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Tuesday, May 17, 2005

# Entertainment **XML**

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## His 'world of sound' to have its world premier

BY ENRIQUE FERNANDEZ

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Shawn Crouch was moving through the Church of the Epiphany on the outskirts of Coral Gables Tuesday night, as Seraphic Fire, Miami's wondrous choral ensemble, rehearsed Crouch's new *The Road from Hiroshima: A Requiem*, which will have its world premier tonight.

Crouch would walk toward the edges and corners of the church, as if there were hidden tuning keys in the interstices of the building, a modern take on the Gothic cathedral. "The sound is very wet," he said. "Lots of reverb. That works fine for an a cappella group, but for an orchestral work, it's a different story."

His *Requiem*, a commission from Yale School of Music buddy Patrick Quigley, who leads Seraphic Fire, engages the ensemble plus the Epiphany's excellent children's choir as well as a chamber orchestra of organ, strings and winds augmented by percussion. Lots of it.

There were vibraphone, marimba, glockenspiel and drums of various sizes. "I love drums," he said as explanation.

Still, the *Requiem* is a departure from Crouch's previous work, which was, in his words, 'what we call `crunchy,' " or atonal and dissonant. Harsh. The 28-year-old composer came to this crunchiness not via the European modernists, as have many classical musicians, but through a homegrown American genre: avant-garde jazz; i.e. John Coltrane.

But something happened to his art a couple of years ago during a Tanglewood Music Center residency at which he came in contact with the man who is fast becoming the seminal composer of the early 21st century, Osvaldo Golijov. "Up to that point we had heard these very European-sounding composers, in the style of Pierre Boulez. But Golijov said, 'you have to write what moves you, feel free to put in whatever feels right.'

"He wants people to jump out of their seats with rhythm, like Stravinsky did. That stuck with me, and I then felt free to write tonally and to write rhythms."

Although *Requiem* incorporates atonal and dissonant passages, it also luxuriates in melodic arias. And it has a beat.

The piece began two years ago when Quigley, with whom he had long discussed a collaboration, sat him down and read from a collection of poems by Brooklyn's Marc Kaminsky, *The Road from Hiroshima*, based on the memoirs of the survivors of the nuclear bombing of that city 60 years ago.

"He recited the section about the bomb exploding and this man only seeing sandals and slippers," Crouch recalls.

*but there shoes! hundreds/of shoes, left/and right separated/one from the other./confused/with clogs, strewn/among sandals and/slippers/only the shoes and hats,/shorn/of their people!*

Crouch worked on it for two years. He was still working Tuesday night. "It isn't a perfect piece yet," he said, giving assurances that it would be for tonight's premier. 'I tell the choir, 'Let's try this out.' " He calls this perfecting experience the "workshop." and finds it a rare and wonderful experience to have the time to do it. "This group allows for a lot of the workshop to happen," he said.

Growing up in the Baltimore area, Crouch started improvising on the piano when he was about 3 years old, "replicating what my parents had on the stereo." By the time he was 14 he had started composing, at the Walden School in Dublin, N.H., where he has gone back to teach many summers.

He tried studying jazz but, paradoxically, found the genre too confining and switched to composition, where he has remained. And, with short hair, clean face and broad-shouldered compact body, he looks more like a high school coach than a serious classical composer.

But his *Requiem* is definitely a serious piece, not just thematically but musically, in which he brings together a new tonal approach and "the good old dissonance I love." This is the direction where his music is now headed.

"I'm trying to create a world of sound," he said, "not just a piece of music."



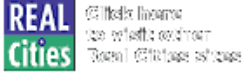
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