

the composer

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 soundworld 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.



Photo by Marylene Mey

Learn more about *Breaking the Waves* at [www.musicsalesclassical.com](http://www.musicsalesclassical.com). Photos from *Breaking the Waves* by Dominic M. Mercier, courtesy of Opera Philadelphia.

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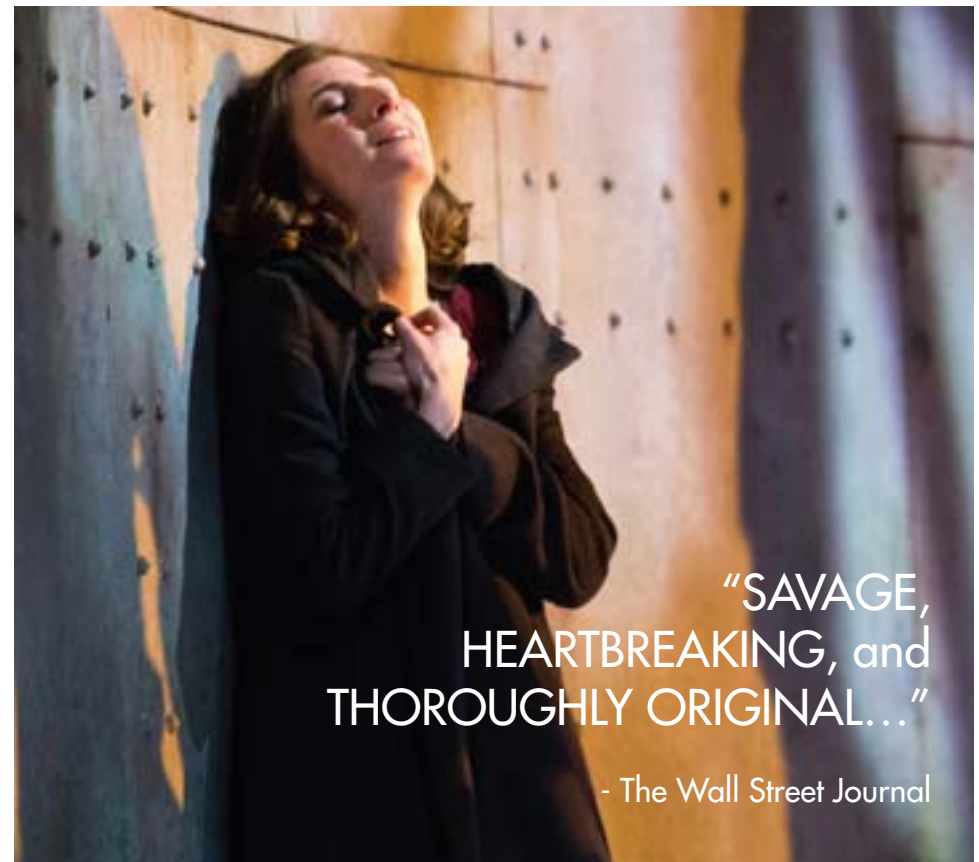
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# Missy Mazzoli

## Breaking the Waves

A new opera in three acts (2017)



“SAVAGE,  
HEARTBREAKING, and  
THOROUGHLY ORIGINAL...”

- The Wall Street Journal

# Breaking the Waves

An opera in three acts (2017)



Score by Missy Mazzoli

Libretto by Royce Vavrek

After the film by Lars von Trier

Duration: 2 hours

Premiere: September 2016, Opera Philadelphia

Orchestra: 1(pic).1.1.1(cbn)/1.0.1.0/perc/  
pf(syn).hp.egtr/str

## 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*

COUNCILMAN: *Bass-baritone*

YOUNG SAILOR: *Tenor*

SMALL CHORUS: *Tenor and Basses/*

*Baritones, 12-24 singers*

## synopsis

Set in the Scottish Highlands in the early 1970s, *Breaking the Waves* tells the story of Bess McNeill, a religious young woman with a deep love for her husband Jan, a handsome oil rig worker. When Jan becomes paralyzed in an off-shore accident, Bess's marital vows are put to the test as he encourages her to seek other lovers and return to his bedside to tell him of her sexual activities. He insists that the stories will feel like they are making love together and keep him alive. Bess's increasing selflessness leads to a finale of divine grace, but at great cost.

## 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

## composer 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 *del cate* melody with a turbulent and distorted 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

*"Breaking the Waves stands among the best 21st-century American operas yet produced."*

- Opera News

*"Mazzoli has produced an opera as potent as its model..."*

- Musical America