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Wolfe's 'Anthracite Fields' is big, burly, attractive

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Julia Wolfe

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GALLERY: Julia Wolfe

By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Music Critic

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Any great piece of music should be an enveloping alternative universe. And the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia went to grand lengths to make sure that happened at the Saturday premiere of Julia Wolfe's *Anthracite Fields*, a major piece that doesn't require the elaborate production it was given at the Episcopal Cathedral.

Then again, great paintings don't need a museum's worth of other paintings as context in order to be appreciated. But it doesn't hurt.

An hour-long work for eight-part chorus and instrumental ensemble, *Anthracite Fields* approaches Pennsylvania coal-mining culture from five viewpoints: the creation of coal and the names of men injured by mining it; the young "breaker boys" who worked grueling hours aboveground; the labor movement, with excerpts from a John L. Lewis speech; the colorful gardens that offered respite from black-and-gray lives; and the many appliances fueled by coal power.

While a historically researched, message-driven piece can come out heavy-handed and prosaic, Wolfe's strong compositional personality wasn't likely to let that happen (OK, the first movement has a few emergency-alarm effects). Working with a nonprofessional choir prompted distilled, concentrated musical thought; *Anthracite Fields* has all the guts of any Wolfe piece, but may be her most attractive work yet. At least, that's how it sounded in the Mendelssohn Club's solid performance under Alan Harler.

As part of the Bang on a Can circle of composers, Wolfe is drawn to setting lists to music, and the first movement begins with a male chorus reeling off scores of names of injured miners - effective in itself. Then, halfway through, a soprano countermelody acts as a cinematic master shot, giving a wide-angle frame for all that came before, allowing you to fathom the enormity of the subject. A stroke of genius.

The subsequent movements played by different rules. The John L. Lewis segment had interplay between soloist and chorus, but never the same sort. "Breaker Boys" mixed street-rhyme-style words and descriptions of hardscrabble work with an escalating

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rhythmic velocity suggesting a relentless conveyor belt. Best of all was the flower movement, with its harmonically constricted beginning that grew continuously from within.

The Bang on a Can All-Stars instrumental ensemble was a motley crew of classical and vernacular instruments, from cello to guitar, and achieved deep, subterranean effects by spinning bicycle wheels along the strings of various instruments.

The visual elements were as appropriate and deeply felt as the music. Jeff Sugg's projections showed the rugged faces of miners morphing into each other plus topographical maps of the region. Choreographer Leah Stein imposed a "feng shui" element with the chorus stationed in poetically appropriate positions in and around the candlelit space.

Audience response was a bit muted and stunned. But then, it takes a while to come back from an alternative universe.

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