Deemed “one of the more consistently inventive, surprising composers now working in New York” by *The New York Times*, and “Brooklyn’s post-millennial Mozart” by *Time Out New York*, Missy Mazzoli’s talent draws audiences equally into concert halls and rock clubs. Her unique music reflects a trend among composers of her generation who combine styles, writing music for the omnivorous audiences of the 21st century. She inhabits a gorgeous and mysterious sound-world that melds indie-rock sensibilities with formal training from Louis Andriessen, Martijn Padding, Richard Ayers, and others. Practically speaking, she amasses music in layers not normally found together but in ways that create matchless vertical harmonies.
Breaking the Waves

A new opera in three acts
Score by Missy Mazzoli
Libretto by Royce Vavrek
After the film by Lars von Trier

DURATION: 120 minutes
PREMIERE: September 2016, Opera Philadelphia

CAST LIST

BESS McNEILL: Lyric Soprano
JAN NYMAN: Baritone
DODO McNEILL: Mezzo-Soprano
TERRY: Bass-Baritone
DR. RICHARDSON: Tenor
MOTHER: Dramatic Soprano
SADISTIC SAILOR: Bass-Baritone
PIM/SECOND SAILOR: Tenor
PRIEST/MAN AT BUS STOP/CORONER: Baritone
Small Chorus

CAST STATEMENT
I have never had a story sing to me like Bess McNeill’s in Breaking the Waves. Immediately upon seeing this film I felt that Bess’s crushing vulnerability, steadfast faith and shocking bravery could manifest in a refreshing and provocative new character on the operatic stage. I imagine music that illuminates the complexity von Trier brings to his characters — a chorus of men sing a hymn that is beautiful but chilling in its austerity, Jan sings to Bess of his desires in a way that is at once tender and calculating, Bess sings a delicate melody with a turbulent and disturbed accompaniment that hints at her inner rages and longings. In creating music for Bess McNeill and her world I see an opportunity to create a new kind of heroine, and a new kind of opera that presents complex characters in an intricate and unblinking light.

— Missy Mazzoli

LIBRETTIST STATEMENT
I have been haunted by the story of Bess McNeill since first seeing Lars von Trier’s film in 1997. A boy of only 14, I first sat arrested by the plight of Bess, in many ways, feeling a kinship with her. I did not know then how informative the film would be, but it has sunk into my marrow, become part of my body’s chemistry, and I carry it with me as the foremost example of the power of storytelling. In Jan, Bess finds a man with whom she joins into an unbreakable covenant with God, a marriage that breaks open the floodgates of one of the most passionate romances I’ve encountered in the cinema (or any other medium, for that matter). Bess’ journey is operatic: from her unbridled commitment to Jan, to his absences that lead to her desperation, to her unquestioning willingness to put herself in harm’s way believing that her sexual sacrifices will save his life. Her story sings, and with Missy I believe that we can translate her singular narrative into an important, intoxicating work of contemporary opera.

— Royce Vavrek

SYNOPSIS

ACT I
Childlike Bess finds love with the off-shore oil rigger, Jan, and they are married in the strict Calvinist church. While they receive the church elders’ blessings, Jan, a Norwegian, is viewed as an outsider. Bess takes her marriage vows seriously, and undergoes a sexual enlightenment with her new husband. It is only a matter of time before Jan must return to the rigs to work, forcing Bess into a deep depression. In conversations with God, Bess seeks answers and solace, and hopes that spiritual intervention will bring Jan home. Shortly thereafter, a near-fatal accident on the rig forces Jan to be rushed to emergency medical attention.

ACT II
Bess learns that the accident has left Jan almost completely paralyzed. She believes it to be her fault, having asked God to bring him home. Jan knows that Bess would never step outside her matrimonial covenant, but feels that he needs to set her free so that she can live a full life. He encourages her to find men to sleep with and report back to him the events that transpire so that it will feel like they are making love. When Jan tries to kill himself by pill overdose, Bess becomes certain that she must obey her husband and find lovers. Failed attempts to woo a handsome doctor, and half-hearted sexual encounters with strangers coincide with a decline in Jan’s health. When Bess finds a man and has sex with him outside an old shed, Jan’s health stabilizes.

ACT III
Bess’s reputation catches up to her, and she is excommunicated from the Church. She fails to understand why, as she is simply following her husband’s will, and his recovery seems directly proportional to her extramarital activities. Bess finds herself aboard a large commercial ship where she is savagely raped and cut up by sadistic sailors with knives. A second trip leaves her near death’s door, and it is only due to the kindness of a stranger that her nearly lifeless body is delivered to the hospital. She dies as Jan wakes from his surgery, his health dramatically improved. The elders agree to provide Bess a Calvinist funeral, but insist she be buried a sinner and consign her soul to hell, Jan, who has fully recovered, steals the body before she is interred, committing her remains to the ocean. God’s bells ring out Bess’s melody.

ORCHESTRA

Flute
Oboe
Clarinet
Bassoon
Horn
Trombone
Percussion (1 player)
Harp
Piano/Synthesizer
Electric Guitar
2 Violins
Viola
Cello
Double Bass