

Fire in my mouth

Julia Wolfe

Julia Wolfe did not set her sights on a musical profession until something clicked while she was an undergraduate at the University of Michigan. Not long after completing her studies there, she met the composers Michael Gordon and David Lang during a visit to New York City — a fateful encounter all around. They encouraged her to apply to the Yale School of Music, which they had attended. She did, and earned a master's degree there, studying composition with Martin Bresnick. She married Gordon. And, in 1987, the three young composers — Wolfe, Gordon, and Lang — created the Bang on a Can Marathon. Bang on a Can would grow into what is today one of the nation's essential new-music associations, with the sextet Bang on a Can All-Stars anchoring a variety of musical activities. The three composers' entrepreneurial spirit also led them to found Red Poppy Music, a publishing and printing company for composers, and the recording label Cantaloupe Music. The Wolfe-Gordon-Lang troika has sometimes produced collaborative works, including the opera *Carbon Copy Building* (1999), in which they worked with comic-strip artist Ben Katchor; the staged spectacle *Shelter* (2005), which featured the vocalists Trio Mediaeval; and *Road Trip* (2017), a celebration of Bang on a Can's 30th anniversary.

Wolfe also gained distinction as a composer on her own. She was named professor of music composition at New York University's Steinhardt School in 2009, and in 2012 she was granted a doctorate in composition by Princeton University. She has produced a hefty catalogue of works for orchestra: chamber pieces for established combinations (including four string quartets and two works for string orchestra); groupings of unexpected musical forces, including *Strong-*

hold (2008) for eight double basses, *Lad* (2007) for nine bagpipes, and *Traveling Music* (2009) for a hundred or more musicians of any type. In 2015 she won both the Pulitzer Prize for Music for her work *Anthracite Fields* (which was performed by Bang on a Can All-Stars as part of the 2014 NY PHIL BIENNIAL) and a Herb Alpert Award, given in collaboration with the California Institute of the Arts. In 2016 she received a MacArthur Fellowship and in 2019 she has been lauded as *Musical America's* composer of the year.

Anthracite Fields, an hour-long oratorio for chorus with chamber ensemble, was a powerful, haunting evocation of the hard-scrabble, often perilous lives of coal miners in northeastern Pennsylvania during the 19th and early-20th centuries. Wolfe compiled its libretto from interviews, oral histories, and other historical texts. Her interest in labor history had previously inspired *Steel Hammer* (2009), for three sopranos and chamber ensemble; in the

IN SHORT

Born: December 18, 1958, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Resides: in New York City

Work composed: 2018, on commission from the New York Philharmonic, Jaap van Zweden, Music Director; Cal Performances at the University of California, Berkeley; Krannert Center for the Performing Arts / University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and the University Musical Society of the University of Michigan; with the generous support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and of Linda and Stuart Nelson

World premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 60 minutes

In the Composer's Words



Union workers protest in the wake of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire
(Photos courtesy of the Kheel Center at Cornell University)

European Jews and Southern Italians, who had fled their homelands to escape persecution and poverty. They arrived to these shores with sewing skills and were eager to work on the large factory floors. They sat at long tables, working long hours, amidst the roar of hundreds of sewing machines. The garment workers had no recourse against intolerable conditions, no worker protections. They began to organize. I became fascinated by the young women who led the fight for reform — Clara Lemlich, Rose Schneiderman, and others, who persevered against extreme obstacles. After being beaten by hired thugs, and having six ribs broken, Lemlich quickly bounced back into action. Years later, in an interview, when asked about her activism, she declared, “Ah, then I had fire in my mouth.”

In *Fire in my mouth*, I weave fragments of oral history, the clatter of factory sounds, Yiddish and Italian folk songs, words of protest, and stories of loss and grief. With my collaborators, projection artist Jeff Sugg and director Anne Kauffman, I follow the story of these women who rose up to demand a more human existence. This piece is dedicated to their memory.

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— Julia Wolfe

course of about 80 minutes it explored the conflict of man and machine in the developing Industrial Age, as exemplified by multiple accounts of the legend of John Henry. Such works showcase her eclectic tastes as a composer as the sounds of old-time folk music rub elbows with the modern impulses of post-minimalism.

Fire in my mouth continues Wolfe's musical investigations into American labor history with a libretto that draws on oral history interviews, and on folk and protest songs. Her subject in this oratorio — that seems a fair descriptor — is the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. On March 25, 1911, fire consumed the factory, which occupied the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of a building that still stands at 23-29 Washington Place,

now part of the campus of New York University. Faced with deplorable deficiencies of safety, including doors that were locked to prevent employees from taking unauthorized breaks, 146 workers perished from fire, smoke, or jumping out of the windows. Most of them were young immigrant women, largely of Jewish or Italian heritage. It remains the deadliest industrial catastrophe in New York City's history. The fire galvanized the city and state governments as well as labor advocates and led to essential legislation that improved the safety of worksites. Wolfe has said:

Writing music for me is a constant evolution. I go through an intense search process at the beginning of each piece to figure out

The Work at a Glance

Julia Wolfe has cast *Fire in my mouth* in four movements.

The first, "Immigration," sets a snippet of oral history of a survivor named Mollie Wexler, who recalls the trepidation and excitement of heading for a new life in New York. Wolfe looks deeply into Wexler's words (see Text, page 30E). "As you take the sentences apart," she says, "it's fun to look at the meaning of each phrase."

At the beginning of the second movement, "Factory," strings make a crunching, Geiger-counter kind of sound — "It's probably the closest thing I could find to a sewing machine, which is what I was looking for," says the composer — after which two songs enrich the texture, one a Yiddish folk tune about sewing with a needle, the other a lively Italian tarentella. "So you have music that represents the two most representative communities, in the midst of all this factory noise."

The third movement delves into the idea of "Protest," with Wolfe using the women's own words about the dreams of becoming American, but also their growing awareness of inequitable working conditions.

The work concludes with "Fire," in which Wolfe offers an overlay of the victims calling out in panic, a reporter phoning in his story, people perishing, and, finally, a recitation of the names of all those who perished in the fire as a haunting reminder of lives and dreams lost.



Conditions inside a garment factory, ca. 1900

just what the piece is about. I work up a kind of maniacal focus. My music has been described as “breathless” or “relentless.” I always try to tap into an urgency and intensity of expression.

Instrumentation: three flutes, three oboes, (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet and one doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four

horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, tubular bells, snare drum, tom toms, bass drum, suspended cymbals, tam-tam, whistle, pūili (Polynesian slit bamboo stick), vibraphone, crotales, kick bass drum, hi-hat, crash cymbals, sizzle cymbal, sleigh bells, two maracas, two tambourines, wind machine, orchestra bells, large triangle, harp, piano, electric guitar, electric bass, strings, women’s choir (amplified), and girls’ choir.

Fashion Statement



Garment worker and activist Clara Lemlich, whose words lend this piece its title, wearing a shirtwaist

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory took its name, in part, from the garment produced there. “Shirtwaist” referred to a popular, front-button blouse style that was originally modeled on menswear, but with embroidery or lace work to add a more feminine touch to utilitarian separates that could be tucked into a skirt (and stretch a wardrobe). Composer Julia Wolfe said:

They look really formal to us, with the high collar and button sleeves, but they were baggy and loose. It was a work shirt. Well, a nice work shirt — fashionable.

Shirtwaists also became somewhat of a symbol of the modern woman who might hold a job, or hit the streets to advocate for better working conditions, or the right to vote; shirtwaists were standard issue for suffragettes. The style was easily mass-produced and by 1911 there were some 450 shirtwaist factories in New York City alone.

The garment also allowed the young immigrant workers making it to project a certain image, as Wolfe said:

A lot of that was about how they wanted to shed the old country, to be American in all kinds of ways. Style was really important, also how you talked. They really studied the accent. How you lived and looked was important.

— The Editors

Text

Julia Wolfe's *Fire in my mouth*

I. Immigration

(excerpt from an interview with Mollie Wexler, oral history)

Without passports or anything
we took a boat,
a big beautiful boat
and off we went,
five of us girls.
It took about ten days,
we went third class
with the poverty stricken
and off we went,
five of us girls.
But it was lively,
everyone talking
and looking
to God knows what kind of future it was going to be.

II. Factory

(adapted from the excerpt of a Yiddish folk song)

*Mit a nodl, on a nodl
Ney ikh mir b'kovid godl
Zitsn zits ikh mir
A fis oyf a fis
Vayl mayn arbet
iz tsiker zis*

With a needle, without a needle,
I do my sewing with great dignity
I sit on my work-table,
With my legs crossed under me,
Because my work
Is sugar sweet

(adapted from the excerpt of an Italian Pizzica folk song)

*e com' aggiu fare ca vulia te vasu pigliate 'na
paletta e va allu focu e ca' pe la mamma dice
ca hai 'tardatu dinne ca' e' stata 'na spitta te
focu e spitta te focu, nun e' stata mai qualche
fijiu te mamma me l'ha vasata*

What I can do to give you a kiss? Tell to your
mother that you have to fetch some fire and
if she says that you are late tell her a spark
of fire burnt you it never has been a spark of
fire some guy kissed her

(continued)

III. Protest

Women's Choir

I want to talk like an American
I want to look like an American
I want to sing like an American
I want to walk like an American
I want to dream like an American
Scheme like an American
I want to stand like an American
I want to smile like an American
I want to pray like an American
Play ball like an American
Cook like an American
I want to laugh like an American
I want to dance like an American
Have a chance like an American
I want to feel like an American
I want to shout like an American
I want to scream like an American
I want to cry like an American
I want to try like an American
Hurt like an American
Bleed like an American
Burn like, burn like, burn like, burn

Girls' Choir

(excerpt from a speech by Clara Lemlich, November 22, 1909)

I want to say a few words. I am a working girl. One who is striking against intolerable conditions.

We laid down our scissors
shook the threads off our clothes
and calmly left the place that stood between us and starvation.

Women's Choir

hem stitcher, sleeve setter, cuff maker, lace runner, ironer, yoke setter, plain stitcher, belt maker, finisher, sample hand, back maker, dampener, baster and binder and cleaner and closer and cutter and draper and hemmer and joiner and mender and buttonhole maker and buttonhole marker and buttonhole stitcher and buttonhole sewer

baster, binder, cleaner, closer, cutter, draper, hemmer, joiner, plaiter, trimmer, tucker, facer, sorter

Girls' Choir

I WANT TO FEEL LIKE AN AMERICAN

Women's Choir

(from an interview with Clara Lemlich)

Ah — then I had fire in my mouth

Girls' Choir

fire fire

IV. Fire

Women's Choir

I heard someone cry fire

Everyone said fire

(excerpt adapted from the testimony of Kate Alterman, ninth floor worker, at the Triangle Shirtwaist fire trial)

And then I saw her bending down on her knees.

Her hair was loose.

And the trail of her dress was a little far from her.

Then a big smoke came.

I noticed the trail of her dress, and the ends of her hair, began to burn like,
burn like, burn like, burn like, burn like, burn

(excerpt adapted from the eyewitness account of William Shepherd, reporter for the Milwaukee Journal, March 27, 1911)

Those of us who were looking, saw her put her arms about him
and kiss him.

And then he dropped her into space.

Then quick as a flash, he jumped.

All Voices

I see them

falling

See them

falling

(continued)

Women's Choir

(excerpt from a speech by Rose Schneiderman at The Metropolitan Opera House, April 2, 1911)

I would be a traitor
to those poor burned bodies
if I were to speak
of good fellowship.
I have tried you good people of the public,
and I have found you wanting.

*(complete list of people who perished in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire —
from The Triangle Fire by Leon Stein)*

Lizzie Adler, Anna Altman, Annina Ardito, Rose Bassino, Vincenza Benanti, Yetta Berger, Morris Bernstein, Jacob Bernstein, Essie Bernstein, Gussie Bierman, Vincenza Billota, Abraham Binowitz, Rosie Brenman, Sarah Brenman, Ida Brodsky, Sarah Brodsky, Ada Brooks, Laura Brunetti, Josephine Cammarata, Francesca Caputo, Josephine Carlisi, Albina Caruso, Annie Ciminello, Rosina Cirrito, Anna Cohen, Annie Colletti, Sarah Cooper, Michelina Cordiano, Bessie Dashefsky, Josie Del Castillo, Clara Dockman, Kalman Donick, Celia Eisenberg, Dora Evans, Rebecca Feibisch, Yetta Fichtenholz, Daisy Fitzie, Mary Floresta, Max Florin, Jennie Franco, Rose Friedman, Diana Gerjuoy, Molly Gerstein, Catherine Giannattasio, Celia Gitlin, Esther Goldstein, Lena Goldstein, Mary Goldstein, Yetta Goldstein, Rosie Grasso, Bertha Greb, Rachel Grossman, Mary Herman, Esther Hochfeld, Fannie Hollander, Pauline Horowitz, Ida Jukofsky, Ida Kanowitz, Tessie Kaplan, Beckie Kessler, Jacob Klein, Beckie Koppelman, Bertha Kula, Tillie Kupferschmidt, Benjamin Kurtz, Annie L'Abbate, Fannie Lansner, Maria Lauletta, Jennie Lederman, Max Lehrer, Sam Lehrer, Kate Leone, Mary Leventhal, Jennie Levin, Pauline Levine, Nettie Liebowitz, Rose Liermark, Bettina Maiale, Frances Maiale, Catherine Maltese, Lucia Maltese, Rosaria Maltese, Maria Manaria, Rose Mankofsky, Rose Mehl, Yetta Meyers, Gaetana Midolo, Annie Miller, Beckie Neubauer, Annie Nicholas, Michelina Nicolosei, Sadie Nussbaum, Julia Oberstein, Rose Oringer, Beckie Ostrovsky, Annie Pack, Provindenza Panno, Antonietta Pasqualicchio, Ida Pearl, Jennie Pildescu, Vincenza Pinelli, Emilia Prato, Concetta Prestifilippo, Beckie Reines, Fannie Rosen, Louis Rosen, Israel Rosen, Julia Rosen, Yetta Rosenbaum, Jennie Rosenberg, Gussie Rosenfeld, Nettie Rosenthal, Emma Rothstein, Theodore Rotner, Sarah Sabasowitz, Santina Salemi, Sarafina Saracino, Teresina Saracino, Gussie Schiffman, Theresa Schmidt, Ethel Schneider, Violet Schochet, Golda Schpunt, Margaret Schwartz, Jacob Seltzer, Rosie Shapiro, Ben Sklover, Rose Sorkin, Annie Starr, Jennie Stein, Jennie Stellino, Jennie Stiglitz, Sam Taback, Clotilde Terranova, Isabella Tortorelli, Meyer Utal, Catherine Uzzo, Frieda Velakofsky, Bessie Viviano, Rosie Weiner, Sarah Weintraub, Tessie Weisner, Dora Welfowitz, Bertha Wendorff, Joseph Wilson, Sonia Wisotsky