

Women Are Making Opera. And It's Not Easy.

For the first time in more than 100 years, the Met is performing an opera written by a woman. Listen to the work of some of the many female composers working today.

By **WILLIAM ROBIN**
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Meredith Monk Krista Schlueter for The New York Times

T HIS MONTH, the Metropolitan Opera is performing Kaija Saariaho's "[L'Amour de Loïn](#)," the first opera written by a woman that the company has produced since 1903. We asked 10 composers to reflect on this conspicuous gap, and on what it means to be a woman creating opera today. Read what they had to say while listening to excerpts from their works.



Sarah Bloom

Jennifer Higdon

[“Cold Mountain”](#) (2015)

“Orion Duet” from “Cold Mountain” 2:48

“I’M GLAD THAT THEY’VE TAKEN THE STEP, FINALLY. One hundred and 13 years: It’s a little stunning to think about. If they move beyond one opera by a woman to a second or a third opera, I think people may feel more hopeful. But for those who are writing opera, you have to just keep doing it. You have to keep finding ways to get the art out there in any way that you can, and you have to continue to do the very best you can. It’s not easy making a living in the arts, but it can be done.”

Carl Skutsch

Kamala Sankaram

["Miranda"](#) (2012), ["Enchantress"](#) (2014), ["Thumbprint"](#) (2014), ["Looking at You"](#) (2016)

"Scrolling Back" from "Looking at You" 4:07

"LITTLE THINGS HAVE HINTED TO ME that perhaps I'm being treated differently because I'm a woman. An accompanist playing an audition asked when the composer was going to get there, and when I said I was the composer, he said, "Oh, this music is very cute." I had a review that called the music "soft." There are little things where you wonder if the language is gendered, but it's not something so overt as, "This person is not qualified because they're female." But there are two parts of it. One is: Are people treating you differently because you're a woman? But the other is: Is the access different for you, because you're a woman? That's definitely true. When all of the people who are in the administrative positions of opera companies are men, it's just human nature: We tend to think of people who are most similar to us when we're trying to think of people who might fit available positions."

Priska Ketterer Luzern

Olga Neuwirth

[“Bählamms Fest”](#) (1998), [“Lost Highway”](#) (2003), [“American Lulu”](#) (2011), [“The Outcast”](#) (2011); currently working on [“Orlando”](#)

Scene 5 from “Lost Highway” 5:07

“WE ARE IN THE WORLD OF CLASSICAL MUSIC, which is still white, male and patriarchal — in other words, still rooted in a hegemonic system. I’ve often been referred to as “that impudent brat.” You’re impudent when you’ve no claim to power. But does anyone call a young man “impudent”? Instead he’s “that gutsy fellow,” and “gutsy” in this context means he commands respect and attention. Some male presenters proudly broadcast: “Now we’re presenting an all-women festival” or “Now we’re focusing exclusively on women conductors,” and yet if their inner attitude is “Now we’ve done our part and may continue on as before,” nothing changes. Ultimately, what this means is — and this applies to all minorities who have ever stood up for their rights — that different people should come together with more openness, understanding and kindness, and not with arrogance, and that opposites and different ways of living and expressing may interact without anyone continually having to point this out.”

Marylene Mey

Missy Mazzoli

[“Songs From the Uproar”](#) (2012), [“Breaking the Waves”](#) (2016)

Prologue from “Breaking the Waves” 3:00

“WOMEN HAVE BEEN NOT ENCOURAGED to be part of this field in a million subtle ways and also in some very obvious ways. When people ask me about being a woman writing opera, the thing that I always try to say is that there is no history, really. The history of women writing opera started, like, five years ago. Yes, there are [exceptions](#) — there’s Ethel Smyth, there’s Hildegard, there have been women over the last 500 years who have written opera — but they’re so few and far between that I can count them on one hand. That said, there is a responsibility there that’s been ignored to seek out these women. And, most important, to give women opportunities that are based on their potential, not on their past experience. What I see a lot is that men are given opportunities based on potential. A lot of young men get their first opera opportunity before they’ve even written an extensive body of work for voice at all. And with women, people are always waiting to see proof. They want to see that you’ve done something before they give you an

opportunity. You can see the impossibility of that situation. If you're a young woman and you have a dramatic impulse and you are attracted to that art form but no one's going to give you your first big break, it becomes impossible to break into that world."

Hiroiyuki Ito for The New York Times

Tania León

"Scourge of Hyacinths" (1999); currently working on "[Little Rock Nine](#)"

"Oh Yemanjá" from "Scourge of Hyacinths" 6:12

"COLOR CANNOT BE A BARRIER. Gender cannot be a barrier. Any kind of orientation cannot be a barrier. We are the human race: What's happening with us? What's wrong? We have to change this landscape, and the only way

by doing it is to really do it. Not to look for the alibi that there's no money, that we always have to find something that has been proven to work before. Otherwise we're not taking chances, and if we don't risk and take chances, we don't know how much we're advancing or not."

Dave Sanders for The New York Times

Bora Yoon

["Sunken Cathedral"](#) (2015)

"O Pastor Animarum" from "Sunken Cathedral" 4:26

"WHY DO FEMALE COMPOSERS keep disappearing from people's minds? Composing is probably one of the most innately female things one can do. It's creating; it's creation. And it's always struck me oddly that it was relegated in a very male-dominant field. Women are more nuanced, as well, in understanding the complexity of conflict, and the embroilment of what makes opera great is really these tangled relationships: dynamics that are external as well as internal. Women are very expressive at breaking those down more — in song, even in timbre, instruments and visual design, too.

Women are very holistic about these things.”

Emily Andrews for The New York Times

Anna Clyne

Currently working on her first opera, “Eva”

Live excerpts from “The Lost
Thought” 7:07

“I ACTUALLY DON’T THINK about gender that much. I think of myself more as a composer than as a female composer. But I do feel very fortunate because I’m in that situation because of the groundwork that’s been made by previous generations. The subject of the opera is Eva Hesse, who was an artist in New York during the ’60s. Her being a female artist was really a challenge at that time, and by nature that’s going to be part of the narrative of this opera. I actually just finished reading her diaries a couple days ago, which definitely give some glimpse into her experiences of being a female artist. One thing that she said that resonates today is that the way to beat discrimination in art is by art, and that excellence has no sex. When I read that, I thought, Yeah. That’s not always easy, but sometimes just actually

doing the work speaks volumes.”

Julie Glassberg for The New York Times

Unsub Chin

[“Alice in Wonderland”](#) (2007); currently working on “Alice Through the Looking Glass”

“A Mad Tea Party” from “Alice in Wonderland” 1:48

“**THE WORLD OF OPERA** is almost by definition a conservative one. Since opera houses are complex institutions, there are strong pressures of commercialism, die-hard habits; there is redundancy in terms of repertoire, there is the star system, and the expectations can be stereotypical. However, to thrive in the 21st century and to make justice to the wonderfully diverse repertoire, there ought to be more experimentation and diversity in the

operatic world in general. While I do belong to a minority in my profession (some people still seem to think that classical music has been exclusively written by dead European men), I have not much pondered prejudices during the 30 years I've been in the business, since that would have been stifling for my compositional work. I've just tried to do my own job as well as I can and not think about what other people might believe, since that's something I couldn't change anyway."

Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

Meredith Monk

["Atlas"](#) (1991)

"Travel Dream Song" from
"Atlas" 5:06

"**THE CLASSICAL WORLD** has been very hard on women. We're just not taken seriously in the same way. There are certain procedures in the Western European tradition that are very respected, and my music offers another way of doing things that is just as rich and powerful, but it is a different set of procedures. I know that sometimes the music has not been taken as seriously

as it could be, because the meticulousness of it and the intricacy of it is not so apparent. One time I was working with a chorus, and I gave them my scores and they said “Oh, we can read this down, this is so easy.” And I said, “Go for it.” And then the more they tried to sing it, the more they realized how difficult it was. The surface seems very simple, but actually it’s really complex and very intricate.”

Matt Gush

Lisa Bielawa

“Ideas of Good and Evil” (1996); “Phrenic Crush” (1997); “[Hildegurils](#)” (1998); “Spooky Action at a Distance” (2000); [Chance Encounter](#) (2007); and “[Vireo](#),” an opera designed for television that is currently in production

“Alcatraz” from
“Vireo” 15:18

“**THE KEY IS SELF CARE.** I’m really interested in joy, in thriving musical communities, in creating work that is vital for both women and men. To work well, I’ve needed to find ways pretty much not to tell myself the story of myself knocking at doors and having them not open. Female readers have

always been very adept at identifying with iconic male protagonists in the stories that we read, because those protagonists are designed to represent the human condition. Female roles in opera should be able to inspire that same kind of identification. You should be able to see "[Vireo](#)" and feel that tug: This is about the human condition. This is healing my basic human wound. That's what we want in opera, right? Not to tell a historically specific women's story. The topicality of it is not really the compelling thing; it's not the operatic thing."

Produced by Danny DeBelius

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