

JULIA WOLFE'S ANTHRACITE FIELDS

APRIL

MON 15 | 7:30 PM

MOODY PERFORMANCE HALL

Texas Premiere

JULIA WOLFE COMPOSER*

BANG ON A CAN ALL-STARS

ROBERT BLACK BASS

VICKY CHOW PIANO AND KEYBOARD

DAVID COSSIN PERCUSSION

MARIEL ROBERTS CELLO AND VOICE

MARK STEWART GUITAR AND VOICE

KEN THOMSON CLARINET AND BASS CLARINET

ANDREW COTTON SOUND ENGINEER

VERDIGRIS ENSEMBLE | **SAM BRUKHMAN** DIRECTOR

JEFF SUGG SCENOGRAPHY AND PROJECTION DESIGN

**DSO Composer-in-Residence*

JULIA WOLFE Anthracite Fields

(Approximate duration 65 minutes)

- I. Foundation
- II. Breaker Boys
- III. Speech
- IV. Flowers
- V. Appliances

This program will conclude at approximately 8:10PM. Please join us in the concert hall following the performance for a moderated discussion.

PROGRAM NOTES | ANTHRACITE FIELDS

Notes by Julie Wolfe

I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania – Montgomeryville. When we first moved there the road was dirt and the woods surrounding the house offered an endless playground of natural forts and ice skating trails. At the end of the long country road you'd reach the highway — Route 309. A right turn (which was the way we almost always turned) led to the city, Philadelphia. A left turn on Route 309 (which we hardly ever took) led to coal country, the anthracite field region. I remember hearing the names of the towns, and though my grandmother grew up in Scranton, everything in that direction, north of my small town, seemed like the Wild West.

When the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia commissioned me to write a new work for choir and the Bang on a Can All-Stars, I looked to the anthracite region. Anthracite is the diamond of coal — the purest form. At the turn of the century the anthracite fields of Pennsylvania became the power source for everything from railroads to industry to heating homes. But the life of the miner was difficult and dangerous. I had been immersed in issues of the American worker — composing *Steel Hammer*, an evening length art-ballad on the legend of John Henry. For *Anthracite Fields*, I went deeper into American labor history — looking at both local and national issues that arose from

coal mining. I went down into the coal mines, visited patch towns and the local museums where the life of the miners has been carefully depicted and commemorated. I interviewed retired miners and children of miners who grew up in the patch. The text is culled from oral histories and interviews, local rhymes, a coal advertisement, geological descriptions, a mining accident index, contemporary daily everyday activities that make use of coal power and an impassioned political speech by John L. Lewis, the head of the United Mine Workers Union.

My aim with *Anthracite Fields* is to honor the people who persevered and endured in the Pennsylvania Anthracite coal region during a time when the industry fueled the nation, and to reveal a bit about who we are as American workers.

In the first movement, **FOUNDATION**, the singers chant the names of miners that appeared on a Pennsylvania Mining Accident index from 1869-1916. The list is sadly long. I chose only the Johns with one-syllable last names in alphabetical order. The piece ends with a setting of the very colorful multi-syllabic names. The miners were largely from immigrant families and the diversity of ethnicity is heard in the names. At the center of **FOUNDATION** is text from geological descriptions of coal formation.

BREAKER BOYS follows next. There were many boys working in the Pennsylvania coal mines. The younger ones worked in the breakers, which were large ominous structures. The coal would come running down the chutes of the breakers, and the boys had the painful job of removing debris from the rush of coal. They weren't allowed to wear gloves and as a result their fingers were cut and bleeding. The central rhyme of this movement, Mickey Pick-Slate, is from the anthracite region. Others were adapted from children's street rhymes. In the center of this movement are the words of Anthony (Shorty) Slick who worked as a breaker boy. The interview is taken from the documentary film, *America and Lewis Hine* directed by Nina Rosenblum. Hine worked for the National Child Labor Committee and served as chief photographer for the WPA.

SPEECH is the third movement. The text is adapted from an excerpt of a speech by John L. Lewis who served as president of the United Mine Workers of America. Lewis was an impassioned spokesperson for the miners and fought hard-won battles for safer working conditions and for fair compensation.

The fourth movement **FLOWERS** was inspired by an interview with Barbara Powell, daughter and granddaughter of miners. She grew up in a Pennsylvania patch town and had many stories to tell about her family life. She never felt poor. She had an amazing sense of community. Barbara talked about how everyone helped each other. In one interview Barbara said, in order to brighten their lives, "we all had gardens," and then she began to list the names of flowers.

The last movement **APPLIANCES** ties the new to the old. I was struck by John L. Lewis's line "those of us who benefit from that service because we live in comfort." Our days are filled with activities that require power. Even today coal is fueling the nation, powering electricity. When we bake a cake or grind coffee beans we use coal. The closing words of *Anthracite Fields* are taken from an advertising campaign for the coal-powered railroad. In 1900, Ernest Elmo Calkins created a fictitious character, a New York socialite named Phoebe Snow, who rode the rails to Buffalo. It used to be a dirty business to ride a train, but with the diamond of coal, her "gown stayed white from morn till night, on the road to Anthracite" — a stunning contrast to the coal darkened faces underground.

ANTHRACITE FIELDS | ARTIST BIOS

JULIA WOLFE

DSO Composer-in-Residence for the 2018/19 and 2019/20 seasons

Julia Wolfe's music is distinguished by an intense physicality and a relentless power that pushes performers to extremes and demands attention from the audience. She draws inspiration from folk, classical and rock genres, bringing a modern sensibility to each while simultaneously tearing down the walls between them. Her work *Anthracite Fields* was awarded the 2015 Pulitzer Prize in music. Wolfe is a 2016 MacArthur Fellow. She is on faculty at the NYU Steinhardt School and is co-founder/co-artistic director of New York's legendary music collective Bang on a Can.

BANG ON A CAN ALL-STARS, formed in 1992, are recognized worldwide for their ultra-dynamic live performances and recordings of today's most innovative music. Freely crossing the boundaries between classical, jazz, rock, world and experimental music, this six-member amplified ensemble has consistently forged a distinct category-defying identity, taking music into uncharted territories. Performing each year throughout the U.S. and internationally, the All-Stars have shattered the definition of what concert music is today.

VERDIGRIS ENSEMBLE, founded in 2017, has quickly established itself as "one of the most innovative chamber choirs...a major artistic force" (*TheaterJones*) and called "a group to watch" offering "accomplished performances" (*Dallas Morning News*). Verdigris gathers Dallas's best vocal talent to engage a modern audience with an ancient art form. In collaboration with creatives from Dallas and beyond, Verdigris weaves intricate choral programs into cross-disciplinary experiences.

SAM BRUKHMAN is the founder and artistic director of the Verdigris Ensemble. He also holds conducting positions at Brown Middle School in Forney Independent School District and Temple Shalom. Praised for his "forward-thinking" choral performances, Brukman is a regular presenter, vocalist and conductor. Previous conducting positions include Berkshire Choral International, Festival Del Sole, Princeton Girlchoir and Vox Mousai Women's Choir. In 2015, he was chosen as semifinalist for the National American Choral Director's Conducting Competition. Brukman is a graduate of Westminster Choir College.

JEFF SUGG is a Philadelphia-based designer with more than 20 years of experience in the performing arts. Sugg has designed for a wide range of productions from Broadway to regional theater to European concert halls. In addition to his collaboration with Julia Wolfe, Sugg has been a principal collaborator with music and theater artists, including Cynthia Hopkins, Jim Findlay and Mikel Rouse. Select Broadway theater credits include *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Sweat*, *Bring It On* and *33 Variations*. His Off-Broadway credits include *Mankind*, *The Layover*, *The Fortress of Solitude*, *An Octoroon*, *Tribes* and *The Slug Bearers of Kayrol Island*. His London credits include *Tina: The Tina Turner Musical*. His credits working with music productions include *Anthracite Fields* and Prince's final appearance on *Saturday Night Live*. Sugg has received the following awards: Lucille Lortel, Obie, Bessie and two Henry Hewes Design Awards.

Anthracite Fields was commissioned through Meet the Composer's Commissioning Music/USA program, which is made possible by generous support from the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Helen F. Whitaker Fund. Additional support was made possible through the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia Alan Harler New Ventures Fund; The Presser Foundation; The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage; the National Endowment for the Arts; The Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia and the Aaron Copland Fund for Music.

For the legal and physical safety of the artists and for the comfort of the audience, cameras and other recording devices are not permitted in the theater during the performance.

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