

Michael Hersch**On Composing *Poppaea***

... the antique mass graves were no prettier.

—CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON

It is difficult to ask another person to step into a world of violence and brutality, a copse of moral and ethical disorder, a place where transgression, tragedy, and vicious indifference are common currency. Even if all the aforementioned occur within the confines of the theater, a world ultimately of the make-believe, victims of prior trauma can have experiences torn asunder anew, and for the individual spared these things in their private lives, confrontation with these environments, even in this context, can be deeply distressing. These are territories where no matter one ventures, upheaval splashes against and upon all involved, mediated only by momentary flashes of one's own humanity and, occasionally, that of others. While the theater does ultimately decouple from real life, on these stages the best performers blur the lines of reality for the audience and, above all, for themselves. For the past decade and a half, I have asked musicians to travel to these places, and they have done so, often bravely and remarkably. One of these works, the opera *Poppaea*, completed in 2019, premiered during the late summer of 2021 in Basel, Switzerland. In our many conversations, librettist Stephanie Fleischmann often noted that violence and threat in *Poppaea*'s world constituted a "room tone," a particular and ubiquitous menace that hummed throughout. While anyone could argue that danger and intrigue shaped almost every action and consequence in the courts of imperial Rome, in the Neronian age, love, family, friendship, hope, and the pursuit of justice and meaning could come at a particularly high cost. Violence was the primary vehicle for change. And so its presence was a major character in *Poppaea*'s story; violence and cruelty becoming characters and characteristics that bound the destinies of all involved. Fleischmann and I wanted to engage with the realities faced and inflicted by these figures of our collective past, and to examine the terrifying consistencies with so much of the human landscape since. In this framework, *Poppaea* and those within her world struggled to navigate often quick-shifting power centers, nuances between agency and ambition, expectations, loyalty, and a murky, blurred descent into depravity and criminality where a sense of the just and unjust seemed to lose all identifying features.

Fleischmann writes:

I was, initially, terrified of plunging into a performative/narrative space so trammelled with violence, of living with Poppaea's story for the years it would take to create the opera . . . I began to understand that here was the medium with which to mine the darkness Poppaea carries within her. The darkness of not just her world, but of ours, now. And with that, my search for Poppaea began. I looked for her in the histories written close to two thousand years ago and in the writings of contemporary classicists . . . I grappled with the violence in the broad-strokes story the histories told, as well as in the classicists' exegesis of a civilization rife with tyrannical cruelty . . . And as I immersed myself in the entwined fates of Poppaea and Nero's first wife Octavia, my world kept turning . . . A world which, it was becoming painfully clear as I sifted through the source materials, was not so very far from Poppaea's.

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Themes relating to external violences—those violences that people inflict on each other—and internal violences in the form of physical or mental illness are never far from my own work even if momentarily quieted, especially in those pieces written over the recent and relatively recent past. They shift from an atmospheric to, increasingly, a structural presence in the music: a grappling with varied brutalities and their respective parallels and divergences. For most of the past eighteen years, physical illness and its consequences have been a focus for me—again, violence from within—but there has been a shift back again to the consideration of issues of violence that leave behind the particular intimacies of illness within oneself and those one holds closest, a shift again to wider intrusions of savagery in the human story and broader societal sicknesses that either actively assert themselves or never seem far away.

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. . . brought me lived again into the sun warm into its own darkness
 . . .
 you have brought me reeling into god . . .
 —Amelia Rosselli

The greatest performers have the power to convince to an almost supernatural degree. I have found that those moments of lasting power are often and as

much in the context of restraint—of an inner connectivity to the characters that outwardly yields no more motion than a flash of the eyes, the pursing of the lips, fingers ever so slightly curled, the faint rise of an artery against the skin; minute physical presentations that can leave a viewer fully frozen—as they are in an actively and outwardly aggressive state. In the right hands, any action has the power to still an audience. Over the past decade, I have watched and listened in awe as the soprano Ah Young Hong has inhabited characters from the imaginations and experiences of composers ranging across some eight centuries—figures defined and elusive, compassionate and cold, mournful, stoic, euphoric, generous, terrifying. Yet no matter what separates these characters in and of their experiences, she populates them, or perhaps they her, to an uncanny degree, seeming to connect above all with that often elusively defined characterization of one’s humanity, or lack thereof, but always variations upon the, or a, human essence, the core connections arguably superseding even complex environmental elements. She animates these characters with levels of mastery, both actorly and musical, that I have found in few other performers; she truly *becomes*.

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The art to which I respond best reflects human experience where all is on the table. That composite is what makes life what it is. It is important to examine all of it.
—Ah Young Hong

In 2012, I listened as Hong sang excerpts from my monodrama, *On the Threshold of Winter*, a two-hour work for soprano and ensemble. She was auditioning for the world premiere, which was to take place in 2014. It was a work I wrote for an idealized voice within the framing of what my inner ear dictated, not a particular voice, a specific vocalist, outside the din of my own head. It was unclear to me whether I would ever find that voice in the physical world. What was clear was the very real possibility that the piece would never be performed as the result of this kind of approach to the work.

The monodrama follows the trajectory of an individual’s final weeks with cancer. The libretto is adapted from Romanian poet Marin Sorescu’s (1936–96) *The Bridge* in an English translation by Adam J. Sorkin and Lidia Vianu. Beyond Hong’s mastery of the herculean musical challenges regarding pitch,

vocal range, rhythm, memory, and stamina, there was immediately a sense that this vocalist, like the greatest actors, was able to transform herself into the body of someone she did not know, and into a set of circumstances she had neither experienced firsthand nor witnessed, with a degree of intuitiveness and involuntary rightness that left me stunned. It was the first of our many collaborations, and the sense of wonder I had at her abilities then remains as fresh today, over a decade on. Hong has noted, “What I expose onstage certainly may at times cause discomfort, but discomfort in art certainly is not incompatible, strange as it seems to say, with the ability to be entertained Discomfort, even the need to turn away, can be an acknowledgement of a wrongness that is happening, what has happened. At its best, discomfort of the bystander, the audience in this case, can lead to empathy. And for me this is one of art’s greatest strengths . . . the potential to break through the disconnections between people endemic in this world.”

A few years after she premiered the monodrama, Hong mentioned to me that she had undertaken the role of Poppaea in Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, an opera that had premiered almost four hundred years earlier. I was fascinated that this artist, whom I had known at that point only primarily a performer of challenging contemporary music, had inhabited Monteverdi’s Poppaea. I learned of her complex feelings about this character and that there was much more to Poppaea’s story beyond that of Monteverdi’s telling, the triumphs of Poppaea within Monteverdi’s frame mostly outweighed by what seemed to have been, at least in what exists in the historical record, something more akin to the earlier described collages of misdeed and violence, which befell not only those around her but also Poppaea herself. I went home and read as much of the history that I could find. I was stunned by the comprehensive devastation that did ultimately fell Poppaea and her world, spaces far removed from the images of grandeur and pageantry of her in triumph—a picture many still currently have due to recurring portrayals of the empress in popular culture over time. The juxtaposition of what was the more likely reality for Poppaea and even Hong’s own painful history made a deep and lasting impression. Hong notes:

As difficult as it is to reveal, I, personally, know all too well the consequences of physical and psychological abuse. I am surprised I find myself at this relatively late date in my life publicly acknowledging this. But if there is an opportunity to

share certain sufferings which I can relate to an audience through my work as an artist, elements of which are familiar to me, to say to an audience “Please consider these things that happen. Let me try and show you through this work,” I welcome it. This is not ordinarily the case in my performing. Usually, I am inhabiting worlds I have no firsthand knowledge of. This opera allows me to communicate something that I wouldn’t feel comfortable sharing outside, off the stage, but the stage and this opera in particular afford me an opportunity. Unlike other roles, I don’t have to fully become someone else. There are elements I recognize in what happens to these women. It is frighteningly real to me. Above all, I want to tell this story.

She continues:

I can relate to those moments when Poppaea’s power is diminishing . . . where she suddenly is very much not in control. Of course, she also becomes oppressor and that feels unfamiliar territory to me. Terrifying, actually. The way I handled my own diminishing power, victimization in my past, was to ask what it was that I had done to find myself in those situations. This misplaced blame on the victim and not the aggressor is tragically not so uncommon.”

I found myself increasingly hearing a new work built around these particular narratives and, by extension, Hong’s voice and presence, her being in all its comprehensiveness. Each strain dealt with issues that had long occupied me in hopes of finding answers in sound. The possibilities for sonic and dramatic exploration were both vast and intimidating. Upon completion of the score, I sent it to Hong, not knowing how she would initially react to what she was being asked to take on. Her response:

The work shines a light into the dark corners . . . I felt, oddly, a huge sense of relief in surveying these utterly destroyed worlds. It felt right to me, especially now. We should share this portion of the story, her story; how these doomed lives came to a close. I felt a responsibility to read, to learn, to participate in sharing this history; not to romanticize or to oversell it, but to simply go squarely into that darkness.

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As Fleischmann continued her own research into the characters, she noted that “the extent of Poppaea’s erasure from the histories allowed us to dream into her, to conjure a many-shaded character on our own terms, to confront



her manifold impulses toward violence . . . Choosing to tell Poppaea's story roughly where Monteverdi's opera left off, we set about crafting a structure from the events known to us, contending with questions of power and love; ambition and desire; hope and longing; a penchant for mythmaking and the human frailties reflected within those myths; and mortality and survival, which, in ancient Rome, was one means towards immortality."

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Poppaea's story encapsulated something that my friend and colleague, sculptor Christopher Cairns, said interested him and fueled much of his art: "the love of humankind, even in its catastrophic relationship to where it is going." This rang true for me. And Poppaea's experiences—as well as the experiences of those directly in her orbit—seemed to allow for a full examination of this sentiment. Even after the completion of *Poppaea*, I continued to ruminate on this statement, this intersection of love and catastrophe, in what I saw generally around me in the present, noted in the past, and increasingly began to recognize across landscapes closer to home.

My friendship with the poet and painter Fawzi Karim (1945–2019) had a profound impact on my thinking about many things, *Poppaea* in particular. I had completed a song cycle for soprano and orchestra entitled *the script of storms* in 2018, setting texts of Karim's to be sung by Hong. His poetry and his painting often dealt with his experiences in Iraq as a young man. His art, both in word and image, and our discussions more broadly touched upon elements that didn't seem far from Poppaea's Rome. Of the 1958 Iraqi coup, which he witnessed as a boy, Karim wrote:

It is very hard to speak of this because I did not fully understand what was going on. I was very young. They took Nuri's (the then Prime Minister) corpse, burnt it, dismembered it, dragged the pieces all over the streets of Baghdad for three days, and after that they hung them from the bridge. The burning thigh I saw with my own eyes, close to my house. All of us ran after it and started shouting revolutionary slogans but I returned home quickly because of the smell of the burning flesh. You can't imagine from where such hatred comes.

In Karim's later poetry, he would invoke these events:

The eye turns black . . .
I was born in a mellower year;
A year when people still paused at the smell of corpses.
Now I smell the roasting of a thigh . . .

He pours on more kerosene

And the fire glows and the smell of flesh gets stronger.
. . . my father said, "Whoever goes sniffing out corpses
would want to be rid of their stench." . . .

But it was a mellower year
 A year when people still paused. A year
 that saw the barrier go down between me and that smell,

The poet's death in 2019 was a shock. It was only months before the premiere of *the script of storms*, which took place in February 2020 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and in turn only weeks before the global Covid shutdowns commenced. Karim's family was in attendance. The loss was devastating for Hong. There was a real and remarkable connection between poet and vocalist—a shared expressive sensibility, a way of looking at the world born out of an inherent, at times disabling, observational precision, historical family trauma, and the knowledge that annihilation was always a possibility, though neither ever suffered from nihilism. In turn, Hong was an artist for whom Karim had an almost fanatical reverence. He, too, seemed to see in her the ability to become, to be anything or anyone she brought to the stage. He saw himself in her.

In the period since his death, I have continued to return to his poetry. I've written before about Karim, that his work often included particular and unexpected juxtapositions of quiet introspection and graphic brutality, something that Poppaea's story shared, and that I wanted to explore further in this opera.

In many respects the ebb and flow of the lives of the opera's major characters—Poppaea, Nero, and Octavia—surfaced ideas I had about certain sculpture, poetry, and other writing that had drawn me in for years. The work of Cairns and Karim always grappled with particular darkneses, darkneses among us, in a manner direct and unflinching; the ideas are conveyed without excess, sentimentality, or sensationalism.

Christopher Middleton (1926–2015) was another poet whose words I had set often in the past, and whose engagement with violence laid a groundwork for some of my own thinking about Poppaea as well. I remember a conversation Middleton and I had some twenty years ago in which he considered the brutalities that human beings inflict on each other as a matter of course, the connection and insidiousness of these brutalities; the devastating actions wielded by and against the individual, society, and everything in between; the origins and maturation of violences that are nurtured over time; and the sometime eruptions of violence unleashed by

those without power finding themselves with it suddenly in their possession. Again, Poppaea was not far away. Middleton wrote:

Now it is difficult. The graves go down
Deeper. The dead are tangled in a heap,
Scooped up and in and left to rot.
Waves of them come up with a stink,
Agony in the gaping rhomboid mouths,

Some with bedroom slippers on their feet.
So many, how to identify them? How
Insert into such a moist dissolution
The fizz of feeling what they felt?
How hard the spade treats their pit,

For the antique mass graves were no prettier;
Below bright multitudes there was only earth.
Herded by radio signals, decrepit codes,
And closing now the hoop, above the business,
Killers converge, dull as the dirt itself. . . .

Difficult conversations directors and composers have with those tasked with bringing their creations to life are nothing new. *Poppaea* is certainly not the first work to ask someone to step into situations in which few would willingly place themselves. Productions abound of operas that ask much of their casts. After Hong had lived with the score for some time, we had the first of many discussions of how she would feel specifically placing herself in the kinds of circumstances housed within the piece, how she would navigate the demands of Poppaea's ferocious world, its tornadic cruelties, and the interactions that those circumstances might have with her own history, her own cyclonic involution. Hong has said:

When one is experiencing a trauma, the mind and body go in many different directions. When one is enduring violence where escape is not possible, you must psychologically put distance between yourself and your attacker . . . Ultimately, I believe Poppaea was a victim. A monster, too. But, a victim nevertheless. She was so blinded by what she wanted in life. I believe she just wanted to be loved. Loved by her mother, her husband, the people under her rule . . . Her desire for love blew up into something unfathomably destructive . . . to herself, her loved ones, the society around her. At the very end of the opera, when Poppaea seems at her most clear-eyed, it's too late. But that final confrontation with love reaches

something approaching a healthy clarity. For me, a feeling of repentance washes over that final scene . . . How, in hindsight, could it have turned out differently for her? It seems a strange thing to say that love and justice triumphs in the wreckage of Poppaea's and Nero's world, but somehow, some way, it is there amongst the ruins.

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The final chapters of Poppaea's life were ones that struck me as important to relay. What history provides us allows for a deep exploration of these kinds of aforementioned scenes and spaces. The limited historical record additionally affords an opportunity to read into the kinds of thinking that may have led to them while also providing an allowance for meaning on a more personalized level. The witting and unwitting interdependence of the opera's major players and the dynamics of power from their respective vantage points furnished a unique opportunity to at least make an attempt at the telling of their story.

It is reasonable to ask why an artist, or in this case a constellation of artists, would make the choice to engage with such frightening, heartrending, and at times grotesque conditions with such willfulness, deliberateness, and purpose over a considerably long period of time, however conscientiously, the latter state (that of conscientiousness) providing no balm to the proceedings as much as the term might imply. There have been many conversations over time, of course, about the role of art, the role of redemption, the role of an energizing hopefulness, a place reached that shows a path forward. In my own experience, it is often the darkest chapters—if one survives them directly or has the benefit of observing them from something of a safe distance, whether temporal or spatial—that can often, perhaps counterintuitively, activate a desire, even need, to engage: to engage in some form as a matter of understanding our own sensibilities of and toward what are very real elements of our world. For some, that curiosity coalesces into a fundamental optimism, an optimism that often, even inevitably, leads to a peering into the abyss and the beholding therein of its surprising, terrifying, even exhilarating complexities.