philly.com

Subscriber Services | The Inquirer | DAILY NEWS

Home | News | Sports | Entertainment | Business | Food | Lifestyle | Health | Marketplace

Collections

A choral piece born in the heart of a mountain

26 Like 0 Tweet 0 g+1 @



Julia Wolfe, composer of "Anthracite Fields," is a native of Montgomeryville.



GALLERY: A visit to a coal mine in Carbon County sets the tone for Julia…

By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Music Critic

POSTED: April 21, 2014

LANSFORD, Pa. - "Don't leave me! Don't leave me!"

So says the ghostly voice, heard clearly and periodically in the No. 9 Coal Mine here, apparently from the spirit of a miner who didn't get out alive.

Whether buried or asphyxiated, the names of killed and injured miners are the starting point of *Anthracite Fields*, the hour-long choral work to be premiered Saturday and next Sunday by the Mendelssohn Club. Its unlikely composer? The cutting-edge New Yorker Julia Wolfe.

Thus this brainy, fiftysomething strawberry blonde, a founding member of downtown Manhattan's experimental Bang on a Can composer collective, found herself heading into a rustic Carbon County coal mine on a recent Sunday. How might this translate into music? As the mine train traveled 1,600 feet into the center of a mountain, the darkness became profound - and inspiring.

"Heat, pressure, and time," Wolfe said regarding the formation of anthracite. "These men were the foundation, and there was this geological foundation - a sense of it all being buried deep into the earth.

"The first movement . . . opens with this low rumble. Little by little, you hear the names [of miners], names that I recognize. I know somebody with those names somewhere in my life. It became very personal."

The Montgomeryville native receives commissions from modern-music organizations all over the world, but *Anthracite Fields* is her first from Philadelphia, and she wanted to touch on something local. "Something about tunnels and digging was speaking to me," she said.

Soon the composition's subject turned into a bottomless pit. *Anthracite Fields* will be performed in the candlelit Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral with singers costumed in tunics printed with Photoshopped coal - "as if you're looking at the wall in a mine," says designer Katy Coble.

Choreographer Leah Stein is adding movement. At times, the singers will bend to the side, as though peering deep into the ground - "but in a subtle way," Stein says. "I'm not trying to make it theatrical, but to do something that will expand the audience's experience."

Choral Group Tours?

Customized high quality tours
Perform in dynamic worldwide venues

We Recommend

Wolfe's 'Anthracite Fields' is big, burly, attractive
April 30, 2014

Another blast at Chinese mine kills six
April 2, 2013

Working at the coal mine; building a business on anthracite
April 22, 2012

AdChoices

The piece itself is full of pictorial imagery - the above-ground flowers that were meticulously tended to bring color into miners' black-and-gray lives, a refined female character used to advertise the cleanness of trains fueled by coal.

Elsewhere, Wolfe sets speeches by labor activist John L. Lewis to music.

"Lewis was a god in my house," said longtime Mendelssohn Club director Alan Harler, son of a coal miner in Galesburg, Ill. He saw the effects of black-lung disease and lived through long strikes during which his father hunted quail not for sport but for dinner.

But when accompanying Wolfe on a coal mine visit, Harler got no farther than the entrance. "Claustrophobia," he says. "Just the thought of it . . . and I could hardly breathe."

Wolfe often asked herself what she was getting into when she first drove out to the Scranton area for research. "I thought, 'Why am I looking at this?' It's a very loaded subject - political issues, environmental issues, immigrant issues, people who persevered, made a life and fueled the nation. *Who are these people*?"

Touring the No. 9 Coal Mine in Lansford with Wolfe, one understands why she was so taken in by this world. The well-kept town seems to exist in a 1950s time warp. The mine itself, which operated from 1855 to 1972, was dripping with water from still-melting snow.

In this underground environment, a homey-looking storefront was a first-aid station. Mules lived here. Steam engines wheezed. Deaths were frequent and bizarre. One man who physically abused a mule was the object of the animal's revenge: It crushed him against a wall. Another man was trapped by an engine and cooked to death.

Tour guide Dave Kutcha - who has heard the "don't leave me" ghost - talked about how his 36-year-old grandfather was asphyxiated when a steam engine in a tunnel below him broke down.

Yet not all was bleak. Many took pride in what they felt was the most honest of work: "Everybody hung out together. Everybody helped each other. If somebody was sick that day, the others covered for him. It was an extended family," says Wolfe. "They lived in these impoverished houses but never felt poor."

Even kids too young to work in the mines had the grueling task of picking shale from the coal (without gloves and, later, without fingernails). But they still had fun with games reflected in the nursery-rhyme lyrics Wolfe uses in the "Breaker Boys" movement of the piece.

Tour guide Kutcha was not one of them. "My father told me in no uncertain terms - you'd better not even think of working in a mine here," he said. "So I got a job at Bethlehem Steel. But I've lived in this region all my life. Coal is in my blood."

In such company, Wolfe's musical vocabulary changed. Known for melodically severe, rhythmically propulsive works for massed bagpipes or double basses, she revealed something richer in *Steel Hammer* (2009), a 90-minute work about the mythical railroad worker John Henry. A Pulitzer Prize finalist, the piece comes out this spring on CD. But rehearsals for *Anthracite Fields* reveal a further blossoming into richer harmonies, expansive vocal lines, and sound effects Harler still ponders.

One movement ends with haunting D-minor whistling. "What *is* that?" he asks. "A canary?"

Though Wolfe considers the piece's current state complete - it will also be performed as part of the New York Philharmonic's Biennial in late May - she's not finished. She longs to add movements inspired by John Mitchell, the labor leader who united rival ethnic groups by saying the coal was not Irish or Polish or Welsh: "It's coal."

And then? The rats, which knew when cave-ins were about to happen and unintentionally led many miners to safety. "I'd really like to do a rat movement. I just didn't get to it," she says. "The [miner] boys were friendly with the rats. They'd save crusts of bread for them."

PERFORMANCE
"Anthracite Fields"

At 4 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday and next Sunday at the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral, 13 S. 38th St.

Tickets $28-30. Information: 215-735-9922 or www.mcchorus.org.

dstearns@phillynews.com

More From The Web

- **Please Don’t Retire At 62. Here’s Why.** (The Motley Fool)
- **You NEED To See These 20 Pictures of Kobe Bryant With Wife Vanessa Bryant Thr...** (Rant Sports)
- **Most Outrageous Gowns at the Met Gala** (The Cut)
- **Seriously, Stop Refrigerating These Foods** (Reviewed.com)
- **CNN Money: How Young Millionaires Invest** (CNN Money | Wealthfront)

More From Philly.com

- **Kingsway's Culbreath adding to family legacy**
- **Ray K. Metzker, 83, famed photographer**
- **Allentown could be blueprint for new development**
- **Sixers fall to Timberwolves as Noel sits**
- **Sat. S.J. girls and boys: Haddonfield Gess captures Invitational**

Promoted Links by Taboola

Comments for this thread are now closed.

0 Comments Philly.com Login

Sort by Best Share Favorite

Be the first to comment.

AROUND THE WEB WHAT'S THIS?

The Borgata
New Jersey Man Hits Record Jackpot at Borgata Casino

The Motley Fool
Buffett Helps LeBron Turn $300 Million Into $63 Billion

Women & Co
How Living Below My Means Led to a Richer Life

Lifestyle Journal
Little Known Way to Pay Off Mortgage

ALSO ON PHILLY.COM

comments powered by Disqus

Commenting policy | Comments FAQ

Choral Group Tours?
encoretours.com
Customized high quality tours Perform in dynamic worldwide venues

FEATURED ARTICLES



Mirror, Mirror: When style is 'ghetto' on black women, 'chic' on whites



Confederate flag in dorm roils Bryn Mawr campus



A look back at artist/activist Kathy Chang, 20 years after her self-immolation at Penn

More:

In Bulk Trucking, Chemical Leaman Is Rolling Toward The Top

Frank Nofer, 71, famed graphic artist

George Mattson, 88, Olympian, Crew Coach

De Mazia Art Brings $2.38 Million

Leader Of Jbm Sentenced To Life Aaron Jones Was Convicted Of Conspiring To Distribute $100 Million In Cocaine. He Plans To Appeal.

Jbm 8 Believed Founders

Index by Keyword | Index by Date | About Philly.com | Contact Us | Terms of Use & Privacy Statement | Copyright 2014