

# Miller Theatre Program Notes

Composer Portraits: *Julia Wolfe*

Thursday, February 3, 8:00PM

**“Most of my music is about the energy of a group sound—how the interlocking of individuals creates a powerful human expression.” (Julia Wolfe)**

It was as part of an “interlocking of individuals,” even as a participant in a “group sound,” that Julia Wolfe first became known. But that, we have to remember, was almost a quarter of a century ago. Like her co-conspirators Michael Gordon and David Lang, Wolfe has come a long way since the time they were all graduate students of Martin Bresnick at Yale University and decided to put on a concert, under the banner “Bang on a Can.” Even so, roots are roots, and they don’t break, and Wolfe’s are strong, in the same places they were back then: in the New York minimalism of the generation before hers, and also, for rougher edges and grit, in rock of various kinds, balanced by a feeling for structured expression, for what music can gain from being written. Of course, the tree also goes on growing, and Wolfe has found her way, as we will hear tonight, to wider spans and, beyond or even within the continuing energy, calmer vistas. There is also the paradox, perhaps only an apparent paradox, that as her music embraces further and remoter traditions (Celtic music, for instance, to which she may have been drawn by a shared interest in drone and decorated melody) so it becomes ever more personal.

One of her key early works was *Lick*—written in 1994 for the Bang on a Can All Stars with a lineup of soprano sax, electric guitar, cello, bass, piano, and percussion—and her note on it says a lot about where her music was coming from, and where it was going. “I begin with an image,” she wrote, “a fragment of a tune, a visual or sonic image—a joyous, active, rhythmic thing that unravels like a little knot....There’s an insistence, a feeling of pushing things to the edge, and there is a certain kind of groove, a dance quality. The body energy of pop music has come into my music.” As she also observes, the many meanings of the title all apply to her work, for its combination of speed and sensuality, extroversion and intimacy.

*Lick* got there, in part, by virtue of its instrumentation, but at the same time Wolfe was discovering the same mix of energies in what she was composing for the most traditional classical ensemble, the string quartet. She wrote three quartets in the 1990s, then in 2003 added a concerto for the Kronos with symphony orchestra, *My Beautiful Scream*. Since then have come the two works for larger string groups on this program.

Wolfe evidently enjoys working with homogeneous formations: eight double basses (*Stronghold*), nine sets of bagpipes (*LAD*), piano and ten recorded tracks (*With A Blue Dress On*), and one could add the six male singers of *Keeper*. Folk music is another stream from which she goes on drawing, for its melodic qualities and for what it commemorates of the lives of people before us, cherished in her 2009 piece *Steel Hammer*, composed for Trio Mediæval and the Bang on a Can All Stars on the basis of Appalachian songs and legends. At the same time, there are continuing collaborations with Gordon and Lang, including most recently a big concert piece, *Water*.

Two of their earlier joint projects, *The Carbon Copy Building* and *Lost Objects*, are available on cd, as are three collections of music by Wolfe alone: *Arsenal of Democracy*, *The String Quartets*, and *Dark Full Ride*.

**Cruel Sister** (2004) *New York premiere*

Wolfe’s own note conveys the essential background to this piece:

“Cruel Sister takes its title from a dark and fantastic old English ballad of the same name. I first heard a beautiful and eerie rendition of the song while in college, on an album by the British folk/rock group Pentangle. While there are no musical references to the original tune, the story of the ballad inspired a response. It’s a tale of two sisters—one bright as the sun, one cold and dark. So that she can have the love of the young man who has come courting, the dark sister pushes the bright one into the sea. The dead sister, who is washed up on the shore, is found by two minstrels who shape her breast bone into a fine harp. They come to play at the sister’s wedding. As the music from the harp reaches the bride’s ears the song concludes, ‘And surely now her tears will flow.’ The ballad is incredibly haunting and powerful. I was fascinated and horrified by the overwhelming greed and jealousy of the tale. My *Cruel Sister* is a search to unravel this human dilemma. In a sense, it is the music of ‘the harp,’ a plea for a higher love.”

As so often with Wolfe, the score has a narrative sweep that makes any further comment almost superfluous. The elements assert themselves boldly—pulsation, counter-pulsation (especially in rhythms of three against four), harmony shining or staring through this vibrant texture, utterly bright notes in a high region where melody will form—and they tell their own story.

Even without the title, and the composer's explanation, we might be able to work out that this story is a dark one. Visiting an old battlefield, or the site of a murder, or an ancient prison, we might have the impression that the dumb slopes of the land or the stones of a building have become imprinted with the suffering that happened there. Wolfe's *Cruel Sister* has this same effect, of seeming to record, with immediate, pressing intensity, the violence and pain of deeds long in the past. A scream is locked into this music, and a terrible song.

The song takes command about halfway through the half-hour composition, when the driving energy suddenly cuts out to leave just the violins in immensely long notes, way above the staff. Solid harmony comes in under the protracted melody, and then basses plucking a heartbeat rhythm. As more and more instruments turn to pizzicato, it seems as if the magic harp is being reconstituted before our ears. Then the music goes into its final phase.

Wolfe composed *Cruel Sister* in 2004, and the piece was played for the first time in Munich that year, Christoph Poppen conducting.

### **Fuel** (2007) *New York premiere*

This, Wolfe's second piece for orchestral strings, also arose from a German commission, for a score for the Hamburg group Ensemble Resonanz to play with a film by Bill Morrison in a former warehouse in 2007. Tonight we recreate that original match of music and film, which, Wolfe has said, "takes its inspiration from many sources—both sound and visual: the whirl of incessant mechanisms, the loading and unloading of ships, the sway and creaking of docks, transportation by truck and train, the sweat of human energy, and the power source of the sun."

Playing for a little over 20 minutes, the score shares with *Cruel Sister* a sense of urgent, compelling direction achieved by means of strong forces acting on strong elements: that "whirl," which creates a sensation at once of high velocity and motionlessness, as well as repeating notes and chords, and a recurrent sound like something being torn, or whipped. About two thirds of the way through, the music's gyrations, large and small, give way to wheeling scales and arpeggios that take the ongoing energy onto a new plane. There is sufficient fuel here, rhythmic and harmonic, for the engine to go on much longer. It stops only because it is held still.

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