which proved nearly as great a discovery as Lang’s well-established piece. “Hollywood harmonies and Gesualdo flexibility” as one audience member described it. Could you have imagined such a thing if you hadn’t heard it? Some composers write music that recognizably reflects our world. Lang and Esenvalds create far less-recognized worlds.

Latviansonline.com and balticmall.com offer information about Esenvalds, 32, who could pass for a Banana Republic description. Could you have imagined such a thing if you hadn’t heard it? Some composers write music that recognizably reflects our world. Lang and Esenvalds create far less-recognized worlds.

Similar effects in a second Esenvalds piece, The Sun Dogs (referring to the light-ice-sun phenomenon of the far north), attain even more hallucinatory levels. These performances showed the Crossing at its peerless best, with conductor Nally often grounding the music with strong bass lines suggesting Russian church chant.

Lang’s Match Girl Passion (also well performed, though it tested the Crossing’s limits) is built on more fearless, less ingratiating musical juxtapositions - Bach’s retelling of Christ’s crucifixion and the Hans Christian Andersen tale about the match-selling street urchin who freezes to death while fantasizing about a loving Christmas. Lang alternates between recounting and reflecting on Andersen's plot, with a post-minimalist language that at times becomes so spare and minimalistic, one wonders if he’s sung such a thing if he hadn’t heard it? Some composers write music that recognizably reflects our world. Lang and Esenvalds create far less-recognized worlds.

Does the character of the Match Girl have the stature that warrants a so-called passion, especially since we know only the barest sketches of her short life? Certainly she dies for our sins. Though Lang isn’t one to manage listener reactions with great specificity, his method of presentation keeps the bigger questions from getting lost.

What if she only spoke Arabic?

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