

## A 'Fire' of Operatic Proportions Ignites Geffen Hall

By <u>Clive Paget</u>, *Musical America* January 28, 2019

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 cocommission—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 musters her enormous forces with skill and imagination. The 36 subtly amplified women's voices of The Crossing, Donald Nally's excellent Philadelphia-based professional chamber choir, were deftly contrasted in frequently complex contrapuntal patterns with the fresh, impressively disciplined female voices of the 114-strong Young People's Chorus of New York City. The Philharmonic fielded triple winds and brass as well as a battery of percussion including whistle, puili (Polynesian slit bamboo rhythm sticks), crotales, sleigh bells, maracas, and wind machine, not to mention tam tam, four different types of cymbal, and 36 pairs of swooshing tailors' scissors, wielded to evocative effect by the women's chorus.

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 sound of sewing machines, ingeniously produced percussively by string players, accompanies the chamber choristers as they change into uniform aprons, their contributions now requiring coordinated robotic movement (the inspired stage direction was by Anne Kauffman). The concurrence of the pure-voiced Jewish girls with the more open-throated Italians rises to a carefully controlled cacophony, the sounds of rasping brass, factory sirens, and clacking scissors underscoring projections of a haunting sea of women's faces.

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-war" felt far more threatening than it did aspirational.

By the time the young women moved to the rear of the stage platform for the final movement ("Fire") it became painfully clear that the number of singers onstage matched the number of victims who perished. The swishing sound of violin bows cutting the air was offset by spiccato playing and slapped strings in a slow accelerando. Women's voices screamed like sirens as the orchestra convulsed with searing glissandi over roiling bass drum and timpani, after which the final litany of women's names felt a trifle rushed and a little flat by comparison.

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*.

Nevertheless, there is much to admire here in Wolfe's bravura writing, always smart, never sentimental, and demonstrating that the musically complex can also be comprehensibly approachable. Jaap van Zweden marshalled his formidable array of forces with care and dexterity, the Philharmonic players throwing themselves into the more out-of-the-ordinary demands with gusto.

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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