

The Premiere of COAL: **music and libretto by Judith Shatin**

a concert report by Anna Larson

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Judith Shatin and miner

It was Clara Boone's idea to get up a carload of musicians and friends and take a Sunday drive out to Shepherdstown, West Virginia, to see the premiere of Judith Shatin's new composition, COAL. The fall weather was exquisite, and as we travelled westward into the mountains, I had no idea what an interesting cross-cultural event we were about to experience.

Funded by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Program (which has the stated goal of developing audiences for contemporary arts), by Shepherd College, and by many community groups, "COAL" turned out to be not just a musical composition, but a two-year program subtitled "A Blueprint for Understanding 20th Century Music." It included four one-week residencies in which Judith offered lectures and concerts, both chamber and orchestral, centering principally, but by no means entirely, on her own work. The project then culminated in the production of her oratorio of the same name. The project's artistic director was pianist Mary Kathleen Ernst, who last year gave one of the recitals featuring several 20th century women composers.

It was evident to us from the moment we entered the Frank Arts Center Theater and saw the crowded theater and stage that this was an event with considerable community impact. Dominating the stage was the Masterworks Choral conducted by Jay Stenger and made up of both students and community singers. Performing with them were the Heritage Musicians, a traditional Appalachian band consisting of fiddle, guitar, banjo, and hammer dulcimer, with Ginny Hawker and Tracy Schwartz on "vocals." There was a synthesizer for piano and organ sounds, and speakers for special electronic effects were placed on each side of the wide stage.

Judith told me later that she considered herself a poet before she ever took up music composition. Her comprehensive libretto is a testament to that fact. She researched her subject through books and through much personal contact with

miners, with experts on occupational safety, and with people of the region. She chose to draw occasionally upon traditional words or tunes, and even the writings of others, such as the moving words of J.N. York used at the opening and closing of her piece, "Just stop and think who suffered for that little lump of coal." Along the way the libretto constitutes a journey, both emotional and informative, into the world of the coal regions: about coal itself, what it is, what it makes; about the people who toiled in the mines, why they loved it, why they hated it, how in years past it devastated their families, their health, their children. It tells how the coal companies bought the rights to their land, leaving the farmers with little more than the right to pay taxes on it. When the land became so damaged they could not farm it, their only recourse was to cease farming and become miners, under terrible conditions. The injured and sick (and there were many because of the lack of health and safety codes) were unceremoniously thrown out. Unions were formed to help, but even they at times became corrupt. Although we understand that many of these conditions have been ameliorated through union efforts and government regulation, Shatin's work goes on to refer to current efforts by unions to fight for the jobs of miners threatened by mechanization.

As a musical form, COAL seemed closest to an oratorio. Judith says she set out to "intertwine" musical styles. And indeed, her own contemporary musical language was given expression only in certain parts of the choral writing, with the traditional band playing exclusively in their own style. She says she specifically wanted to keep that separation, to have musicians "write in their own language." The fact that the players were not sight-readers surely affected her decision. (Some of them went through the entire oratorio with no music in front of them.) As a result, Judith's most interesting writing came in the choral parts, where she used angular rhythms, in one case with the chorus stamping their feet, and some delicious cluster chords. One of the strengths of this piece is its range, from explanatory to descriptive to dramatic, from traditional to contemporary.

Electronics were used mainly as transitional material: between sections the sharp sound of pick axes striking the coal face was heard leaping rhythmically from right to left speakers. At one point Shatin took those sounds, and, using a computer language called HACK developed by Pete Yadlowsky at the Virginia Center for Computer Music (which she founded and heads), shaped them gradually into something that sounded almost like a banjo, which briefly echoed a tune we had just heard. This was a wonderful effect, and I wished there had been more like it. The climax of the oratorio, "Fire in the Mine" and "Oh God, Why?", which included sung dialogue dramatically passed around to individuals in the chorus, was effectively enhanced by sounds of fire and explosion from the speakers. Just

after that came what for me was a high point, when Ginny Hawker quietly sang, without accompaniment and in her earthy, focused country twang, "My head and 'stay is took away, and I am left alone." Using a text from the Primitive Baptist tradition, Judith set all five verses starkly and traditionally, allowing even the last verse to end on the dominant. The song, its placement and its delivery were stunning.

The chorus and conductor were impressive, with especially sweet tones achieved by the sopranos. My guess is that this is a work they will live with a long time, and as they get to know the more complex choral parts better, they will be able to be more aggressive in places that call for crisp rhythmic emphasis and unhesitating forward motion, such as in the dramatic climax or in such parts as "What Coal Makes."

It could be said that COAL is a gift from all who contributed (and especially from Judith Shatin) to the people of West Virginia. It was evident that the audience was very moved by the work. Just as the some of the local people involved were getting their first taste of a contemporary musical sounds and hearing their life's concerns made into something artistic, listeners like myself were treated to a fresh understanding of the Appalachian people and their music. Mary Kathleen told me that one of the miners attending the concert (Cynthia Ray, who was one of the people interviewed during Judith's research) remarked, "This piece gives my job dignity."

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