

Philadelphia vocal trio to perform David Lang's *Lifespan* at CMA

by Mike Telin



Beginning on Friday, January 6 at 4:00 pm, three members of the award-winning Philadelphia-based choir, The Crossing, will present the first of sixteen performances of David Lang's *Lifespan*, a

fifteen-minute work for three or more whistlers, in the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gallery 218, East Wing Glass Box. See our [concert listings](#) page for additional performance dates and times.

In his artist statement for the composition, Lang writes: "Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla asked me to work with them for a major 2014 retrospective of their work in Philadelphia, this time on a piece that would represent an encounter between musicians and a four-billion-year-old rock, one of the oldest intact rocks remaining in the world. For this piece I imagined that the musicians would use their breath and their voices to challenge and threaten the suspended rock, in the way that the forces of nature have been challenging it for the previous four billion years."

Yes, you read that correctly. During each performance, an approximately 4 billion year-old rock — found during a geological dig in Alberta, Canada — will hang from the gallery ceiling while the vocalists whistle and breathe, subtly moving the Hadean-period rock like a pendulum.

"It sounds weird, but *Lifespan* really is a beautiful piece, and I think the title captures why," [The Crossing](#)'s conductor Donald Nally said during a recent telephone conversation. "The rock is from the time when the earth was formed, but it's like only a quarter of the age of the universe. Yet, when you put a thirty-something-year-old singer next to it, the span of that person's life is completely insignificant compared to the immense span of the rock."



Nally said that during a performance a meditative place is created for listeners as they watch the singers and the rock, and lose themselves in the sounds that are happening in the room. “It leaves you really thoughtful, and there are moments in it that are quite violent as the singers force their breath out of their bodies. What we found interesting during the premiere at the Philadelphia Museum is how many people came back several times to hear it again. People loved it, and they wanted to talk to the artists and ask them how they did it.”

During a performance of *Lifespan*, it may appear that soprano Rebecca Siler, tenor Steven Bradshaw, and bass Colin Dill are improvising, but Nally said they are not. “The piece is written in cells — there’s one event, then another, and another. There’s also something ritualistic about it, and I think people crave that kind of connection. So being in the room and close to the performers, and being able to move around the room gives the feeling that you are part of it. It’s happening in front of you, but also happening *with* you.”

Nally said that Jennifer Allora’s and Guillermo Calzadilla’s choice of David Lang as their collaborator for the project was a great one. “He’s really a thoughtful and inquisitive artist. The piece has a logical structure and form that you are aware of even during the first listening. And it takes a master composer like David to accomplish that. With a concept like this, you could get it really wrong and it could turn into an overtly performance art type of piece, but this doesn’t feel like that at all.”

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