

Arming a Chorus of Women With Scissors

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By Michael Cooper

It wasn't where you would expect to find the composer Julia Wolfe shopping for musical instruments.

The store she walked into one morning this fall, Steinlauf & Stoller, is one of New York's garment district survivors. It's a family business that has supplied the sewing industry since 1947 with pins and needles, buttons and snaps, threads and ribbons, and tools of the trade.

Including Ms. Wolfe's object that day: scissors.

"The big thing is the sound," she explained to the store's manager, Sid Schwarzenberger. "I'm not really looking for how they cut."

Ms. Wolfe was in the market for scissors to be wielded by the women of the chorus in her new oratorio, "Fire in my mouth." The work, which will be given its premiere on Thursday by the New York Philharmonic, explores the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire of 1911, which killed 146

garment workers, mostly immigrant women, including many who were trapped by locked exit doors. Their deaths helped change the way New York and the nation thought about safety, the labor movement and the struggle for women's equality.



Credit...Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Ms. Wolfe's previous oratorio about labor in America, "Anthracite Fields," about the hardships faced by Pennsylvania coal miners, won a Pulitzer Prize in 2015. She is known for her evocative orchestrations and varied sound palettes, and in parts of "Fire in my mouth" she wanted to suggest factories.

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She wrote string parts that recall sewing machines, and at several points in the score she included the sound of scissors opening and closing. She imagined the effect as more of a slow, resonant "swoosh" than a staccato, castanet-like "snip." But she had to find the right ones for the job.

So she set out one morning in October on a scissor listening tour — starting out in the garment district, making a stop at a theatrical wardrobe supply store, and trying out the scissors at a West Village hair salon for good measure. She ended at a tailor's shop in SoHo, just a short walk from the site of the Triangle fire: a building that still stands a block east of Washington Square Park and is now, like so much of the Village, part of New York University.

Along the way, she got an education. At Steinlauf & Stoller, Mr. Schwarzenberger showed her pocket scissors, thread snips, embroidery scissors, bent trimmers, pattern notchers and pinking shears. At one point he handed her a small pair, which would be easy for the chorus to hold.

But they were nearly silent.

“I was going to make a bad joke,” Ms. Wolfe said, hesitating before deciding to go for it anyway: “This doesn’t cut it.”

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She soon fell in love with the sound of a heavy pair of 12-inch shears made by Wiss — a company, Mr. Schwarzenberger explained, that had once made its scissors in Newark but has since moved production overseas. “This is so big you could use two hands,” Ms. Wolfe said.

These days, Mr. Schwarzenberger said, many garment factories use machines or lasers to cut cloth. “Like John Henry and that steam engine,” Ms. Wolfe mused, invoking the subject of another of her labor-related pieces, “Steel Hammer,” a musical retelling of the legend of John Henry pitting his superhuman strength against a machine.



Credit...Karsten Moran for The New York Times



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Her next stop was Manhattan Wardrobe Supply, a large store on the eighth floor of a building on West 29th Street that caters to New York's theater and film industries. Ms. Wolfe tried out some Fiskars shears ("Eliminates Fabric Fray," the package promised) and some Gingher dressmaker shears (whose package touted "smooth, mistake-free cutting"). Neither was quite as resonant as the Wiss.

Then it was off to the hairdresser's: the chic Seagull salon on West Fourth Street. Jenna Huber, an assistant stylist, showed Ms. Wolfe a large assortment of barber scissors. But even after the dance music was turned down, they were hard to make out.

"You hear it when your hair's getting cut," Ms. Wolfe said, "but I guess it's close to your ears."

Her last stop was King Garment Care, on the Avenue of the Americas just below Houston Street, a family-owned shop with a dry cleaner and 16 full-time tailors who add elbow patches and working buttons to the sleeves of sport coats; give off-the-rack suits a fitted, bespoke feel; hem and distress jeans; and make wedding dresses ready for the big day.



Credit...U.S. National Archives, via Associated Press



Above, labor union members gather to protest and mourn the loss of life in the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire in 1911; below, plaques at the building near Washington Square Park where the fire took place. Credit...Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Hearing that Ms. Wolfe was interested in sound, Victoria Aviles, the owner, ran some of her sewing machines: one that does the purl stitch, and another that she had just bought because its chain stitch is needed for work on jeans.

Like many generations of New Yorkers in the garment industry, Ms. Aviles came to the United States as an immigrant — in her case, from Colombia. She said that the idea of using scissors as an instrument made her think of “The Typewriter,” a lighthearted Leroy Anderson orchestral piece that uses the clicks, clacks and bells of a typewriter as percussion. Ms. Wolfe said she didn’t know it.

“You never heard it?” Ms. Aviles said. “Oh my god, we have to educate this woman!”

As Ms. Wolfe watched the shop’s tailors work, she finally heard another pair of scissors she liked. She checked the manufacturer. “These are Wiss!” she exclaimed.

So last week, when three dozen singers from the Crossing, a Grammy-winning chamber choir dedicated to new music, gathered in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill in Philadelphia to rehearse the piece, it was heavy Wiss scissors that were placed on their music stands. (“Sid

gave me a deal,” Ms. Wolfe said.)

The conductor, Donald Nally, urged the singers to handle the scissors with care as they took them out of their sheaths and held them aloft, observing that the spectacle looked like “Sweeney Todd.” The group tested the sound the scissors made when they were opened with one hand, then two hands. Finally, everyone was satisfied.

“The swoosh is good,” Ms. Wolfe said.

The scissor-wielding women of the Crossing will be joined in performance by a large chorus of girls from the Young People’s Chorus of New York City, who will begin with excerpts from a 1909 speech the garment worker and activist Clara Lemlich delivered urging exploited garment workers to strike and from an oral history:

I want to say a few words. I am a working girl. One who is striking against intolerable conditions.

We laid down our scissors

shook the threads off our clothes

and calmly left the place that stood between us and starvation.

“Fire in my mouth” will be sung by 146 women and girls — the same number of people who died in the fire. And the girls will serve as a reminder that the disaster’s victims were as young as 14.