

David Lang

Opera and Theater Works

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Passionate, prolific, and complicated, composer David Lang embodies the restless spirit of invention. Lang is at the same time deeply versed in the classical tradition and committed to music that resists categorization, constantly creating new forms. In the words of *The New Yorker*, "With his winning of the Pulitzer Prize for *the little match girl passion* (one of the most original and moving scores of recent years), Lang, once a postminimalist enfant terrible, has solidified his standing as an American master." Many of Lang's pieces resemble each other only in the fierce intelligence and clarity of vision that inform their structures. His catalogue is extensive, and his opera, orchestra, chamber, and solo works are by turns ominous, ethereal, urgent, hypnotic, unsettling, and very emotionally direct. Much of his work seeks to expand the definition of virtuosity in music — even the deceptively simple pieces can be fiendishly difficult to play and require incredible concentration by musicians and audiences alike.

PHOTO CREDITS

Front cover and *Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, courtesy of The Ridge Theater; *Anatomy Theater*, MASS MoCA; *The Little Match Girl Passion*, Ga-Ken Wa, courtesy Cryptic Theatre; David Lang, Peter Serling.

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The Difficulty of Crossing a Field

Chamber Opera, 1999
Duration: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Libretto in English by Mac Wellman after a story
by Ambrose Bierce

WORLD PREMIERE
March 22, 2006
Theater Artaud, San Francisco, CA
American Conservatory Theater, Kronos Quartet



COMPOSER NOTE

A slave owner in the pre-civil war American South walks across his field and disappears, in plain view of his family, his neighbors and his slaves, forever altering the relationships among them. Everyone around him has his or her own sharp view of what that disappearance means, of why it had to happen, and of what will happen now that there is a "hole" where a man used to be. Based on a one page story by the writer Ambrose Bierce, *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* was commissioned by Carey Perloff and the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. It was intended to cross between opera and theater worlds, mixing arias with spoken text, emotional melodies with intense drama. It is written for 5 principals and a chorus of 6 or more slaves, and the accompaniment is for string quartet on stage, both as the "orchestra" and as part of the set.

PRESS

"*[Field]* weaves a bizarre tale of Mr. Williamson, an Alabama plantation owner, who walks across a field in 1854 only to vanish into thin air. Over the next 75 minutes or so, we hear from his family, neighbors and slaves, as they contemplate the strange disappearance — an "erasure" that is impossible to explain. Just as the story refuses to conform to any traditional structure, so does the music. *Field* is described as a contemporary opera/theater hybrid, incorporating compelling scenes of spoken drama within Lang's haunting score. Richly repetitive and often discordant, rhythms and melodies unfold slowly, only to circle back upon themselves in an almost hypnotic fashion."

—Amy Stumpf, *The Tennessean*

"*The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* is a major contribution to American Musical Theater.... This astonishing work must not be allowed to vanish into thin air. I know I can't get it out of my head."

—Mark Swed, *Los Angeles Times*

CAST AND INSTRUMENTATION

Mrs. Williamson: *Mezzo-soprano*
Mr. Williamson/Magistrate: *Spoken*
Williamson Girl: *Soprano*
Boy Sam: *Tenor*
Armour Wren/Andrew: *Mezzo-soprano*

Chorus of Slaves, from which are drawn:
Virginia Creeper: *Soprano*
Old Woman: *Contralto*

INSTRUMENTATION

2vn, va, vc

The Little Match Girl Passion

Winner of the 2008 Pulitzer Prize in Music
Duration: 35 minutes

Text in English by David Lang after
H. C. Andersen, H. P. Paulli, Picander,
and Saint Matthew

WORLD PREMIERE (staged version)
Theatre Cryptic, November 2011
Glasgow, Scotland

ADDITIONAL PERFORMANCES

Glimmerglass Opera, July 2013
Cooperstown, NY

COMPOSER NOTE

The story of *The Little Match Girl* by the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen has that shocking combination of danger and morality that many famous children's stories do. A poor young girl, whose father beats her, tries unsuccessfully to sell matches on the street, is ignored, and freezes to death. Through it all she somehow retains her Christian purity of spirit, but it is not a pretty story. *The Little Match Girl Passion* sets Andersen's story in the format of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*, interspersing Andersen's narrative with my versions of the crowd and character responses from Bach's *Passion*. The word "passion" comes from the Latin word for suffering. There is no Bach in my piece and there is no Jesus — rather the suffering of the Little Match Girl has been substituted for Jesus's, elevating (I hope) her sorrow to a higher plane.

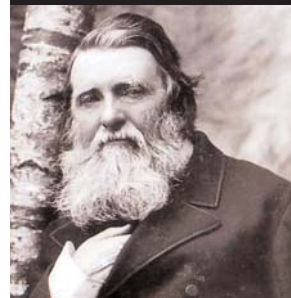


Modern Painters

Opera, 1994
Duration: 1 hour and 50 minutes

Libretto in English by Manuela Hoelterhoff

WORLD PREMIERE
July 29, 1995
Santa Fe Opera
Francesca Zambello, director
Alison Chitty, designer
George Manahan, conductor



CAST AND INSTRUMENTATION

3S, Mz, 6T, 3Bar, 2B, 2 silent roles; Chorus
2(pic)2(ca)2(bcl)2/4220/2perc/pf(syn).hp/str

SYNOPSIS

Victorian art critic John Ruskin believes there are seven attributes in a perfect work of art: sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, memory and obedience. These concepts are the background for seven scenes from the critic's life illuminating his relationships with art, his mother, his wife, a young girl and his love of Venice and disgust with the Industrial Age. *Modern Painters* is the title of Ruskin's most famous work, a five-volume study of painting — spanning much of his life — that attempts to describe nature, people, ideas and relationships with intricate formulas.

