

A 'Fire' of Operatic Proportions Ignites Geffen Hall

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Julia Wolfe is no stranger to the history of industrial relations and its tragedies. Her *Steel Hammer* (2009) for three sopranos and chamber orchestra examined the often fractious relationship between man and machine through the tale of African American folk hero John Henry. *Anthracite Fields*, her oratorio on the hard-scrabble lives of miners in the Pennsylvania coalfields carried off the Pulitzer Prize in 2015. Her latest work, however, is a little different.

For starters, the story of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, an industrial conflagration in which 146 people, mostly immigrant women, were killed as a result of safety breaches and executive negligence, feels personal. Wolfe walks past the building, which still stands on Washington Place in downtown New York, nearly every day on her way to teach at NYU. Secondly, she was offered the full resources of the New York Philharmonic in an hour-long co-commission—an opportunity she clearly seized with both hands. And finally, although previous pieces involve elements of scenography, *Fire in my Mouth* uses video, music, and directed movement that, at its January 24 premiere, utilized every nook and cranny of the David Geffen Hall stage (and aisles). The result is a powerful story of the fight for women's rights that at times verges on the full-blown operatic.

The fire was a national tragedy, but one that inspired women like Clara Lemlich and Rose Schneiderman to fight for improved working conditions and reformed industrial relations. Years later, when asked about her activism, it was Lemlich who replied “Ah, then I had fire in my mouth,” the phrase that gives the work its evocative title. The libretto, put together by Wolfe herself, is culled from contemporary accounts, first-person interviews, and songs of the period. The first movement, “Immigration,” is an account of an Irish immigrant's passage to the U.S. The second, “Factory,” juxtaposes a Yiddish folk song with one from Southern Italy, thus representing the two main groups of women working at the Triangle Shirtwaist facility. In the third movement, “Protest,” a wish list of American citizen privileges is integrated with text from one of Lemlich's speeches. And in the finale, “Fire,” eyewitness accounts of the disaster conclude with a valedictory rollcall of the dead.



Wolfe's brand of adaptive Minimalism is heard to powerful effect in the lengthy prelude, the open harmonies and passing dissonances of the intoned text setting sail over shimmering high strings in a spirit of joyous optimism. The projected visuals (care of scenographer and long-term Wolfe collaborator Jeff Sugg) show period imagery of immigrants sailing into New York past the Statue of Liberty, reminding us that back then, refugees were embraced, their contribution to the workforce welcomed, a stark contrast to the current climate of "Build a Wall." Chugging rhythms and body percussion add to a sense of elation, the interweaving vocal lines building to a warm climax.

The Crossing's move to the front of the orchestra for *Protest* heralded an invasion as the Young People's Chorus marched down the aisles to demand their slice of the American Dream. In an overwhelming surround-sound sequence, underpinned by driving percussion, the veiled threat of "I wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-want" felt far more threatening than it did aspirational.

In her program note, Wolfe accepts the terms “breathless” and “relentless,” each of which have been applied to her music in the past. That is certainly the case with *Fire in my Mouth*, whose one fault is that (at least from the second movement onwards) the repeated onslaughts come overly thick and fast. Perhaps if the *Protest* section had offered more of a sense of hope and less of a series of angry demands, the work’s climax would feel more “earned.” As it is, one emerges feeling as much harangued as moved—which is not the case, say, at the emotionally overwhelming conclusion of *Anthracite Fields*.

The first part of the concert may have been a less ambitious affair but was at least as satisfying. The late, deeply lamented Steven Stucky's oratorio *August 4, 1964*, like Wolfe's work, is a socially inspired meditation on (among other things) the murder of three young civil-rights workers in Mississippi. A work close to Van Zweden's heart (he gave the 2008 premiere in Dallas), the central *Elegy* received an eloquent reading. Piercing trumpet over rolling bass drum was prelude to a seven-minute utterance of loss, a ravishing lamenting figure on oboe taken up by violins proving its delicate, beating heart.

Anthony McGill followed that by nearly stealing the show with his deeply poetic reading of Copland's glorious Clarinet Concerto. The Philharmonic's own principal clarinet, McGill's long, smooth, buttery tone rode effortlessly over Copland's tender, waltzing strings in the opening movement, his sleepy lullaby decorated with gently glittering harp. A masterful musical storyteller in a razor-sharp, immaculately tailored blue-gray suit, McGill found the sweet spot in the playful cadenza before cruising into the fizzing finale, his roulades glistening like liquid chocolate. Maintaining a polite insouciance, he enjoyed, but never overplayed the jazz elements, before

pulling a rabbit out of the hat with a cheeky finesse of the final bars to earn a well-deserved standing ovation.

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