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Ears wide open here in the new Brooklyn



Friday's "Double Exposure" at FringeArts headquarters had new scenes from Lembit Beecher's yet-untitled opera and Missy Mazzoli's "Breaking the Waves." (DOMINIC MERCIER)



GALLERY: Missy Mazzoli has moved from New York to Philadelphia and... (STEPHEN TAYLOR)

By David Patrick Stearns, Inquirer Music Critic

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"What have the outsiders brought with them?" asks a severe town elder in Lars von Trier's 1996 film *Breaking the Waves*.

Reply: "Their music!"

In Philadelphia, you could have answered that question the same way for years, with new composers visiting, living, and working here. But never has it been more true than this spring, as radical events pop up like mutant daffodils, suggesting that we're becoming the new Brooklyn.

That paragon of Brooklyn composers Missy Mazzoli never thought she'd be back - she grew up in the area - but here she was last week, workshopping her new opera *Breaking the Waves* as one of Opera Philadelphia's composers in residence.

Another prodigal daughter, downtown-Manhattan Bang on a Can composer Julia Wolfe, is revisiting her Montgomery County family roots with *Anthracite Fields*, a new work for the Mendelssohn Club April 26-27 about Pennsylvania coal mining culture.

Her equally notable husband Michael Gordon is represented by his new composition *Rushes* Friday in the Icebox at Crane Arts - a sweeping hour-long work with seven bassoons converging into entrancing sounds and propulsive gestures probably unlike anything heard here before.

Composers have long thrived here, but with Morton Feldman and John Cage festivals staged by Bower Bird in recent years, audiences are increasingly on totally new ground. The newest wrinkle: These locally created works exploring the edges of various musical universes are being exported.

On the Threshold of Winter, the first opera by Philadelphia über-expressionist composer Michael Hersch, will be premiered June 25 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Wolfe's *Anthracite* migrates to the New York Philharmonic's Biennial at Lincoln Center May 28-June 7. On the other coast, *De Materie*, the much-admired but seldom heard magnum opus by Dutch minimalist Louis Andriessen, will be sung by Philadelphia choir The Crossing at the Los Angeles Philharmonic's

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A jazz musician in local clubs and a member of the Settlement Music School faculty, pianist/composer Adam Berenson has a huge variety of free-form, atonal miniatures on his new double-disc set *Lumen*, some taken from his 17 previous CDs plus his *String Quartet No. 3*, played by the JACK Quartet, that barely has a traditionally bowed note.

These things don't happen easily. Each of these pieces requires wildly impractical degrees of preparation with deceptively fluid outcome. Gordon's intricate *Rushes* flows like a river with constantly varying ripples and waves, requiring great concentration over its hour-long unbroken span of sound. The composer compares the score to "a very long weaving pattern for a loom," but it's also alive and breathing on its new, Cantaloupe-label recording since the instruments are, after all, bassoons.

What it takes to reach that level was apparent at The Crossing's recent Andriessen rehearsals at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, whose parishoners couldn't be blamed if they dialed 911 on hearing the pungent, exclamatory sounds coming from the basement practice room. But they know they should expect anything from this choir that can sing everything.

"We need to be as Zen about this as possible," said conductor Donald Nally, confronting staccato outbursts at irregular rhythms, voiced with anti-intuitive harmonies. Once in Los Angeles, singers will interlock with instruments. But even without them as a point of reference, the rehearsing choir maintained its high standard of accuracy, even attending to how Andriessen's mechanized musical manner expresses the sense of the Dutch text.

Rehearsals had to be concentrated into discrete periods, with time off for singers to digest the piece on their own. But when done right, Andriessen's music feels more random than drilled. "Dutch Tourette's syndrome?" suggested one singer. Sounds right to me.

The operas: A partial unveiling, titled *Double Exposure* and produced by Opera Philadelphia at FringeArts headquarters last Friday (free tickets were snapped up in two hours), had newly written scenes from Lembit Beecher's yet-untitled opera and Mazzoli's *Breaking the Waves*. Each was performed twice by separate teams, revealing hugely differing viewpoints. Beecher has an elderly man with dementia being installed at a senior community - director Daniel Fish showing how the scene might feel from the inside (reality felt dreamy, amid unfeeling callousness from those around the man) while director Stephanie Havey emphasized how it looked from the outside, showing the patient's cantankerous neediness (prompting defensive callousness).

In *Breaking the Waves*, based on the von Trier film, Mazzoli's voice is like a 21st-century refraction of the Smetana/Janacek nexus, conveying the under-the-surface repression in the small-town community. When a woman's oil-rigger husband is severely injured, she begins a bizarre sexual odyssey with other partners that ends with her murder. In Friday's first reading, high notes popped out of nowhere, suggesting the heroine's mostly-hidden obsessions; in the second, vocal lines clearly built up to the high notes - a more integrated characterization.

Why would a feminist-minded composer like Mazzoli take on a heroine who willingly submits to sexual brutality? The film was condemned by some as misogynist. Answer: "Endless complexity and psychological depth . . . Bess endures physical and emotional pain, but she also wields tremendous power," said Mazzoli in an e-mail.

Whatever one's viewpoint, Mazzoli is likely to be walking on hot coals in this work. But that's to be expected here in the new Brooklyn.

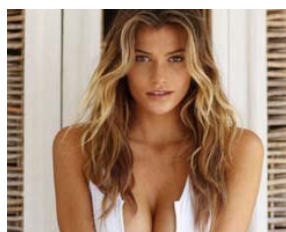
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