

MUSIC REVIEW

Sounding ‘Her Story’ and the music of loss

Giancarlo Guerrero led the BSO in a potent new work by Julia Wolfe dramatizing the struggle for women’s rights across the centuries

By [Jeremy Eichler](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 19, 2023, 1:52 p.m.



Giancarlo Guerrero conducts the BSO and singers of the Lorelei Ensemble in Julia Wolfe's "Her Story" on Thursday in Symphony Hall. ROBERT TORRES

Present-day political struggles, it has been said, are motivated less by imagining the freedom of future generations than by coming to grips with the suffering and unfinished revolutions of the past.

This notion would be seem to be somewhere near the heart of Julia Wolfe’s “Her Story,” a large-scale oratorio-like work that dramatizes the fight for women’s rights across centuries of American history. On Thursday night, this intensely potent score, co-commissioned by the BSO, formed the centerpiece of the third and final program in the orchestra’s ambitious midseason festival titled “Voices of Loss, Reckoning, and Hope.”

The work’s own history dates back to before the pandemic, when Beth Willer, artistic director of the locally based Lorelei Ensemble, proposed that Wolfe create a new work commemorating the 2020 centennial of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. Wolfe used her time during the pandemic to expand the piece’s vision by placing suffrage as just one stage of a centuries-long struggle for equality.

The piece in its final form has no individual vocal soloists, but in Thursday’s dramatically compelling performance, resourcefully staged by Anne Kauffman and inventively costumed by Márion Talán de la Rosa, the 10 singers of the Lorelei Ensemble played many central roles: singing and declaiming text from different points all over the stage, waving fists, holding aloft various Brechtian placards with epithets that had historically been hurled at the suffragettes, and much more.

The actual words they sing are taken from various sources including a letter from 1776 by Abigail Adams to her husband, anti-suffrage propaganda, and a speech by the abolitionist and women’s rights champion Isabella Baumfree, later known as Sojourner Truth. Wolfe’s settings often underscore these texts through repetitions, and conversely, by abstracting her tightly harmonized vocal lines to the point that they all but dissolve into pure sound. All of this takes place over a churning post-minimalist orchestra. Helpful stage projections of the text carried the audience along.

It added up on Thursday to a musical-dramatic happening of considerable force, with the Lorelei’s performance tightly honed and riveting. Visiting conductor Giancarlo Guerrero, who has been engaged with this work since its 2022 premiere, deftly held the pieces together. By implicitly placing today’s activism in relationship to these sharply etched moments drawn from the history of the struggle, “Her Story” ultimately sounds both a viscerally moving tribute and a forceful call to continue the fight.

In an interesting juxtaposition, the score followed the BSO’s first performance of Polish composer Henryk Górecki’s Symphony No. 3, “Symphony of Sorrowful Songs,” a work for soprano and orchestra that premiered in 1977. Over the course of its three movements, minimalism is angled toward the sacred, with a large string-dominated orchestra building up — through repeating figures, canons, and drone-like textures — a series of vast landscapes in sound, much of it enveloped in a rapt sense of beauty. Against these mesmerizing backdrops, the soprano floats short texts of lamentation, all of them summoning relationships between mother and child riven by loss.

On Thursday night, Guerrero layered the various elements with care and restraint — at times perhaps a bit too much restraint — and Aleksandra Kurzak was the admirably pure-voiced soprano. In 1992, a recording of this work featuring David Zinman and soprano Dawn Upshaw touched a nerve internationally and ultimately sold more than 1 million copies, an unfathomable number for an album of contemporary music. One might speculate that its success owed much to the massive geopolitical changes of those years, as so many profound losses of the recent decades were — with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the dissolution of communism’s master narratives of progress — suddenly made available to mourning. The work found deep resonance in those times; judging from the heartfelt reception it received in Symphony Hall, it has not lost its ability to speak to our own.

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Giancarlo Guerrero, conductor

At: Symphony Hall, Thursday night

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