

## Unearth, Release (Concerto for Viola and Orchestra)

### Julia Adolphe

Julia Adolphe has staked remarkable success for a composer still in her twenties. She is currently pursuing a doctoral degree from the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music, where she previously earned a master's (as a pupil of Stephen Hartke), following her undergraduate education at Cornell University (where she studied with the late Steven Stucky). She received a 2015 Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, as well as grants from New Music USA and American Composers Forum and was named a 2016 Lincoln Center Emerging Artist.

The daughter of two visual artists, she was already composing as a child and wrote her first musical at the age of 11. Her catalogue of "mature compositions" now extends to eight works of chamber music for a variety of ensembles, a number of art songs, and multi-movement choral pieces. Selections from her suite *Sea Dream Elegies* (for chorus, oboe, and cello) were performed in the Sacred Music in a Sacred Space series at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola in New York City this past September, and at the Cincinnati May Festival last spring, with James Conlon conducting. Her orchestral works have been played by the In-scape Chamber Orchestra, Kaleidoscope Chamber Orchestra, and the North Carolina Symphony. She has composed a one-act chamber opera, *Sylvia*, and is working on another, titled *So Donia Speaks*, set in present-day Iran and using a libretto by Nahal Navidar. Other upcoming performances this season include her *Veil of Leaves*, which the Diotima String Quartet will perform at the Hear Now Paris Festival in France, and a new composition, as yet untitled, that will be premiered by the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (conducted by Jeffrey Kahane) in March 2017.

New York audiences may have first encountered Adolphe's music in the spring of 2014, when her *Dark Sand, Sifting Light* was one of three works by young composers chosen from a reading session to be performed in an NY PHIL BIENNIAL concert with the full Orchestra. The Philharmonic (along with the League of American Orchestras) then co-commissioned her to compose a viola concerto to spotlight Principal Viola Cynthia Phelps. The resulting piece, *Unearth, Release*, was unveiled this past summer at the Eastern Music Festival in North Carolina. Adolphe embraced the opportunity to experience the work in a live performance before bringing it to Lincoln Center. As she had anticipated, the process of preparing the initial performance exposed some issues she could then address

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### IN SHORT

**Born:** May 16, 1988, in New York City

**Resides:** in Los Angeles, California

**Work composed:** 2016, on commission from the League of American Orchestras and the New York Philharmonic, Alan Gilbert, Music Director, with the generous support of the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation and with additional composer assistance from the Sorel Organization; dedication: "For Cynthia Phelps and the New York Philharmonic"

**World premiere:** July 16, 2016, at Dana Auditorium of Guilford College, Greensboro, North Carolina, by the Eastern Music Festival Orchestra, Gerard Schwarz, conductor, Cynthia Phelps, soloist; these concerts mark the first performances of the work in its revised form.

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these concerts, which mark the New York Premiere

**Estimated duration:** ca. 19 minutes

through revisions, which have been incorporated into the score for these concerts. “Sometimes,” she told the *Greensboro News & Record*, “as much as you can imagine it in advance, you really need to experience it from start to finish with the full orchestra to understand what it is that you have created.” The work was also performed in October by the USC Thornton Symphony, conducted by Donald Crockett, with Phelps as soloist. Phelps said:

The chance to hear it with orchestra was really invaluable. It takes a special vehicle to be able to showcase pretty much every aspect of the viola’s color, which is unique and beautiful, in a context where the viola doesn’t get swallowed up. And indeed, the changes she made in between the premiere in North Carolina and now included taking me out of a few bars where I was being made into a silent movie beside the orchestra. With a concerto, it’s always the challenge of gauging the tension and release, enabling the listener to follow this narrative

voice enhanced by the added color, scope, and depth of the orchestral score.

Adolphe approached the balance issue by employing an orchestra of modest scale with “double woodwinds” (meaning two players each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons), but she has one player from each of those duos double on a related instrument — oboe doubling English horn, clarinet doubling bass clarinet, and so on. That expands the possibilities of instrumental color without increasing the absolute number of players.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (one doubling alto flute and piccolo), two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, vibraphone, xylophone, marimba, crotales, snare drum, bass drum, tom-toms, wood blocks, log drums, claves, tam-tam, Chinese cymbal, cabasa, piano, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo viola.

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## In the Composer’s Words

In *Unearth, Release*, the viola’s voice emerges from dark, dense textures and rises toward light, misty atmospheres. The relationship between the viola and the orchestra transforms over the course of the work’s three movements. The entangled, combative “Captive Voices” of the first movement threaten to consume the viola while she strives to assert her musical identity and expressive power. In the second movement, “Surface Tension,” the viola and orchestra engage in a competitive dialogue that is at once playful yet taunting. In the work’s final movement, “Embracing Mist,” the viola hovers above the orchestra, gliding freely while echoes of her music pervade the orchestra’s thinning atmosphere. The work reveals a transformation from sinking to swimming to floating, from drowning in uncertainty toward embracing ambiguity.

— Julia Adolphe

