

CHORAL CONVERSATIONS



A Conversation with Donald Nally

by William Southerland



Becky Oehlers Photography

Donald Nally is the conductor of The Crossing, a professional chamber choir based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, that is dedicated to performing and commissioning new music. Their most recent album, *Born: Music of Edie Hill and Michael Gilbertson*, was recognized

with the 2022 Grammy Award for Best Choral Performance, the ensemble's third such award. Since 2012, Donald Nally has served as John W. Beattie Chair of Music, Professor, and Director of Choral Organizations at the Henry and Leigh Bienen School of Music at Northwestern. Now, he is leaving his position in Evanston, Illinois, to dedicate more time to his multi-award-winning ensemble.

Can you tell me about the ensemble The Crossing?

We have twenty-four core members, and about two-thirds of them are Philadelphians. In 2004, I left Philadelphia, where I had lived for eleven years, and I moved to Wales to conduct the Welsh National Opera Chorus. In Philadelphia, we had this group of about twenty singers who did everything together: church choir at St. Mark's on Thursdays and Sundays, Choral Arts Soci-

ety on Tuesdays, Opera Company every other night, and the Spoleto Festival in Italy in the summers. We loved working together.

On a visit back from Wales, we were having a beer about a half block from St. Marks, and somebody said, "I really miss making the kind of music that we made; we should do a concert." Later, my co-founder, Jeffrey Dinsmore, called me about setting up that concert. I thought he was kidding, but he was very serious. So, we found a date and a time. I flew back from Wales for the performance. We had eighteen singers for that first concert and many of them flew in as well. We benefitted from the fact that we had all been so active in Philadelphia. One of the critics there knew us really well and wrote a preview, then a review. Both of those write-ups were great, and we drew a nice crowd. I went home to Wales, but Jeff called a short time later and said, "So, when are we going to do it again?" And so here we are.

The Crossing works exclusively with new music, and a lot of people consider you one of the central voices influencing new American choral music today. What is your process like?

The majority of the time, I start thinking about

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things that we'd like to talk about a few years in advance. It's usually a three-year process, and we tend to want big "adult-sized" pieces. In the choral world, we get used to a four-minute-piece and then clappy-clappy and then a four-minute-piece and clappy-clappy. I don't like that type of storytelling; it doesn't hold my interest.

Our seasons are structured so that the whole season will make sense. There's a story being told throughout the season, and then there's a story being told in each concert as well. I discovered quite a long time ago that my job is telling stories. I really love telling stories. The pieces that I commission are largely based on the stories of our time. There's a type of musical art called *critical composition*, which some people would call political. I think of myself as a "critical conductor." I don't have any answers. I'm not a politician. I'm not a priest. These are complex questions, and I love that complexity because human beings are weird and crazy and wonderful, right? They create terrible, terrible dilemmas, but it's really fun to consider how to get out of them. I just want to make art about those things. I have very strong opinions, but in the art side of my life I just want to tell the stories. I think composers enjoy having this kind of specificity, this restriction, when considering a new piece.

We've told stories about diaspora, homelessness, farming, and food—who grows, picks, or makes your

food, and how does it reach you. We've told stories about martyrdom, about what human beings are doing to the Earth. So when I'm thinking about a new commission, I start to think about what I would like to talk about.

I'm very hands-on about commissions. I don't just call a composer up and say, "You're a good composer, write something." I call them up and say, "We have a project. You may not be interested. I totally understand that and, if not, we could do something else another time, but this is what this is." I talk with the composer, and we make a plan. We work out the basic details—length, forces, delivery, recording, exclusivity—and eventually we decide what the text is going to be. And then I say, "Okay, I'll talk to you in two years," because the writing part is not my business.

Do you have any words of wisdom for how to work with a composer to achieve your goals as the artistic director and conductor, and to help them realize their artistic vision?

It's good to build in enough lead time, in case there is a problem. If there is a problem, it doesn't have to be handled in any kind of emergency way. Let's talk about it. Don't shy away from looking at the score and saying, "That is not a good idea." Let's talk about having the sopranos singing a sustained high G for the entire piece. Do we think that's a good idea? Maybe that's not a good idea. It's going to wind up being an F by the end of the piece because there's a thing called fatigue.

About a decade ago, everybody decided that they wanted to write tone clusters for the basses that are down around G3. But you can't hear them! The acoustics make it inaudible. It doesn't sound like a MIDI realization. It doesn't sound like a piano, and it doesn't sound like clarinets. It's different than that. It sounds like basses that don't know what they're doing. Then we went through a period where everyone wanted to compose for throat singing. Sure, we have a couple of people who can do that well, but it's certainly not for this ensemble, right? We're all conservatory trained musicians, and I'm not going to apologize for that.

Don't be embarrassed to suggest cuts. Composers are not always terribly appreciative about it, but my



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opinions are only about making the piece a success. I don't see a conductor's role as interpretation. I see it as realization. It's your job to make this very vague language that we use to write down music into a piece that sounds like it's being thought of in real time—music that makes sense to the listener in real time, so that even the directions of the notes indicate the directions of the story. It should sound like we're thinking it up, and it should change us. If it does not do those things, then I feel a responsibility to ask the composer what it is they're trying to get at.

How do you as the conductor interact with a brand-new score, and how do you work with the ensemble for a piece that's never been performed before? How much do the singers contribute to the process?

I love getting a new score and sitting down to learn it. Second only to hanging out with my husband, it's my favorite thing to do. I love closing the door to my studio

and being with the silence of this piece that's going to become a thing, that's going to become sound. Sound is really interesting, because music doesn't actually exist. On the page it's just a map; it's not the actual landscape. Music happens as time passes into what we call the past. It's back there in space/time.

When I approach a new score, I first deeply ingest the text, taking a helicopter view of it. How is this text embodied in the music by this composer? What is the composer saying about the text? There's no point to setting a text if there isn't some enhancement. So, who are they in this piece? Who am I in this piece? At the first rehearsal of any piece, I usually start either telling or rehashing the story of how it came to be and what is the story we're telling.

Then there's the nitty gritty of the notes and the rhythms. That's the workaday stuff. That's just like riding the bus to go to your job. For singers who are part of The Crossing, they prepare substantially before they come to the first rehearsal. Other literature pros can perform with a very cursory glance and sight reading. You



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can't do that with our music. There are meter changes all over the place. There are tons of divisi; everyone needs to make a map of who goes where, when.

Probably the thing that we talk about more than any other thing is how we use American English. We commission only in English. We have an intention to expand the American choral canon and to take advantage of the fact that we live in a democracy; we can sing about anything we want, at least for the time being. So, we use American English. We talk a lot about how the sounds of the words convey meaning. The structure and the delivery of a sentence is primarily how we get the meaning of a musical phrase or texture.

We have a lot of rehearsal time. When we started *The Crossing*, we decided, if we're going to do new music, then we're going to schedule a lot of time so that, when somebody hears it, it doesn't sound like the

first performance. We've all heard those unfortunate performances where everybody's holding on for dear life; it's not ready technically, so there's no possibility of emotional content, no storytelling. Instead, we aim to really know the piece; we know what it means. I think of our work as journalism, so there is an aspect of it in which we're just reporting what has happened. There is so much to learn by singing the words of other people, particularly words that you would never say yourself. There's a tremendous amount to be learned about ourselves by singing.

Do you have any recommendations for people who might be interested in developing a similar choral organization to *The Crossing*?

Don't think about money, just do it. Do something that you love with other people who love it. It would be nice if you could be paid for that, but for the first two to three years we just split the box office. I think our check for the first concert was \$85. Most people paid for their own plane tickets and parking. We just liked what we were doing, and we still do!

This sounds really simplistic. It also sounds idealistic when I say to my students, "Don't do anything you don't want to do; only do stuff that you want to do." But I actually mean it. "Should" is a word that I don't allow in our studio. I'm not interested in what other people think, or what I or my students "should" do. It's what we're doing. It's "must," right? I have a rule: do a thing you like until you feel that you've given everything you can to it and that you've taken everything you can from it. Then move on. I've left a lot of jobs and, sure, it can cause personal instability, but it's an interesting journey.

So, to answer your question: Find what you love and do that thing. The world may come along with you, as they have with *The Crossing*. We're very fortunate to be paying a very good wage and making lots of recordings—a literal record of the time, as the composer intended—and commissioning big projects that I hope will last a long time. But that isn't because I figured out how to raise money. It's because I figured out how to tell stories in ways that singers buy into and find satisfying. Ultimately, it's about them; if they're not happy in their storytelling, I'm not doing my job well.

As for the fundraising side of things, you've heard the

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expression: “If you want money, ask for advice; if you want advice, ask for money.” I have a rule: never have lunch with someone who you don’t want to have lunch with. If you think you need to have lunch with someone who has the potential to give you lots of money, but you’re not going to enjoy the company, then don’t. That’s not money you want. Everything is about community and karma, so you want support from people you’re sincere in asking, “What’s happened in the last two months? What’s important to you? What do you think about this idea? Where do you think the country is going?” I genuinely want to know about their lives. But, then, I genuinely want to know about most lives that are not “me.”

What are the skills you think conductors today need to survive? What were the skills or ideas that you stressed with your students at Northwestern University that you hoped to foster in them?

I teach largely what I know. So, that’s listening—a very particular way of listening, which is also connected to breath and gesture. And I teach point of view: how to develop an idea of how the music goes; what are the questions that you need to ask; how do you find the answers to those questions? Conducting is connection. Defining and describing our world, just like any other art. Connection, communication, and in that is expression. That’s what I teach.

The full-time faculty part of my life is ending. And there’s quite a bit of melancholy in that. I’ve been very fortunate. Northwestern has amazing grad students who all have gone on to be not just colleagues, but real friends of our family.

The Crossing just won its third Grammy Award. What is that like? Is it just one more for the trophy case, or does it stay fresh?

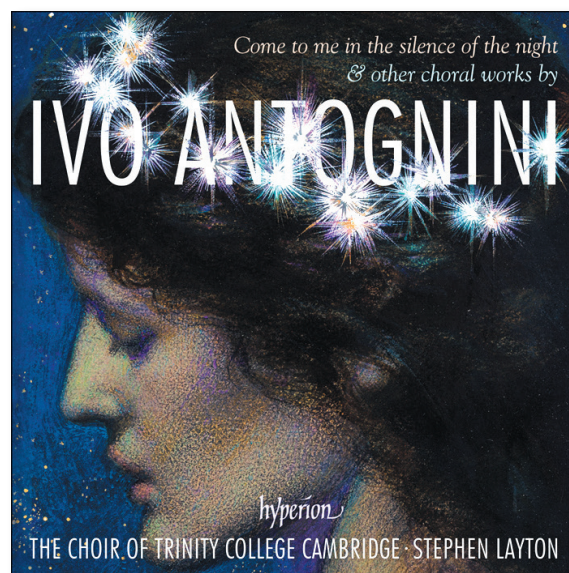
We don’t do what we do to win awards, but it really helps to give the music much further reach. People notice. They listen. People find us now who probably wouldn’t have otherwise, and we’ve seen the effect on the organization, which has been entirely positive.

This album, *Born: Music of Edie Hill and Michael Gil-*

ertson, was special for me because my partner and I commissioned the title piece of the album from Michael, in memory of my mother. Then it has this spectacular piece by Edie that we have performed a lot. In fact, we sang it at the ACDA National Conference in February of this year. So yeah, the Grammy thing is fun, but we don’t let ourselves get too excited about it.

What motivates you for the future?

The Crossing has reached a certain status, but admittedly, it’s choral music. When we say we’re sold out, that’s like 350 people. That’s not 70,000 people going



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to the Eagles game. I think we have the opportunity to think deeper and not concern ourselves so much with reaching wider. I want to spend more time on our stories, and I want our stories to have greater depth. I don't know what's next, and in fact, you know, this decision that I've made comes with a number of unknowns. I just have to trust that.

If you listen to the universe, it tells you stuff, right? And the universe is telling me that now is the time to concentrate on one thing for a while and to develop my own projects. I do these museum live installation art projects all over the world with these artist friends; they're bizarre and wonderful and I learn so much, and they invite me to question what it is I do with choirs. I like doing things in which I don't actually know what the outcome will be. I like collaborating with friends. But the answer to your question about the future is, I don't know, and I probably I don't want to know.


One final question, provided by the previous Choral Conversations interviewee: How can conductors identify, recruit, and promote local or lesser-known composers?

As I've said before, I don't think there's been a better time to be a musician in the United States. Composition is alive and greatly varied, and a great number of musicians and ensembles—many of whom are specializing in whatever area/style/practice they love—are eager to take on new works. It helps give them identity and purpose, and it's fun to be a part of making something from nothing!

The more obvious answer is to do a Call for Scores with a focus—regional or topical or career level, etc.—and get the word out by contacting places and people where composers hang out: university composition and ensemble programs; other conductors, ensembles, and musicians; churches; friends. (I am not a fan of pay-to-play competitions with entrance fees.) Calls can be a real pain, because you're going to get tons of scores to review, but it can be worth it. That's how we encountered Michael Gilbertson, now a Pulitzer Finalist. As I mentioned, the piece he composed for us, among our most loved, went on to be the title work on a Grammy-winning album. New music is about discovery: people, things about ourselves, and pieces that remind us of

our humanity.

Please provide a question to the next Choral Conversations interviewee.

If art is supposed to change us, why do you think so many choral conductors program music that simply affirms the morality of their singers and audience? 

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Choral Conversations is an ongoing column series in *Choral Journal*. The editorial board approved the addition of this column during our biennial meeting at the ACDA national conference as a way to highlight conductors outside of a regular feature article. For past installments of Choral Conversations, see the following issues:

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