

Pulitzer Winner for Music Found Inspiration in Pennsylvania Coal Mines

By **Michael Cooper** April 20, 2015 6:59 pm

The composer Julia Wolfe’s oratorio “Anthracite Fields,” which won the Pulitzer Prize for music on Monday, had its origins in curiosity about the road not taken.

Ms. Wolfe, a co-founder of the music collective Bang on a Can, said that when she was commissioned to write a choral piece by the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, her thoughts turned to her childhood in a small town north of Philadelphia, when excursions almost always meant turning right onto the road that headed toward the city.

“I thought, why don’t I look in this other direction?” Ms. Wolfe said in an interview.

That was the way toward Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, and the anthracite coal mining regions of Pennsylvania — which became the inspiration for her work.

Her research led her to museums and mines and books, which helped her create a libretto from historical texts and first-person accounts. “I wanted to honor the people that worked in the mines,” Ms. Wolfe, 56, said. “To really get a sense of what the life was like: lots of integrity, lots being dependent on each other in this very dangerous work. And basically, the work fueled the nation.”

“Anthracite Fields” was given its premiere by the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, and was later included in the New York Philharmonic’s inaugural NY Phil Biennial festival. Reviewing the New York performance, Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim wrote in The New York Times that it “contains a raw indictment of the

exploitation of workers, particularly the children employed in the mines as breaker boys, sifting through coal and debris with bleeding fingers.”

She added that in “Ms. Wolfe’s polished and stylistically assured cantata, the overall coherence of the musical material helped her expressions of outrage to burn cleanly and brightly.”

Those who missed the performances will soon have a chance to hear the piece: a recording of it is expected to be released this fall on the Cantaloupe Music label, featuring the Bang on a Can All-Stars and the Choir of Trinity Wall Street with Julian Wachner conducting.

The label is on a roll: it also released a recording of last year’s Pulitzer Prize-winning piece, “Become Ocean” by John Luther Adams.