

## A 'Fire' of Operatic Proportions Ignites Geffen Hall

By [Clive Paget](#), *Musical America*

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Julia Wolfe is no stranger to the history of industrial relations and its tragedies. Her *Steel Hammer* (2009) for three sopranos and chamber orchestra examined the often fractious relationship between man and machine through the tale of African American folk hero John Henry. *Anthracite Fields*, her oratorio on the hard-scrabble lives of miners in the Pennsylvania coalfields carried off the Pulitzer Prize in 2015. Her latest work, however, is a little different.

For starters, the story of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, an industrial conflagration in which 146 people, mostly immigrant women, were killed as a result of safety breaches and executive negligence, feels personal. Wolfe walks past the building, which still stands on Washington Place in downtown New York, nearly every day on her way to teach at NYU. Secondly, she was offered the full resources of the New York Philharmonic in an hour-long co-commission—an opportunity she clearly seized with both hands. And finally, although previous pieces involve elements of scenography, *Fire in my Mouth* uses video, music, and directed movement that, at its January 24 premiere, utilized every nook and cranny of the David Geffen Hall stage (and aisles). The result is a powerful story of the fight for women's rights that at times verges on the full-blown operatic.

The fire was a national tragedy, but one that inspired women like Clara Lemlich and Rose Schneiderman to fight for improved working conditions and reformed industrial relations. Years later, when asked about her activism, it was Lemlich who replied “Ah, then I had fire in my mouth,” the phrase that gives the work its evocative title. The libretto, put together by Wolfe herself, is culled from contemporary accounts, first-person interviews, and songs of the period. The first movement, “Immigration,” is an account of an Irish immigrant's passage to the U.S. The second, “Factory,” juxtaposes a Yiddish folk song with one from Southern Italy, thus representing the two main groups of women working at the Triangle Shirtwaist facility. In the third movement, “Protest,” a wish list of American citizen privileges is integrated with text from one of Lemlich's speeches. And in the finale, “Fire,” eyewitness accounts of the disaster conclude with a valedictory rollcall of the dead.





pulling a rabbit out of the hat with a cheeky finesse of the final bars to earn a well-deserved standing ovation.

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