

# Review: An Oratorio Cautiously Looks Back on Women's Suffrage

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## Her Story

NYT Critic's Pick

NASHVILLE — It was here, a little more than a hundred years ago, that the 19th Amendment crossed the threshold into ratification and granted millions of women the right to vote.

That wasn't so assured. Ratification was needed from at least 36 states. By summer 1920, that number had reached 35, and Tennessee provided the decisive tipping point — but only narrowly, passing by a single vote in its House of Representatives.

Such fragility has been borne out in the decades that followed: The Equal Rights Amendment, which was introduced in 1923, has yet to be adopted. Some see women's rights as again coming under assault from restrictive abortion laws across the country, and hear casual misogyny continuing to course through politics, up to the level of presidential elections.

So you can understand the muted celebration in Julia Wolfe's "Her Story," an oratorio-like work that originated as a commemoration of the 19th Amendment yet sobers as much as it rouses. It has a ferocity that is literally written into the score, but also an absence of resolution as it looks back to suffrage with one wary eye toward the future steps this country still needs to take for something resembling true equality.

"Her Story" premiered here on Thursday — fittingly, given its subject, at the Nashville Symphony, alongside works by Joan Tower and Florence Price — with a notice that suggested it would be recorded for future release, as well as a list of heavyweight co-commissioners that promises coming performances in Chicago, Boston, San Francisco and Washington.

It joins Wolfe's body of large-scale, historically minded works that lean toward oratorios — what the National Public Radio journalist Tom Huizenga recently called, to Wolfe's delight, "docu-torios." First came "Steel Hammer," about the legend of John Henry, in 2009; then "Anthracite Fields," a 2015 meditation on Pennsylvania's coal mines that went on to win the Pulitzer Prize; and, most recently, "Fire in my mouth," which premiered at the New York Philharmonic in 2019 with a sweeping account of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.

Like those, "Her Story" resists a heavy hand but is smaller by comparison — in scale, with 10 members of the Lorelei Ensemble in lieu of, say, a 100-plus-person chorus, and in length, with a running time of about a half-hour. Its two movements, though, are just as concentrated, and if anything more poetic and thus haunting in their ambiguity.

It arrived on the second half of what the Nashville Symphony's music director, Giancarlo Guerrero, declared, with a bit of extravagance (if a whiff of paternalism), would be one of the most historic nights in classical music, featuring what had been billed as "trailblazing women." In the field's own progress toward gender equality — programming, while slowly evolving, still overwhelmingly favors white men, preferably dead — a better concert might one day present three female composers without so much fanfare.

But the Nashville Symphony, to its credit, played each work with absolute commitment and passion. The Tower — her "1920/2019," which premiered in New York as part of Project 19 at the Philharmonic — was lent a monumental grandeur; the Price, her Piano Concerto in One Movement, featuring a warmly expressive Karen Walwyn, an infectious pleasure. And "Her Story," with tension, crashing swells and dramatic momentum, was given more than the dutiful reading often heard in premiere performances.

The first movement, "Foment," is a drawn-out setting of a letter from Abigail Adams to her husband, John Adams, in 1776, that reads, in part: "I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and more favorable than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited

power into the hands of husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could.” Wolfe borrows isolated phrases for the final lines, “We will foment a rebellion” and “We have no voice.”



The oratorio included theatrical touches by a team including the director Anne Kauffman and the designers Jeff Sugg and Márion Talán de la Rosa. Credit...Kurt Heinecke

Wolfe’s other recent oratorios have been busy, multimedia presentations. On Thursday, “Her Story,” directed by Anne Kauffman, featured subtle lighting and scenic design by Jeff Sugg, and deceptively demure costumes by Márion Talán de la Rosa; but it was all analog, a modest complement to the music rather than a competitor as in “Anthracite Fields” and “Fire in my mouth.”

Here, then, Wolfe’s style of clear, direct vocal expression landed with unmissable impact. Her orchestral writing, meanwhile, pulsed with Minimalist gestures — phrases that repeatedly swirled upward, steady rhythmic support in the strings — while also nodding to grooving rock in drum kits and electric guitars.

And when the score swerves from its Minimalist influences, it’s to arresting, moving effect. Violins deliver harmonic glissandos that echo in the vocal treatment of the word “husband,” which warps, melting downward. Wolfe shatters the rhythmic unison of her singers with dense, overwhelming fogs of phrases that return to unity with new focus and force.

Motion is baked into the score; the Lorelei singers gasp and cover their mouths. In the second movement, “Raise” — a triptych of texts taken from antagonistic labels used against women agitating for the right to vote, a political cartoon and a speech by Sojourner Truth — orchestra members accusingly point at the vocalists at the mention of labels like “bolshevik,” “communist” or “anarchist.”

During the opening section of “Raise,” the labels are almost entirely accompanied with the prefix “un,” which is isolated in both the score — highlighting its “wrongness” relative to convention — and signs held up by the singers: “unstable,” “uncivil” and, ultimately “un-American.” Later mentions of “screaming” and “hysterical” aren’t too far from “nasty woman.” Like much of the staging, those signs don’t interfere but could just as easily be excluded. Then again, Handel’s oratorios are today presented both staged and not; and Thursday was hopefully far from the last dramatic interpretation of “Her Story.”

As the second movement continues, it becomes more stylistically volatile, and engrossing. An interlude plays off a cartoon, which in turn played off a pacifist song, that says “I didn’t raise my girl to be a voter,” in a gruff musical treatment that gives way to a galvanizing setting of Sojourner Truth’s words.

That final stretch has the makings of a triumphant finale. The orchestra crests and retreats under a unified front of female voices with a fortissimo, accented “I am strong.” And yet they are virtually alone in the closing measures, joined only by the lingering ring of percussion. Isolated, perhaps, but determined nevertheless.

## **Her Story**

Through Saturday at the Nashville Symphony Schermerhorn Symphony Center, Nashville; [nashvillesymphony.org](http://nashvillesymphony.org).