


OPERA

A close-up portrait of Thea Musgrave, an elderly woman with short, wavy, light-colored hair. She is wearing a dark blue velvet jacket over a purple top. She has a slight smile and is looking slightly to her left. The background is dark and out of focus.


THEA
MUSGRAVE

A Catalogue of Operas

NOVELLO



The music of Thea Musgrave is of unique beauty and dramatic energy. It is a great honour and pleasure to publish the oeuvre of one of the most original and independently minded composers.


Wiebke Busch
Managing Director, Novello & Co Ltd

THEA MUSGRAVE

at Ninety Five

On May 27, 2023 one of Britain's most distinguished composers, Thea Musgrave, celebrated her ninety-fifth birthday. In this booklet we have brought together tributes, programme notes and previously unseen photos highlighting a truly wonderful career spanning almost seventy-five years.

Today, Musgrave maintains a very active composing schedule, writing with amazing energy and passion, each work informed by a lifetime of intellect, craftsmanship and experience.

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Thea's signature flourish, present on the title page of all her manuscripts.

AN APPRECIATION

————— by *Nick Daniel*

It is a great honour and a privilege that my warm and much treasured friendship with Thea has resulted in a brilliant series of pieces written for me, showing her absolute mastery and total professionalism in writing for the oboe, which flows from her deep understanding of my playing and what I want to say with the instrument.

Thea was first suggested to me by Peter Maxwell Davies as an ideal composer to write a concerto for his 1994 St Magnus Festival. He wanted specifically a woman and a Scot. Thea produced *Helios*, one of the most original oboe concertos ever written, which requires a mixture of virtuosity, sound painting, movement, theatre and dramatic presentation. It also contains a spine tingling musical sunrise, a summer storm and a moonrise. The oboe plays the Sun-God, and I delighted Thea by wearing a bright red Nehru collar jacket at the premiere, which happened with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra in the cinema in Kirkwall with a force 10 gale regularly intruding into the performance! I remember meeting Thea for the first time at Heathrow Airport and discussing *Helios*. She had drawn a 'map' of the piece, showing dramatic intention, key relationships and structure, and already, without seeing a note of written music, her highly creative and fertile imagination got me very excited. Seeing these maps of hers is always a thrill as they give me an early view into what's going to be involved. Very generously she has given me some of them. *Helios* was the first in a series of pieces for different settings of the instrument. This forms an important body of work for the oboe and the cor anglais, and I was delighted when the recording company Harmonia Mundi agreed to release almost

all of Thea's chamber music for oboe on my first album with them. When you play a piece of Thea's it's almost impossible to believe she doesn't play the instrument herself, so fluid and natural is her instrumental and vocal understanding and her complete professionalism. I've heard many people say this about her writing, but at the same time, this fluidity of technique is used at the service of great inspiration and ideas. Discipline and inspiration in perfect balance.



Left: Thea Musgrave and Nick Daniel following the world premiere of *Helios* in Orkney, 1995.

Right: Thea and Nick, 2016.

Like many great opera composers Musgrave has brought dramatic elements from the stage to her concerto forms and chamber music. These elements may be visual, involving the artists to move or communicate visually in some way, or they may be purely musical. Being coached by her in how to present these aspects is a wonderful lesson in stagecraft. In her masterpiece for oboe and piano, *Night Windows*, inspired by Edward Hopper paintings, the drama is distilled into pure music with no diminishing of the dramatic effect of the music on the listener, and yet her oboe quartet, *Cantilena*, placed the oboe as an outsider and the string trio gradually, although at first suspiciously, welcome him into the group on stage. Thea asked for me to enter the hall some minutes after the piece had begun playing a top A!

Similarly in *Two's Company* for Dame Evelyn Glennie and me, she asked me to bow normally with Evelyn on entering, then immediately leave the stage, only to re-enter playing from memory on the opposite side of the Albert Hall. Quite a trot round I discovered! These motion and gestural aspects of the pieces bring the music to life in 3D for the audience and it's why, when Thea ascends the stage to bow and opens her arms in that warm way of hers, the same way she greets those of us lucky enough to be her friends, the audience's warmth is both audible and palpable. Yet Thea is as likely to drop an unexpected F Bomb as any composer I know, and in the next breath she will be telling us how she turned down a request from Tolkien to write a Lord of the Rings opera because there were just too many overtones of Wagner!

I send her very much love, wish her many more years of creativity, happy healthy life and a wonderful 90th year.

THEA MUSGRAVE

Biography

Rich and powerful musical language and a strong sense of drama have made Scottish-American composer Thea Musgrave one of the most respected and exciting contemporary composers in the Western world. Her works were first performed under the auspices of the BBC and at the Edinburgh International Festival. As a result, they have been widely performed in Britain, Europe and the USA, at major music festivals; such as Edinburgh, Warsaw Autumn, Florence Maggio Musicale, Venice Biennale, Aldeburgh, Cheltenham and Zagreb; on most of the European and American broadcasting stations and as part of many regular symphony concert series.

From time to time she has conducted her own works: the premiere of *Mary, Queen of Scots* at the 1977 Edinburgh International Festival and later with the San Francisco Spring Opera; the premiere performances of *The Voice of Ariadne* in Britain and again in New York and Los Angeles for the New York City Opera; and many orchestral concerts (Philadelphia, San Francisco, St Paul Chamber, Los Angeles Chamber, BBC Symphony, BBC Scottish Symphony, Royal Scottish National, Hong Kong Philharmonic, Jerusalem Philharmonic, etc.). It is a measure of her talent and determination that Musgrave has earned great respect for her work both as a composer and conductor at a time when these were still uncommon professions for a woman.



Photo: Kate Mount

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland on 27 May 1928, she studied first at the University of Edinburgh and later at the Conservatoire in Paris, where she spent four years as a pupil of Nadia Boulanger, before establishing herself back in London as a prominent personality of British musical life. In 1970 she became Guest Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which anchored her increasing involvement with the musical life of the United States. In 1971 she married the opera conductor Peter Mark, and has lived in America since 1972. In 1974 she received the Koussevitzky Award, resulting in the composition of *Space Play*, which, after its London premiere was performed in New York by the Lincoln Center Chamber Players. She has also been awarded two Guggenheim Fellowships, in 1974-75 and again in 1982-83, and was recognised with honorary degrees by Old Dominion University (Virginia), Smith College, Glasgow University and in May 2004, the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. She was awarded a CBE in The Queen's New Year's Honours List in January 2002. As Distinguished Professor at Queens College, City University of New York from September 1987-2002, she has guided and interacted with many new and gifted young student composers.

Musgrave has consistently explored new means of projecting essentially dramatic situations in her music, frequently altering and extending the conventional boundaries of instrumental performance by incorporating physical movement to enhance the musical and dramatic impact of her works. As she once put it, she wanted to explore dramatic musical forms: some works are 'dramatic-abstract', that is without programmatic content (such as the Concerto for Clarinet, the Horn Concerto, the Viola Concerto, and *Space Play*), and others project specific programmatic ideas (such as the paintings in *The Seasons* and *Turbulent Landscapes*, the poems in *Ring Out Wild Bells*, *Journey through a Japanese Landscape*, and *Autumn Sonata*, and the famous Greek legends in *Orfeo*, *Narcissus*, *Helios* and *Voices from the Ancient World*), all extensions of concerto principles. In some of these, to enhance the dramatic effect, the sonic possibilities of spatial acoustics have been incorporated: in the Clarinet Concerto the soloist moves around the different sections of the orchestra, and in the Horn Concerto the orchestral horns are stationed around the concert hall. Thus the players are not only the conversants in an abstract musical dialogue but also very much the living (and frequently peripatetic) embodiment of its *dramatis personae*.

It was therefore not surprising that her focus on the lyric and dramatic potential of music should have led to Musgrave's fluency in the field of opera, and it is interesting to see that her large-scale operas of the past thirty years, beginning with *The Voice of Ariadne* (1974) and followed by *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1977), *A Christmas Carol* (1979), *Harriet, the Woman Called Moses* (1984), and *Simón Bolívar* (1992), are in every sense the true successors to the instrumental concertos.

AN INTERVIEW

————— with Thomas Le Brocq

What was studying music like in Paris like right after the war?

There was such a positive feeling of hope and freedom in Paris right after the war that I have always considered myself to be lucky to be there at that specific moment. Coming after the horrors of the war and the occupation, it was easier to speak about important things and form lifelong friends.

What are your memories of Nadia Boulanger?

I have so many that it is hard to single them out. Her amazing focus on detail proved the importance of music on a daily basis to me, and her personal warmth and encouragement of me gave me the courage to pursue my own individual musical ideas.

It seems, looking back, that composing music in the twentieth century was a battleground for ideas, each artist looking to plant their flag as prominently as possible; was that important to you?

What was important to me at the time was hearing other people's music and understanding the ideas that were behind the music. I was never part of an ideological group of composers, but was close to a few composers who are very important to me personally. Richard Rodney Bennett and Iain Hamilton were lifelong friends from the early years.

What inspires you to write? Art, poetry, everyday life?

I need to focus on an idea to write music. That idea can come from poetry such as Songs for a Winter's Evening to poems of Robert Burns, or The Voices of our Ancestors to poems from the ancient world: or paintings such as the Turners in Turbulent Landscapes: the inherent variety of percussion instruments in my Journey through a Japanese Landscape for Evelyn Glennie: or simply a dramatic idea for programme music – such as Orfeo, Pierrot, Narcissus: or even an abstract idea which then works itself into a 'dramatic-abstract' colloquy such as my Concerto for Orchestra, as well the concertos for clarinet, horn, viola, and oboe.

To what extent does the work of other composers influence your writing?

I am drawn to composers who really have their own voice and something to say. I feel I can learn from the way they say it, but I feel I am always true to my own voice.

Has there been a performance of your work which has particularly struck you or taken on a new life that you didn't expect?

Well, there hasn't been a performance yet... but the piece I am writing on commission just now – a song for solo baritone and piano based on the famous soliloquy of Calderón, has literally transformed itself into a dramatic monologue similar to a full opera scene. It has gripped me increasingly, revealing more of its breadth and its depth and significance as I daily try to live up to its challenges and do it justice musically.

You have ten operas to your name, would you say that's the form of music you are most comfortable writing? How important is 'theatre' in your concert works?

I tend to think of music as drama - moving from one place to another and usually through some kind of conflict. That is why I feel opera is so natural for me. But I also have always seen and felt the inherent drama of instrumental music which, as you know, has created in my catalogue a whole genre of 'dramatic-abstract' works without singers.

You have written such a large body of works but as yet no symphony, is there something about that form which does not appeal to you?

Although never a symphony and that kind of formal structure, I have written many orchestral works, though usually with a dramatic element.

You've recently made a new reduction of your opera Mary, Queen of Scots. What was it like returning to your score, your first grand opera, now?

I loved reliving my acquaintance with this watershed opera of mine. Of course it is an entirely different process to reconceive a work you've already written to composing it in the first place. But I admit to loving every minute of it and finding new solutions for the new version with reduced forces – which means reconsidering the proportions of scenes as well as the continuity of the story.

Over a long career, unsurprisingly, your compositional style has evolved. But do you see elements of your early work in what you are creating now, or was it different work for a different era?

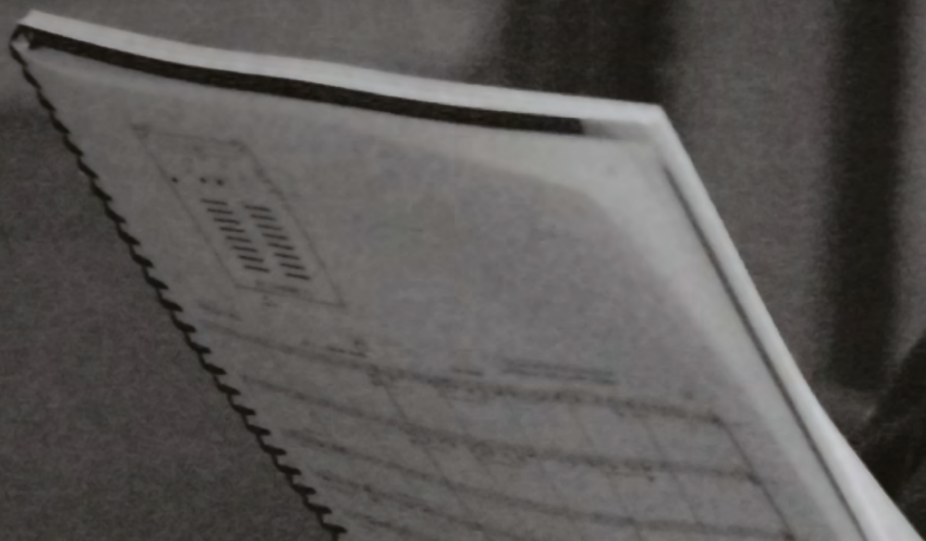
If I look carefully from one early work to another I can see how I got to where I am now. However, I would never have seen this from where I stood looking forward from my early works. And yet the progression matches that of my own growth and development in life, where there are always new influences and the one constant is change. Whereas the form and notes my works take might have changed over the years, I feel that what I have to say has only become clearer and truer.

Where do you compose?

In a room of one's own – as Virginia Woolf said!

You've written so much for all types of ensembles, is there anything left to write? Is there a piece of music you are burning to compose?

I truly have not really contemplated this issue – being involved even these days in three commissions that loom in front of me. I always take my deadlines seriously, and know myself well enough to know that I must stretch my commitments out even more now to avoid pressure.







Top: (left to right) Peter Mark, Thea Musgrave, David Farrar, Fred Burchinal (*Scrooge* in the world premiere of Musgrave's *A Christmas Carol*) in Central Park, New York, 1981. Bottom: Paris, 1953: The class of Nadia Boulanger (centre) at the Conservatoire with Musgrave standing in the back row.



Top left: (left to right) Elizabeth Maconchy, Aaron Copland and Thea Musgrave on Aldeburgh beach, 1960.
Top right: HRH Prince Charles presenting Thea with her Honorary Doctorate of Music. Bottom Right: Conductor Paul Goodwin, Thea Musgrave and soprano Carolyn Sampson at a rehearsal for the premiere of *Journey into Light*, 2005.



Top: Thea conducts violinist and husband Peter Mark in a rehearsal of her Viola Concerto in the Royal Albert Hall for the BBC Proms, 1973. Bottom: Thea Musgrave with Finnish Composer Kaija Saariaho following a performance by The Juilliard School's Axiom Ensemble in New York, December 2016.

The

OPERAS

Thea Musgrave has that rare gift of being able to create characters who are musically as well as dramatically viable; to create and maintain dramatic tension; and to write music that is at once original and at the same time easily accessible.

Harold Rosenthal, *Opera Magazine*

With her predilection for dramatic engagement and story-telling in her orchestral, choral, and chamber music, it is no wonder Thea Musgrave is a natural and prolific opera composer: eleven distinctive theatre pieces of all sizes blend the very best of her highly developed orchestral skills together with decades of experience writing for voice. Her stage works are notable for their powerful pacing, gripping instrumental sonorities, and soaring vocal trajectories.

The subjects of her operas are as potent and important today as when the characters lived: from the political power struggles and sexual politics of Mary, Queen of Scots and Simón Bolívar, to the heroism of Harriet Tubman confronted by racial hatred, as depicted in *Harriet, The Woman Called Moses*. Musgrave's operas are always thought-provoking, multi-layered, while remaining accessible, engaging visceral experiences with pure drama at their heart.

THE ABBOT OF DRIMOCK

(1955)

Libretto: Maurice Lindsay, based on J.M. Wilson

Language: English

Duration: 50 minutes

Soloists: 2 baritones, bass, contralto, mezzo-soprano, soprano, tenor

Orchestration: 0111/1000/2perc/pf(cel)/str(10010)

SYNOPSIS

This, Musgrave's first opera, was composed very shortly after her return from Paris in 1955, where she had been studying with Nadia Boulanger for the previous four years. The story is taken from J. M. Wilson's *Tales of the Scottish Border*. A parallel with Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* will be obvious to any opera lover. However, this is not surprising since both share a common source: Dante's *Inferno*, though in this opera the date is mid-sixteenth century and set in pre-Reformation Scotland.

With the cooperation of a witch-woman, Geills, the Abbot of Drimock feathers his nest by persuading the dying rich of the neighbourhood to alter their wills in his favour. In a particularly complex case, however, he declines to reward Geills. Bess, whose husband, the local laird Sir William, is grievously ill, has borne a child, Maggie, by the Abbot. Sir William dies, leaving his fortune to Maggie (whose plans to marry do not have her mother's approval) and to the Edinburgh lepers. Determined not to be outdone, Bess and the Abbot hush up the death and prepare to stage a reenactment which will prevent the marriage and save the fortune. The plans go awry and with Geills's help Maggie manages to turn everything to her advantage.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

(1979)

Libretto: Thea Musgrave, based on the story by Charles Dickens

Language: English (German trans. Claus Henneberg)

Duration: 1 hour 50 minutes

Soloists: 2 sopranos, mezzo-soprano, tenor, 2 baritones,
bass-baritone, actor, dancer (or mime), 3 children*

Chorus: children's chorus (optional)

Orchestration: 1+pic.1+ca.2+bcl.1+cbn/1000/
2perc/hp.pf/str(min.11111)

Commissioned by the Virginia Opera Association

*Also suitable for younger operatic voices

SYNOPSIS

It is a cold, foggy Christmas Eve. Scrooge, the miser, berates his clerk, Bob Cratchit, for arriving at work late and loudly derides the whole idea of Christmas. Later that night the ghost of Scrooge's deceased partner, Jacob Marley, confronts him. Marley laments that he is forever doomed because of his narrow and selfish life. He warns of a worse fate awaiting Scrooge. At the strike of one, The Spirit of Christmas Past appears. He shows Scrooge memories of his own childhood: his fondness for his sister Fan and the breakdown of his relationship for his young love, Belle. In Act Two, the jovial spirit of The Spirit of Christmas Present wakes Scrooge and leads him to the Cratchit house. There, the family, including Tiny Tim, assembles for Christmas dinner. Despite their poverty there is an atmosphere of warmth and merriment. Soon after, The Spirit of Christmas Future appears out of the gloom with several starving children (including Tiny Tim) and, in their desperation, they cling to him. He violently pushes them down. Tiny Tim is crushed and falls dead. Bewildered and distressed by events, Scrooge finds himself in a deserted graveyard facing his own tombstone, inscribed 'Ebenezer Scrooge, miser; who lived unloved and alone.' Terrified, he renounces his miserly ways and swears henceforth to honour the spirit of Christmas.



Top: The appearance of Jacob Marley (Howard Scammon); from the 1979 world premiere production of *A Christmas Carol* by Virginia Opera. Bottom: Christmas celebrations from Scrooge's past; from the 2002 revival by Virginia Opera.

THE DECISION

(1965)

Libretto: Maurice Lindsay, based on a television play by Ken Taylor

Language: English

Duration: 2 hours 4 minutes

Soloists: mezzo-soprano, contralto, 3 tenors, baritone, bass-baritone, 2 basses

Chorus: chorus

Orchestration: 2233/4331/hp/timp.3perc/str

SYNOPSIS

John Brown, a man of strong character, whose insistent warnings about the safety of a coal face being worked have been ignored, is trapped in a tremendous mining accident. Flashbacks relate how Katie loved John but married the foreman, Wayson, for his money and position; eventually she died carrying John's child. Returning to the present, Wayson considers a rescue attempt useless, but a few helpers are determined to try. Knocking is heard, then more miners and Wayson join the rescue party. A breakthrough is made but it is too late. John Brown dies and the opera ends in a mood of guilty recrimination. The libretto is based on a true incident which occurred in a depressed Scottish mining village in 1835.

HARRIET, THE WOMAN CALLED MOSES

(1984)

Libretto: Thea Musgrave

Language: English

Duration: 2 hours 10 minutes

Soloists: 5 principals (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritone, bass-baritone); 5 comprimario (2 tenors, baritone, 2 bass-baritones); 5 spoken parts; supers

Chorus: chorus

Orchestration: 2(pic)2(ca)22(cbsn)/3330/timp.2perc/hp.pf/str

Co-commissioned by the Virginia Opera and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

THE STORY OF HARRIET TUBMAN

(1990)

Duration: 1 hour 30 minutes

Soloists: 3 principals (soprano, mezzo-soprano, baritone)*; 3 comprimario (tenor, baritone, bass-baritone); 4 actors; supers

Chorus: Chorus of 8 (SSAATTBB)

Orchestration: fl.cl/hn/perc/pf(syn)/vn.va.vc

*Also suitable for younger operatic voices

SYNOPSIS

The story is freely based on the life of Harriet Tubman, a slave who escaped from bondage on the eastern shore of Maryland, and who became a 'conductor' on the Underground Railroad, returning back nineteen times and rescuing over three hundred of her people. At one time a reward of \$40,000 was offered for her recapture alive or dead. The opera opens with slaves passionately crying out for freedom. They stand aside to reveal Harriet restlessly asleep in the house of Mr. Thomas Garrett, a Quaker - she has managed to escape North and so reach safety. But in her dream she is told that she must not pursue her life with Josiah, who has also made his way North, but like Moses, make the difficult journey to deliver her people from bondage. She is successful but she sacrifices her personal happiness. Maunela Hoelterhoff, writing in The Wall Street Journal said, 'Musgrave wrote her own libretto and she is as precise with words as she is with notes: her fictional additions meld seamlessly with Harriet's biography; her own mostly tonal music meshes smoothly with reworked spirituals'.

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MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS

(1977)

Libretto: Thea Musgrave, based on work by Amalia Elguera

Language: English

Duration: 2 hours 12 minutes

Soloists: 4 principals (soprano, 2 tenors, baritone); 5 comprimario (soprano, tenor, 2 baritones, bass-baritone); 3 bit parts (soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto)

Chorus: chorus

Orchestration: 2(2pic)3(2ca)2(bcl)2(dbsn)/3210/timp.2perc/hp.org/str

Commissioned by Scottish Opera

CHAMBER VERSION

(2016)

Duration: 2 hours 12 minutes

Soloists: 5 principals (soprano, 2 tenors, baritone, bass-baritone)*; 5 comprimario (soprano, 2 tenors, baritone, bass-baritone); supers

Orchestration: 1(pic)1(ca)1(bcl)1/1100/timp.perc/syn/str(10110)

*Also suitable for younger operatic voices

SYNOPSIS

Unlike Donizetti's opera *Maria Stuarda*, this opera focuses on the historic and chaotic political pressures (as well as personal ones) on the young Mary. She has just returned to Scotland as the widow of the Dauphin of France. She is a Catholic queen in a Protestant country. She is also confronted by her ambitious half-brother James, the bastard son of James V (and thus excluded from any consideration as monarch), by the rival Earl of Bothwell, a soldier who has always been loyal to her family, and eventually by a suitor from England - Henry, Lord Darnley, an heir to both Scottish and English thrones. Marriage to him would seem to secure the throne of both countries for her son. But Darnley proves to be a very unsuitable Consort, trusted by no-one. Later, he is murdered, Mary is compromised, for she very unwisely marries Bothwell who is under suspicion of Darnley's murder. She is forced to abdicate and flees to England leaving her son in Scotland to become King. Mary will now be in the power of her cousin Elizabeth. Andrew Porter wrote in *The New Yorker*, 'I found myself forgetting about the careful planning, the parallels, the influences, and instead caring very much about Mary herself... rapt in the music. There is visionary quality in *Mary*'.

THE MOCKING-BIRD

(2000)

Libretto: Thea Musgrave, after Ambrose Bierce

Language: English

Duration: 28 minutes

Soloists: baritone*

Orchestration: 1(pic)010/0000/perc/pf/str(10010)

*Commissioned jointly by the Serge Koussevitsky Foundation
in the Library of Congress and Boston Musica Viva*

*Also suitable for younger operatic voices

SYNOPSIS

War is a barbaric and primitive way of settling inevitable differences between nations and peoples, and these stories of Bierce show that, of all wars, civil war is perhaps the most devastating. He has an almost journalistic way of describing details of place and situation alongside wonderful poetic imagery; it is perhaps this style that gives his stories their evocative power. It is 1861 and, as *The Mocking-Bird* opens, we see a soldier, Sergeant Grayrock, on picket duty. He is lost, and fearful that he is in fact behind enemy lines... and is bitter at this situation. For him the mocking-bird is a joyful memory of his earlier years, those golden days of his youth when life was happier. Writing after the premiere in the Boston Globe, Richard Dyer remarked:

‘The monodrama is a small but choice subdivision in the world of music. Now the 21st century has produced its first contender, Thea Musgrave’s extraordinary anti-war parable *The Mocking-Bird*. [It is] a dramatic display of Musgrave’s talents... the skillful writing for voice, the flexibility of the music, which moves from military tattoos through recitative, a mimicry of military voices that anticipates the appearance of the mocking-bird, to superb lyrical music of an idyllic past that tugged at the heart and already lingers in the memory.’

AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE

(1981)

Libretto: Thea Musgrave, based on a short story by Ambrose Bierce

Language: English

Duration: 30 minutes

Soloists: baritone, actress, 2 actors*

Orchestration: 1111/1110/perc/pf/hp/str(1111)+tape

Commissioned by the BBC

Written as an opera for radio, but may be staged if given special treatment

*Also suitable for younger operatic voices

SYNOPSIS

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge is based on one of the famous short stories about the American Civil War written in the late 19th century by Ambrose Bierce.

Peyton Farquhar, an Alabaman planter, has been captured by a troop of the invading Yankee army from The North. He is about to be executed for attempting to sabotage their advance. As the noose tightens round his neck he fantasises about his escape down-river and back to his wife and home.

The story puts side by side the 'real' world of action (speech and sound effects), with the 'imaginary' world (singing) of Farquhar as he thinks, feels and remembers. The music in the orchestra is continuous; the work is truly conceived as an opera and not a play with incidental music.

PONTALBA

(2003)

Libretto: Thea Musgrave

Language: English

Duration: 2 hours

Soloists: 3 sopranos, mezzo-soprano, tenor, 2 baritones, bass-baritone

Chorus: chorus

Orchestration: 2(pic)2(ca)2(bcl)2(cbn)/4331/timp.2perc/hp/str

Commissioned by New Orleans Opera

SYNOPSIS

This opera was commissioned by New Orleans Opera to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase. This remarkable event, which doubled the size of the young United States of America, is the background of the story of the Pontalba family. Because of it, the family had to leave New Orleans for France.

The story of Micaela who married into this family is a dramatic one. After many years of financial struggle, Micaela's father-in-law in a desperate attempt to keep control of her dowry tries to kill her. He fails and, in his shame, kills himself. Micaela thus secures her inheritance and returns to New Orleans. As the first woman architect, she builds the famous Pontalba buildings in Jackson Square. She has managed to transcend the personal tragedies of her life, remain true to her calling, and to leave a lasting legacy of beauty and tranquillity for the city of her birth.

'Musgrave composes for the stage with great skill. One can hear her sense of the orchestra and her ear for forward, ever-moving vocal lines as they listen to the events onstage and respond to them moment to moment. The crowd scenes and ensemble work are complex but free of tangles: every crossing musical line has its own clear story to tell.'

Bernard Holland, *The New York Times*, 10 July 2003



Pictures from the world premiere production of *Pontalba* by New Orleans Opera, 2003. Top left: Micaela in Jackson Square. Top right: Micaela with her father-in-law. Bottom: The negotiation scene.

SIMÓN BOLÍVAR

(1992)

Libretto: Thea Musgrave, based on historical events and writings of Simón Bolívar.
(German translation by Hilary Griffiths and Claus Henneberg)

Language: English, Spanish, (Spanish version by Lillian Groag)

Duration: 2 hours 20 minutes

Soloists: 5 principals (soprano, 2 tenors, baritone, bass); 3 comprimario
(mezzo-soprano, baritone, bass); treble; 4 minor roles

Chorus: chorus

Orchestration: 2222/4331/timp.2perc/pf/hp/str

Co-commissioned by Los Angeles Music Centre and Scottish Opera

CHAMBER VERSION

(2013)

Duration: 1 Hour 45 Minutes

Soloists: 4 principals (soprano, tenor, baritone, bass-baritone);
2 comprimario (tenor, baritone); 5 bit parts and supers

Orchestration: oboe (ca), clar (bs cl), bsn (dble bsn), hrn, trpt,
timp (dble perc): synthesizer: vln, vla, vc

SYNOPSIS

Each generation needs its heroes: those people who can conceive of a new world and who also have the charisma, commitment and skill to bring it to reality. Thus was Bolívar. Though in his own eyes he was not successful (“those who serve a revolution only plough the sea”), for us he is a source of insight and understanding of the difficulties of achieving the goals to which he aspired. But no struggle of this nature is in vain. And we find renewal of his spirit in a few rare and wonderful people of our own time. The opera tells the story of the Venezuelan historical figure Simón Bolívar, who liberated five South American countries from Spanish colonial rule and unsuccessfully pursued their political unification under one flag. Against the tumultuous forces of the period’s struggles, Bolívar emerges as a passionate idealist, brilliantly successful as a liberator (‘El Libertador’), but unable to achieve his dream for the continent. The formation of those ideals, his charisma and passions and his inability to compromise are all part of an historic process which resonates with renewed meaning in today’s world.

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James Stewart, Earl of Moray (Jake Gardner) looks on his half-sister Mary, Queen of Scots (Ashley Putnam) in the US premiere of *Mary Queen of Scots* by Virginia Opera



THE VOICE OF ARIADNE

(1974)

Libretto: Amalia Elguera, based on *The Last of the Valerii* by Henry James

Language: English

Duration: 1 hour 40 minutes

Soloists: 5 principals (soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto, baritone, bass-baritone)*; 3 comprimario (2 tenors, bass-baritone)

Orchestration: 1(pic)1(ca)1(bcl)1(cbn)/1000/perc/
pf(org).hp/str(min.11111)+tape

Alternative Orchestration: 1(pic)1(ca)1(bcl)1(cbn)/1000/perc/
pf(org).hp/str(75432)

Work Notes: tape created in collaboration with Richard Rodney Bennett
Commissioned by the Royal Opera House

*Also suitable for younger operatic voices

SYNOPSIS

Count Marco Valerio and his recently married American wife invite a group of friends to witness the excavation of an antique statue on the grounds of their villa in Rome. But instead of a complete statue only a single broken-off hand and a pedestal are revealed. The pedestal carries an inscription in Greek: 'To Ariadne'. When the Count's excitement at the prospect of the discovery yields to disappointment and depression, he thinks he hears a voice addressing him as Theseus, urging him to return to Ariadne whom, in the legend, he abandoned on the island of Naxos. The Count's forsaken wife identifies with Ariadne and gives up her claim on her husband. Her own self-sacrifice enables him to emerge from his delusions.

Critical reception to *The Voice of Ariadne* has been exceptional both sides of the Atlantic. William Mann in *The Times* (London) said of Musgrave's third opera, 'A composer needs not only technique and imagination and a special, very uncommon dramatic understanding but also a large spoonful of luck to write an opera that comes off unequivocally onstage. Most composers misfire. [She] has miraculously succeeded... [it] is a delight to listen to' Andrew Porter in the *Financial Times* remarked, 'the piece is very well written for singers, [it] seems almost instinctive – a mark of a born opera composer.' Following the US premiere, William Bender (*Time Magazine*) praised the music's 'innocent freshness' and 'dramatic precision'. Alan Rich of *New York Magazine* wrote 'it sets the English words with remarkable attention to their shape and tone... and it doesn't waste a gesture'.

*Musgrave's new opera is an emphatic success...
Musgrave knows how to create real theatrical
urgency; she is obviously a born dramatic composer.*

Stanley Sadie on *The Decision* in *Musical Times*

*An opera of immediate and powerful impact...
in fact so clear is the emotional geography and so
clear are most of the words that matter, the plot
consistently makes its point.*

Edward Greenfield on *Harriet, The Woman Called Moses* in *The Guardian*

*Rarely since Peter Grimes have I been as
impressed by the first hearing of a contemporary
stage work.*

Harold Rosenthal on *Mary, Queen of Scots* in *Opera Magazine*

*Musgrave's decades of experience of
writing every kind of music show in
the precision of her craftsmanship.*

Richard Dyer on *The Mocking-Bird* in *The Boston Globe*

*Unstoppable dramatic momentum... the
most gifted operatic composer this country
has produced since Britten.*

John Allison on *Simón Bolívar* in *The Times*

*Musgrave is as naturally gifted a composer for the stage
as anyone writing today. ['Bolívar'] is a thrilling piece,
conceived and executed on an epic scale... [She] has an
infallible sense of theatrical pace and effect.*

Rodney Milnes on *Simón Bolívar* in *The Times*

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