

A person wearing a vibrant red robe is holding a large, bloody, and carved human figure. The figure appears to be a torso and limbs, possibly a sculpture or a prop, covered in red liquid, likely representing blood. The background is dark with out-of-focus light spots, creating a dramatic and unsettling atmosphere.

Michael Hersch
POPPAEA

AH YOUNG HONG
STEVE DAVISLIM
SILKE GÄNG

Ensemble SoloVoices
Ensemble Phoenix Basel
Jürg Henneberger

LIBRETTO BY
Stephanie Fleischmann

POPPAEA

an opera in one act

Music by Michael Hersch

Libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann

Directed by Markus Bothe

Ah Young Hong - POPPAEA

Steve Davislim - NERO

Silke Gäng - OCTAVIA

Svea Schildknecht, Vera Hiltbrunner, Francisca Näf

HANDMAIDENS

Ensemble SoloVoices

Ensemble Phoenix Basel

Conducted by Jürg Henneberger

A Production of Wien Modern and ZeitRäume Basel

Live Recording



"Hersch ... is the explorer of an unconditional,
radical expressivity that reveals the human
abyss without any palliation. In music.
In a new, crystal-clear beauty."

— Georg Friedrich Haas

A large white IBC tote is positioned in the foreground, partially obscured by a metal cage. The background is dark and industrial, with steam rising from the tote and sparks or debris scattered on the floor. The overall atmosphere is gritty and dramatic.

Michael Hersch

POPPAEA

AN OPERA IN ONE ACT

Libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann

DISC 1 (54:27)

1	Prologue	2:11
2	Overture	5:51
3	Scene I - New Life	11:15
4	Scene II - The Wedding	1:57
5	Scene III - Adultery	10:55
6	Scene IV - Octavia is Innocent	5:23
7	Interlude I	1:08
8	Scene V - Octavia	4:58
9	Scene VI - Poppaea Witnesses Octavia's Death	10:49

DISC 2 (46:36)

1	Scene VII - Milk Bath	8:28
2	Interlude II	0:56
3	Scene VIII - Claudia Augusta	2:52
4	Scene IX - Nero's Lament	4:41
5	Scene X - The Great Fire	5:40
6	Scene XI - After the Fire	10:56
7	Scene XII - This World	13:03

Total Time: 1:41:03

Poppaea in History and on the Stage

Dr. Lauren Donovan Ginsberg

This opera takes us to one of the most notorious periods of imperial Roman history, the age of Nero. But while the writings that survive from ancient history often center the voices and worldview of men, *Poppaea* takes us into a world of women. In doing so, it stages two intertwined stories. The first is a story about Nero's two wives, Octavia and Poppaea, as they wage a war fueled by women's rage within the heart of the imperial palace. The second is a story about the rage of men against powerful women and the ways in which that rage vents itself – on their bodies, on their supporters, on their legacies. Never before had a Roman emperor's divorce of an unloved wife threatened to undo his power; never after would a Roman emperor's violent obsession with a new wife echo so clearly in eternity. This new work takes us back in time to these violent years but sheds the detached male eyes of ancient history in order to foreground the emotional interiority of the women who experienced these events, especially the woman for whom Nero would risk everything: Poppaea.

Poppaea strikes the Roman historical record like a lightning bolt. As a woman with few significant social connections, she mattered little to ancient historians whose eyes remained firmly trained on the center of power, the House of the Emperor. She only 'matters' once her orbit intersects with that center of power; in other words, for ancient historians, she only matters once Nero notices her. Then, suddenly, she matters very much. We would do well to remember this dynamic as a first act of violence committed against her.

Poppaea's paternal line was of middling significance, but her mother's line could boast a man, Gaius Poppaeus Sabinus, who



rose from obscurity to be consul of Rome, a political office second only to the emperor. For this reason Poppaea chose to go by a name descended from her maternal line, an irregular choice and one that foregrounds the role of women in transmitting power and prestige. Her mother too was a victim – executed on trumped up charges by the empress Messalina, wife of the previous emperor Claudius. While few ancient sources seem interested in this episode, we might imagine how it colored Poppaea’s understanding of imperial power.

She came to Nero’s attention through his good friend, Otho, who was either Poppaea’s lover or her husband. Although the timeline of her affair with Nero is uncertain, it is clear that Nero decided there must be a marriage. It probably seemed to Nero that it would be easy to accomplish: he simply had to divorce his current wife, Octavia, who had born him no children and whom he clearly disliked, in the same way that earlier emperors like Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius had divorced earlier wives in pursuit of more appealing matches. Yes, Octavia was the daughter of his predecessor, Claudius, and had been important for Nero securing the throne eight years earlier, but he was now a mature ruler with a firm grasp on the empire and an equally firm need to shore up that throne by producing

an heir. Poppaea may even have been pregnant at this time. What Nero clearly did not imagine was the tidal wave of rage that his decision would unleash, a rage that informs an early scene in *Poppaea*.

First came the rage of the people who loved their princess with a passion that should not be underestimated. For one of the only times during the reign of Nero, they took to the streets in protest. Octavia was the wife who mattered. Her children must rule after Nero. They seem to have taken particu-

“... Hersch’s Poppaea with its libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann does not shy away from the tragedies of Octavia and Poppaea.”

lar offense to statues of Poppaea cropping up throughout the public spaces of Rome, replacing those of their beloved people’s princess. They attacked Poppaea’s statues viciously, tearing them limb from limb or otherwise smearing them with mud and dung. They re-erected Octavia’s statues throughout the political centers of the city. And though the crowd here touches statues, we must see in their actions how the statues become proxies for the bodies of the women, for the loving caresses they offer the one and for the

violence the enraged mob wishes to inflict on the other.

Nero’s rage comes next. He rages against the people and sends armed guards to violently suppress the riots. But the true target of his rage is the wife he wishes to rid himself of. It is clear to him now that the people will not let him let her go, that keeping her alive, even if divorced, will only turn her into a rallying point for those who would dethrone him. And so he manufactures a charge of adultery and treason against her such that he could exile her and, once she is out of the reach of her mob-protectorate, execute her. She was at most twenty-two years old.

Where was Poppaea during this time? The historical record is keen to tell us that she played puppet master behind the scenes driving Nero’s rage to the point of murder. She was behind the murder of his mother. She was behind the decision to execute Octavia. From the perspective of male Roman historians, the only explanation for Nero’s choices was a truly evil woman whispering into his ear. And yet just as quickly as she entered the historical tradition, upon her marriage she is all but forgotten. We hear only of the birth of their first child, a daughter whose tragic death engendered deep and profound grief in her parents. We next hear of Poppaea at her own death. It is as if once she became



the empress of Rome, her story was done being written. But of course this is not so.

When we look beyond the writings of ancient historians, we can piece together a wider picture from the fragments that remain. We can observe how Nero minted golden coins advertising her fertility, the title “Augusta” that he bestowed on her, and their partnership in power. Partnership? Was this possible? It seems that the answer is yes. Even within the historical tradition we see references to certain political decisions being made “in the presence of Poppaea.” Elsewhere we have a glimpse of more: the Jewish writer Josephus records that Poppaea twice interceded on behalf of the Jewish people when they petitioned Nero to address certain wrongs. More locally, chance surviving graffiti from Pompeii, the likely city of Poppaea’s birth, show us a faction of citizens who felt they had benefited from the joint decisions of Nero and Poppaea and who consequently called themselves the *Neropoppaeenses*. This circumstantial evidence points to a widespread perception of Poppaea as key player in Neronian politics, a woman who steered her imperial husband towards good decisions.

Why were the ancient historians uninterested in this side of her story? Because, of course, they too feel rage against a powerful

woman and they use their texts to play their part in her abuse — this is what we mean when we refer to an ancient authorial “bias” when writing about women. This brings us to Poppaea’s untimely death. According to some ancient writers, she was poisoned by Nero but our major sources believe this cannot have been the case and suggest instead that, in a fit of rage, he caused her death by kicking her in the stomach during the final months of pregnancy. But according to these same sources, none positively inclined to Nero, it must have been an accident because of how much Nero loved Poppaea. If modern audiences bristle at how Roman male historians can so easily make excuses for domestic violence by appealing to the idea of love, we should go one step further and realize that this is part of how history continues to abuse women. It would not fit the historical idea of Poppaea as an evil woman puppeteering all of Nero’s worst crimes to have her suddenly become a sympathetic victim without agency. The focus of ancient historians, then, remains not on the tragic death of the woman in question, but on Nero’s fits of rage and on his extravagant grief for her in the aftermath. In other words, in her final hour she remains for ancient historians a vehicle for exploring Nero’s story, not her own.

But there is more: scholars have recently drawn attention to how the ancient historians of Nero’s reign write less with an eye to facts and more with an eye to replicating certain stereotypical story patterns drawn from Greek ideas about mad kings. In other words, many famous episodes of Nero’s life are scripted so that they fulfill certain wider ideas about how tyrants live. One recognizable pattern is that mad tyrants kill their pregnant wives, an act that becomes an index of their perversity as they destroy their own legacy in utero. One particular tyrant, Periander of Corinth, seems to become a wider, consistent model for ancient historians writing about Nero. This should cause us to pause. And so if Nero did not beat Poppaea to death, what may have killed her? This is also a tragic tale as old as time: Poppaea may have died from complications from a miscarriage or childbirth. This fate befell many women, no matter their status. Poppaea may have been one of them. Ancient historians were so uninterested in such “women’s” details that this story could easily be overwritten by a more sensational tale of a tyrant fulfilling his prescribed destiny.

It is not necessary for you to choose which seems more believable. There is a more urgent need: to rewrite this story as the story of Poppaea’s death versus Nero’s actions. We

should put the woman back at the center of a very female tragedy, whether that be ineffective gynecological care or domestic violence, two tragedies which harm women every day in the modern world. By focusing on Poppaea, the modern world of scholars and artists can give voice to her experience even as ancient historians have silenced her.

The stories of these two women, Poppaea and Octavia, do not end with their deaths. Their memories continued to haunt Nero's reign. Nero likely continued to vent his rage against Octavia, first through decapitating her corpse and second through the destruction of her statues; indeed, several possible likenesses survive with intentional damage to her eyes and nose. But in the ancient imagination the fate of this once celebrity couple was joined to such a degree that the date of Nero's suicide was imagined to be on the anniversary of Octavia's execution, as if Octavia had her own vengeance at last against the man who had abused her.

Nero's treatment of Poppaea after her death showed a similarly masculine attempt at control. He eschewed traditional Roman funerary practices by embalming and perfuming her body in the manner of Egyptians, eventually burning her body with what the historical record indicates was an entire year's worth of incense from the East. In do-

ing so he "othered" her permanently, sowing the seeds for the hostile historical tradition which saw her as a reincarnated Roman Cleopatra to be denigrated. He then had her deified and worshiped as a goddess alongside their earlier child. And finally, we are told, for the rest of his life whenever he would act a tragic role on stage – especially roles involving the pain of a woman in childbirth – he would wear a mask of Poppaea's face, as if reviving and killing her in a perpetual cycle. In these ways Nero raged at his grief, raged at Poppaea's death, and raged at his inability to raise her from the dead.

Throughout this essay, I have drawn attention to the rage of men: the rage of Nero, of the Roman people, and of the male-dominated historical tradition. All three form sites of violence against the women of Nero's reign, albeit using different tools. But while the historical tradition uses these women to tell the story of men, a different tradition has long been interested in bringing these women back to life to tell their own stories. This tradition is the stage and it begins shortly after Nero's suicide.

The years after Nero's unexpected death feature many different attempts to tell his story. One particularly fascinating example is an anonymous history play, *Octavia*, which dramatizes Nero's divorce of Octavia and

marriage to Poppaea. As its title suggests, the play is less interested in Nero than in the women surrounding him, especially his first wife. It is the story of a war between women that will shake an empire. It is a story about two women who are cast as victims *and* villains simultaneously in their experience of Neronian Rome. In order to make this clear, the play leaves behind the public spaces of men and takes us into the bedrooms of two empresses, into their deepest fears and traumatic memories, and, in the case of Octavia, into her rage against the injustices she has suffered at the hands of Nero's infidelity and, more globally, what she has suffered as part of the machine of Roman history which forges a path over the bodies of women. Where ancient historians silenced these women or reduced them to stereotypes, this staging of Nero's wives centers their voices, lets them sing and scream in alternation, as it foregrounds more complicated histories.

The story of Nero, Octavia, and Poppaea goes on to have a long afterlife on the stages of Renaissance and Baroque Europe. Perhaps the most famous is Monteverdi's opera, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* with a libretto by Busenello. Like its ancient dramatic predecessor, this opera gives voice to the passions of women, but admittedly with less sympathy. Although it shifts focus to the love

triangle between Nero, Poppaea, and Otho, we are not allowed to forget the wronged Octavia who surpasses her ancient counterpart by forcing a man, Otho, to attempt the murder of Poppaea. Poppaea too is ready to eliminate anyone who stands between her and the throne. These are women unafraid to use their power to violent ends.

L'incoronazione di Poppea appeared within an intellectual climate that read into Roman imperial history the idea that Rome's excessive decadence was fundamentally intertwined with the rise of politically powerful women. The opera plays with the idea of women as dangerous – dangerous to each other, to the state, to morality. But as it does so, it fundamentally rewrites the history of these women. Octavia sails off to exile and strips off her imperial insignia, but the hints of her impending death are removed. More dramatically, the opera ends with Poppaea in triumph, having achieved both objects of her desire: Nero and power. Within the world of the stage, these women are victims and villains, constrained by the choices of men, yet granted their own agency. The tragic next act in their histories is left tantalizingly to the side.

In contrast, Michael Hersch's *Poppaea* with its libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann does not shy away from the tragedies of Oc-

tavia and Poppaea. The opera is ringed by twinned scenes of domestic violence committed against Poppaea by her husband; it closes with a pointed look at Nero's continued violent control of her body and her legacy after her death. At the opera's center we are invited to watch as Octavia bleeds to death, a scene which the stage has often declined to depict. But *Poppaea* does not allow us to view the violence against these women's bodies with the voyeuristic eyes of male-centered drama. Rather, the true drama comes from the staging of the inner lives and complex psychology of women who are victims, yes, but who are also agents of vengeance against a world that would continue to victimize them through its storytelling. We experience Poppaea's journey to the center of political power as a journey to her own inner darkness as she learns to be comfortable with stage-managing murder and watching bloodshed. So too as we see Octavia die, we might be surprised to see her continue to haunt the stage as a vengeful ghost who finds pleasure in the death of Poppaea's child, who seems to relish Poppaea's bloodthirstiness, and who looks forward to Poppaea's own destruction at the hands of her husband.

Poppaea is an opera about Nero's wives for the modern world. Its polyvalent characterization of these women gives them back

their agency and their psychological interiority by refusing to flatten them into the convenient stereotypes of ancient history. But although it centers their passions and their agency, it refuses to use their complicity within the system of imperial oppression to deny them the status of victims. For they are victims: of Nero, of history, and of the many stories that have been told in-between. As a scholar of antiquity, I see within this new work an emotional awakening within the power of their story that began on the stages of ancient Rome but which recognizes a power in female anger that belongs squarely to this century. ■

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“... the antique mass graves were no prettier”

Michael Hersch

In our many conversations, librettist Stephanie Fleischmann would note that violence and threat in Poppaea’s world constituted a “room tone” which hummed omnipresently. 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 which bound the destinies of all involved. We 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.

The fact is that themes relating to violence both externally and, later, internally (illness), would not be far from my own work over the past several decades, even if momentarily quieted. It would 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 fifteen years, physical illness and its consequences have been a focus for me — 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.

A number of years ago I had a conversation with the soprano Ah Young Hong, who mentioned to me that she had undertaken the role of Poppaea in Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. I was fascinated that this remarkable singer, whom I only knew as a performer of challenging contemporary music, had inhabited Monteverdi's portrayal of this figure. I learned of her complex feelings about this character, and the fact that there was much more to Poppaea's story beyond that of Monteverdi's telling. I went home and read as much of the history that I could find. I was stunned by the comprehensive devastation that ultimately befell Poppaea and her world, spaces far removed from the images of grandeur and pageantry of her in triumph — a picture many still currently have. The juxtaposition of what was the more likely reality for Poppaea, and Hong's own personal painful history made a deep and lasting impression. I found myself thinking and increasingly hearing a new work built around these particular narratives and, by extension, Ms. Hong's voice. Each strain dealt with issues that long occupied me in hopes of finding answers in sound. The possibilities for sonic and dramatic exploration were both vast and intimidating.

Poppaea's story encapsulated something that my friend and colleague, sculptor Christopher Cairns, said years ago that 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 those directly in her orbit — seemed to allow for a full examination of this sentiment.

My friendship and working relationship with poet and painter Fawzi Karim (1945-2019) in more recent years had a profound impact on my thinking about many things, Poppaea in particular. I had completed a work titled *the script of storms* in 2018, setting texts of Karim. Karim's poetry often dealt with his experiences in Iraq as a young man. His poetry and our discussions more broadly touched

upon elements which didn't seem far from Poppaea's Rome. Writing of the 1958 coup he witnessed in Iraq as a boy:

It is very hard to speak of this because I did not fully understand what was going on. I was very young. They took (the then Prime Minister) Nuri's 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.

After Karim died unexpectedly a few years ago, I continued to return to his poetry and his considerations regarding writing. I've written before about Karim that his work often included particular and unexpected juxtapositions of quiet introspection and graphic brutal-

"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 which bound the destinies of all involved."

ity, something that Poppaea's story shared and that I wanted to further explore in this opera.

In many respects the ebb and flow of the lives of Poppaea, Nero, and Octavia surfaced ideas I had about certain sculpture, poetry, and other writing, which had drawn me in for years. The work of Cairns and Karim always struggled with particular darknesses, darknesses among us, in a manner which got to the heart of the matter directly, unflinchingly, and conveyed them without excess, sentimentality, or sensationalism.

Christopher Middleton (1926-2015) was another poet whose work 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 two decades 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 which 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.

*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 ... 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 dirt itself.*

— Christopher Middleton

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, and the limited historical record additionally affords an opportunity to read into the kinds of thinking which 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 the attempt at telling their story. ■



Poppaea

Stephanie Fleischmann

I first encountered Michael Hersch's music in 2018, when he approached me to collaborate with him on *Poppaea*. Listening to his work, I entered what was for me a new world—one of intense darkness and a rare luminosity. A sonic space that straddles present and past, violence and tenderness, resilience and terror, brokenness and beauty. A music that reaches for the ineffable and expresses just that—the impossibility of the attempt—as well as the plentitude of possibilities proffered in the reaching, in the fact of that very impossibility.

Despite my visceral response to the richness, the complexity of Michael's music, 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. And so I listened some more, and found I could not tear myself away from this relentless, unflinching, uncompromising voice, the brave new world of Michael's music, the ancient quality I sensed emerging from its architectonics. As I listened, 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. As I read, I discovered that Poppaea, like so many women of her time, is largely absent from the record, a cipher erased from the histories—the so-called source texts of Suetonius and Cassius and Dio, written decades after Nero's reign, fueled by complex political agendas. 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, in which emperors were akin to gods. And as I immersed myself in the entwined fates of Poppaea and Nero's first wife Octavia, my world kept turning, through

a presidency that was likened to, indeed a president who has likened himself to, Nero; through pandemic and civil rights upheavals, climate crisis and multiple ongoing wars. A world which, it was becoming painfully clear as I sifted through the source materials, was not so very far from Poppaea's.

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, in all their terrifying, consternating, and exhilarating contradictions. 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.

As we sought to look into the abyss of the past in order to shed light on how it is we move forward—despite the devastation that we continue to wreak—we found ourselves writing the opera during a sea-change, a sorely needed, ongoing correction regarding whose pieces are being played in the world's concert halls, whose works are being

published, exhibited, performed. But we encountered, too, a kind of fallout in the wake of this necessary shift, a reckoning involving which stories can be told, and by whom.

In her essay accompanying this recording, soprano Ah Young Hong, for whom we created the role of Poppaea, eloquently addresses the current turn away from the depiction of fallen women, victims of their circumstances, as opera heroines, articulating the imperative she feels, especially now, to realize Poppaea, both victim and victimizer, on the opera stage. Even so, as we set out to write *Poppaea*, we had to silence the voices in our heads, the culture at large pelting us with questions: Whose story is this, anyway? Do I/we have the right to tell it? Will the current moment sustain the telling of *this* story—by *these* makers?

To which I reply with yet another question: As a writer who makes a practice of writing into stories, histories, worlds, civic spaces, cultures, eras, genders and contexts often wildly different from those of my own lived experience, how do I breathe life into that which I have not lived or do not intimately know? There is always the research. But foremost within the writer's—and the composer's—arsenal is the imagination. It is this very realm that seems to be at stake in these times.

If we do not leave ourselves open to our imaginations and the imaginations of others to dream into bodies, minds and hearts other than our own, questions of appropriation notwithstanding, how can we come to know each other? To meet each other where we live and share that space? If, whatever our gender, we are not free to create complex female characters with which to both consider and confront the violence of who we are and to mine what little beauty remains in a world riven by it, then we diminish our vigilance, we are in danger of turning a blind eye. We fail to lay the groundwork for the possibility of change.

What we need now more than ever is to scrutinize ourselves all the more closely. How else do we begin to divine the truth of what it is to be human? Where do we find *empathy*? How do we engage in civil discourse and exchange, let alone friendship and love, without it? *Poppaea* seems to me the ideal site for such an inquiry. As both a collaborator in the making of this music drama, and as audience member, I turn to Michael's music, in all its hallowed, ravaged sublimity. I seek the answers, and the questions, there. ■



Interview with soprano Ah Young Hong

There are times when the “bad guy” wins, though it’s usually temporary. But “temporary” is often a description given by those who are not victims. More frequently, justice remains elusive. And collectively there is often a tendency toward complicity in this ... to hide things, to camouflage, to gloss over. There is understandably a strong desire to focus on the good, the just. But in art, when the aspirational comes into conflict with the realities it attempts to transcend, it can lead to problematic distortions. Reality, life, is rarely one or the other. This is why I was so excited to focus on this particular *Poppaea*, and this character in all her complexities. The work shines a powerful light into the dark corners. As someone who performed the role of Poppaea in Monteverdi’s opera, I was very curious to see how Hersch would approach it. How would he and Fleischmann approach this life? When I read the score and the libretto 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.

These performances occur during a long-running battle, especially in the Western world, of what art should be; what art should do. People argue that by sharing particular troubling aspects of human experience in this cultural moment, specifically those of women, we are perpetuating these crimes rather than taking a step toward diminishing them. Contrary to providing a space to obscure difficult realities — which much art does and does beautifully and even at times necessarily — art can also clarify them. It can provide a window into the all-too-common chaoses which occur behind closed doors and, too frequently, remain there; situations and events many people understand, unfortunately. Opera is particularly good at this. Much of what happens in this *Poppaea* may seem distant to some in the audience. But I assure them it is not distant for many more.

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 first hand 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.

This openness is a gut feeling. What I expose onstage certainly may cause discomfort, but discomfort in art certainly is not incompatible, strange as it seems to say, with the ability to be entertained. That is not news to anyone. Discomfort, even the need to turn away would be an acknowledgement of the wrongness of what 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.

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. In this moment where there are good and bad faith calls to curtail, minimize, reframe, rethink, reorder, reconfigure violence against women on film, in the theater, on the opera stage, I think we must be extremely cautious in the face of calls to put up guardrails. It's one thing to sensationalize difficult issues. This opera doesn't do that.

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. I can relate to those moments when Poppaea's power is diminishing, is on the downslide, where she suddenly is very much not in control. Of course, she also becomes an 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 tragically, is not so uncommon.

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 to me 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. Perhaps this is a result of my own upbringing. I'm not sure. 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. ■

- Interview conducted on 18 June 2021

The Telling of Poppaea's End

Markus Bothe

This *Poppaea* begins its narration where Monteverdi's opera leaves off. It displays a world which still upholds a veil of intactness, but that in fact is actually destroying itself.

At this moment, we are again living in a time in which we can feel violent forces living just beneath the surface; the assumed protective shell of civilization and humanism by no means providing the stability we think. All it takes is the withdrawing of soldiers from Afghanistan over a few days for a supposedly stable system there to implode. A virus emerges, and all over the world expected consensus disintegrates. This opera tells us a bit about processes like these.

How does one show the violence of this work on the stage, especially since Michael Hersch's music is extremely vivid in and of itself, and can tell us such a large part of it? We chose a medium that enables us to still hopefully display further facets: Marius Kob, a puppet-maker from Basel, has built "soul puppets" for each of the three protagonists, with which Nero, Poppaea, and Octavia can communicate

with each other, and through which they also can enter into myriad physical contacts with one another.

Hersch's attempt to directly communicate a fundamental emotion with his music is remarkable. This sometimes stands in contrast with what is simultaneously said in the libretto. He brings the overarching feeling to the fore, and the actual micro-actions often recede into the background.

This makes for many interesting decisions that the director and actors must determine. For example, when Nero enters Poppaea's chambers in the penultimate scene, is he coming from a celebration or straight from a catastrophe? The libretto says one thing, the music says another. The performance should make both tangible, so that the story told is communicated just as well as the violence that often remains held just below the surface, with which this music makes palpable. ■

This text was based on a conversation between Markus Bothe and Adrian Kelterborn / Prisma-go GmbH in September 2021.



On Poppaea

Heinrich Toews, Ioannis Piertzovanis: Architects/Set Design for Poppaea

There is no doubt that the actions of the brutal ruler Nero have led us to remember him, even today, as among the most vibrant tyrants of Rome. But in the shadows of such a vicious figure — often invisibly — other people are at work. And from their shadowy places, they orchestrate intrigue and, in this case, the most terrible brutalities, without ever having to fear the spotlight on their own misdeeds. In an abstruse mixture of instrumentalized morality is a hardened hunger for power. Everyone fights for their own advantage. It is often difficult to discern if there are, in fact, any victims at all in this story, or if they simply harm each other to the extent of their respective abilities. Is anyone in the spotlight automatically a villain?

The relationships and entanglements of the characters are laid out like a finely woven web. Loose connections, tight knots and strong networks characterize the heterogeneous web. Everything is interwoven. There is no pulling without making the whole net shake; no loosening without making the many other links lose their own points of reference. While some skillfully weave new threads, others at times are hardly aware

of the enormous strands of power that are placed in their hands: one wrong move and the whole system falters, one mistake and half the net is gone. One thing tied to the wrong leash, and before one knows it, everything unravels.

Simply telling the story of a twisted ruler and his twisted companions in an equally depraved system would, however, be an all too easy escape into the ancient material. To paraphrase Goethe's Faust:

*My friend, all of the ages that are gone
Now make up a book with seven seals.
The spirit of the ages, that you find,
In the end, is the spirit of Humankind:
A mirror where all the ages are revealed.*

But it would be too trivial to specifically point the finger at the present day: Nero is not a current autocrat, and Poppaea is not simply the Roman image of a scheming influencer. Rather, the urgent question is how much of Nero and Poppaea each of us lets out, for the sake of self-advancement or simply out of convenience. How much do we build, how much do we destroy? How much damage do we find just about tolerable so we

can continue to cultivate our favorite prejudices?

The 'skene', originally a simple wooden structure in the ancient 'theatron', took on a central role as stage house for the locus of the action. It helped to suggest architectures and served as a scaffolding for stage sets that would transport the audience into the world of the drama being portrayed. The action of *Poppaea* takes place mainly in the palace of imperial Rome. What could be more natural than to draw a picture of the Domus Aurea: the golden house with exorbitantly lavish furnishings that Nero had built after the burning of Rome, about which he supposedly said after moving in, that it was now finally worthy of a human being. Poppaea, however, sees this house quite differently in the libretto: "It's too big. I get lost when I try to take a bath. This house is as big as a city. A labyrinth of passages leading nowhere."

Half parading, half erring, Poppaea, Nero, and their court wander through the glittering house. It is made of translucent walls that show glimpses and then conceal again. Meticulously threaded and balanced, thousands of bottles come together to form a





“What we see looks at us.” [‘Ce que nous voyons, ce que nous regarde’].

It looks at us in the light of our biases, and at best manages to shake them up a little. Perhaps somewhere in the reflections and obfuscations, a small bit of insight catches our eye; into the hubris of our species, into our well-intentioned and yet disastrous actions. Beyond anger or ambition, which make us equally blind with rage.

As the plot unfolds, the initially grave entity of the facade begins to crumble. At first, there are small injuries: Someone pushes through the shimmering rows and reveals the fragility of the membranes. Then, at some point, whole strands begin to rush down: Perforating these layers of space subtractively opens up spaces that reveal details and key scenes occupied by the actors. While the opening of the curtains initially creates exciting new spaces, it becomes more and more clear that, as it progresses, it proceeds inexorably to ruination. The house is abandoned to a blind lust for destruction. What remains is a toxic world left behind for posterity. And as if that wasn’t enough, on the wreckage from which it had built its glittering house, this society beats, unto death, its own unborn continuation. ■

unified whole. The boundaries between reality and illusory pretension are blurred. Are these bottles valuable material or just nicely presented refuse? In its dynamic, the stage design reflects the ambivalent questions of the opera, and in its materiality it also refers to much more everyday confrontations. We know that we produce a lot of waste. Are sustainable materials better? Maybe we should use glass bottles — they feel much more valuable. But if we take the time to compare the ecological footprints more closely, we

are perhaps shocked to discover that it is not at all clear what is less harmful to our environment. Even a glass bottle leaves its mark, which, depending on the journey, can exceed that of a plastic one.

Inevitably, we classify what we see into one preconceived value system or another. The “innocent eye”, as John Ruskin would have wished, a value-free way of seeing, isn’t something we will achieve. Rather, we are forced to learn, like Georges Didi-Huberman:

What Has Changed Since Then?

Bernhard Günther

People are swept away by excessive ambition, they overestimate their agency in complex situations, they make regretful decisions in an attempt to generate lives of ease; they cause suffering, death, cruelties, impossible to fathom; they trigger processes which can be neither controlled nor reversed, ultimately dragging themselves and others into the abyss. Is this opera or reality? Is it prehistory, antiquity, absolutism, or the daily news? Is this an old European inheritance of the West, or is it the same elsewhere? Is it even about people, or is it the third law of thermodynamics? Is it the *White Male Effect*, or a broader problem of power and privilege; should others also be considering: 'Don't do this at home'?



With *Poppaea*, Michael Hersch and Stephanie Fleischmann have come much closer to the brutal historical events of Rome, the center of power under Emperor Nero, than Monteverdi's genre-shaping baroque *Poppea*, with its deceptive happy ending. Risk-taking, ambition, abuse of power and authority, violence, — especially violence against women — murder and intrigue bring a world to its end. The dark side of power, largely omitted by Monteverdi, becomes the motor of the destructive events in Hersch and Fleischmann's work. The score and libretto look these violences, sexuality, and devastation right in the eye. A major challenge for the director of the world premiere performances in Basel and Vienna, Markus Bothe, was that this larger-than-life work would have to make do without a traditional opera stage and its comparatively limitless technical possibilities. For the same reasons, similar challenges arose for Piertz-ovanis Toews Architects in the development of the stage design for this opera and these particular spaces.

Hersch and Fleischmann deliberately focus on the female perspective. They make it unmistakably clear that, despite all the historical research, the focus here lies on a current viewpoint. The bloody end of the dynasty of Julius Caesar and the five emperors after

him from 2000 years ago is not told through the dry facts of history books but, rather, it is exactly those blind spots in the surprisingly distorted image of history that are brought into view: the subjective, personal, private, emotional moments of women in a world of power dominated by men. The fascinating Roman empress Poppaea is portrayed as exceptionally complex, beyond the superficial perpetrator-victim dualities through her brutal experiences of sexual and physical violence, her own intrigues and others', the death of her mother, her daughter, her rival Octavia and, finally, her own death.

The story of Poppaea stood at the very beginning of the genre of opera, when it was established that such an elaborate art form was able to display the forbidden, the immoral, and the monstrous with, ideally, an accompaniment of glamor and triumph. 380 years later, the mood is somewhat less triumphant than in the Baroque era, to put it mildly. The monstrous, on the other hand, has not diminished.

While a radical discussion is carried out in the English-speaking world which often attempts, for example, to make the portrayal of violence against women taboo on the opera stage while at the same time fundamentally questioning who remains allowed to tell which stories about whom, Michael

Hersch and Stephanie Fleischmann write *Poppaea* appropriately — and necessarily — as an opera to which nothing human is alien. They write about highly complex figures of a disappeared culture, where even historical scholars must often rely on intuition and empathy. Above all, they write *Poppaea* as an opera. And they write it as a decidedly new opera that is unusually daring.

The questions raised by Hersch and Fleischmann about how much has changed in the course of the last 2000 years, and how far humanity has come since then are now being raised in the form of this opera at a festival that has transformation as its theme. With a bit of luck, which culture and society have a real need for in these complex times, works like this might contribute something to thinking about necessary change.

We thank the many people who have contributed to making this courageous undertaking possible, we wish this opera many listeners, and we wish the listeners all those essential and healing effects that, since Aristotle, have been attributed to the representation on the stage of that dark side of humanity. ■



Poppaea: Timeline

Caveat: it is challenging to create a timeline for any woman from ancient Rome, even one as famous as Poppaea. Birth dates are rarely recorded in sources that survive to us and must be estimated based on things like later marriage and childbirth. So too events important to an individual, such as the death of a child, are often seen as insignificant to the male historians who focus on politics. What follows is an attempt to give chronological life to Poppaea and to those whose lives intersected meaningfully with hers. — *Lauren Donovan Ginsberg*

- AD 30** Poppaea born to Titus Ollius and Poppaea Sabina the Elder, likely in Pompeii.
- AD 31** Death of Titus Ollius, Poppaea's father.
- AD 37** Birth of Nero to Agrippina in Antium (modern Anzio).
- AD 40** Birth of Octavia to Messalina and Emperor Claudius.
- AD 44** Marriage of Poppaea to Crispinus, leader of the Praetorian Guard for Emperor Claudius.
- AD 47** Poppaea Sabina the Elder is forced to commit suicide at the order of Messalina, wife of Emperor Claudius.
- AD 48** Empress Messalina is executed for treason.
- AD 49** Emperor Claudius marries Agrippina, mother of Nero; Agrippina cleans house and removes Crispinus, Poppaea's husband, from his position.
- AD 53** Nero marries Octavia, daughter of Emperor Claudius, and becomes heir apparent.
- AD 54** Death of Emperor Claudius, accession of Emperor Nero.

Sometime during these years Poppaea gives birth to a son. Shortly thereafter she also divorces Crispinus, likely due to his fall from power. She then married Otho, friend of the emperor Nero. It seems she had full agency over these choices.

AD 58-60 Nero meets Poppaea through Otho; Nero and Poppaea begin their affair; Poppaea and Otho divorce.

AD 59 Nero murders his mother, Agrippina.

AD 62 Nero attempts to divorce Octavia to marry Poppaea; the people of Rome rise in revolution; Nero charges Octavia with treason and has her exiled and executed.

Nero marries Poppaea twelve days after Octavia's death.

AD 63 Birth of Claudia, daughter of Poppaea Sabina and Emperor Nero; Poppaea is given the honorific title 'Augusta' in honor of the birth.

Claudia dies within a few months and is deified as Diva Claudia.

AD 64 The Great Fire of Rome.

Poppaea becomes pregnant again.

Pompeii becomes an imperial colony; graffiti and inscriptions praise Nero and Poppaea Augusta for the decision and for their gifts.

AD 65 Poppaea's first husband, Crispinus, is executed alongside other leading Romans like Seneca for conspiracy against Nero (the so-called Pisonian conspiracy).

Death of Poppaea Augusta. Nero deifies her with the name Diva Poppaea and sets up cult worship in her name.



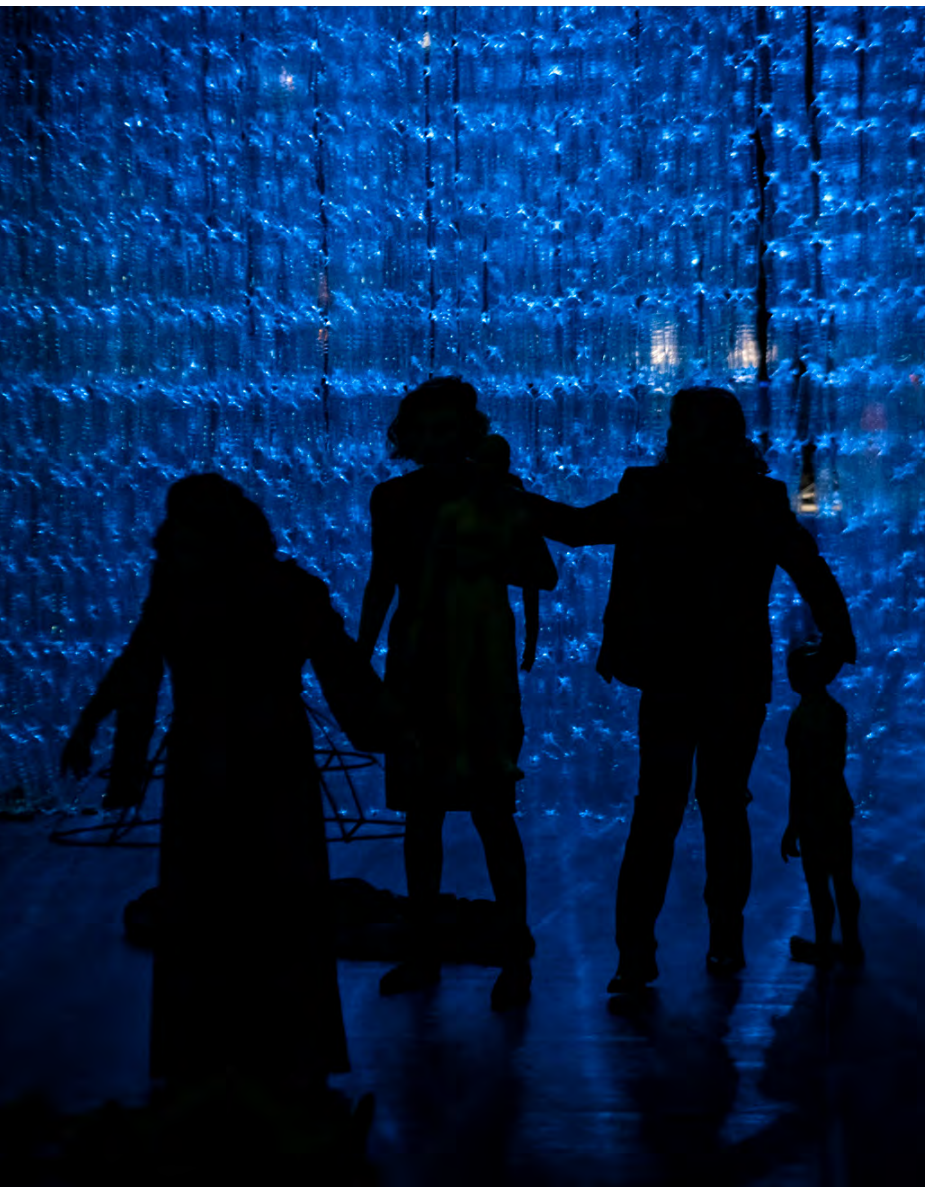
Sometime after the death of Poppaea, her son by Crispinus drowned. One source claims Nero ordered the drowning, but we cannot be sure.

AD 65-68 Nero continues to publicly mourn Poppaea; he wears masks modeled on her face when he performs tragedies on the stages of Rome and abroad.

AD 68 Nero commits suicide after a series of provincial rebellions. Ancient sources note that he dies on the anniversary of his execution of Octavia.

AD 69-70 The cult of the deified Poppaea is nullified by Nero's enemies and many of her surviving statues and images are destroyed alongside his.





POPPAEA

libretto

music by Michael Hersch

libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann

Characters

Poppaea	soprano
Nero	tenor
Octavia	mezzo-soprano
Handmaidens	2 sopranos, 1 mezzo-soprano
Chorus	soprano I, soprano II, mezzo-soprano

Instrumentation

flute, oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, 2 alto saxophones, bassoon, contrabassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, percussion, piano, 2 violins, viola, violoncello, contrabass

Time/place

The events of the opera are inspired by specific historic moments during the reign of Nero, occurring in Rome or thereabouts between the years 62 to 65 AD. Although the language and its imagery are rooted in the history/culture/mythology of Nero and Poppaea's time, the opera is conceived with the notion that POPPAEA is not set in ancient Rome, per se, but that its characters may inhabit some other space/time, which may evoke a more contemporary world.

Synopsis

Prologue: We begin at the end. We see a man in the act of ferociously beating a woman who is clearly in the late stages of pregnancy. The details of the faces are obscured, in silhouette. We cut away from the violence to the overture—populated by shadowy images of Nero's monstrous acts, very possibly visions of a semi-conscious Poppaea. The sensation is one of moving backwards through time, to the inciting incident, the moment that hurtles us towards Poppaea's death.

Three years earlier. Poppaea sings to the statue of her mother, who, falsely accused of adultery, was forced to commit suicide when Poppaea was 16. Nero, the emperor, Poppaea's lover of 3 years, enters. Poppaea

delivers the news that she is carrying his child. Nero, ecstatic, promises to divorce his barren wife Octavia and marry Poppaea, who will now become empress of Rome (thus avenging her mother's death, which was instigated by Octavia's mother, Messalina, former empress).



But divorcing Octavia, who is beloved by the people, proves challenging. In response to a wave of rioting in the streets, Nero and Poppaea accuse Octavia of adultery. Nero has Octavia's handmaidens tortured in an attempt to garner proof of her adultery, but they insist on Octavia's innocence. This is Poppaea's first direct involvement in inflicting violence on others. She looks away before confronting her fear, moving in closer, as Nero orders Octavia's execution despite the maidens' avowals that she has done nothing.

Soon after, Poppaea serves as a kind of midwife to Octavia's passage into death, witnessing as Nero's former wife slowly bleeds.

Plagued by nightmares of her mother, Poppaea washes off Octavia's blood in a bath of the milk of 500 she-asses. Time collapses; Poppaea gives birth. Four months later, she loses the child. Nero laments his daughter's death, deifying her, as Poppaea's world crumbles: Rome burns; Nero grows ever more debauched, bankrupting the empire by building a palace as big as a city, desperate to fill it with heirs; and betrayal is everywhere. As the Pisonian conspiracy unfolds, it is Poppaea, pregnant once again, who ruthlessly orders the executions—not Nero, who escapes all responsibility by recklessly racing chariots and chasing the laurels of lyre competitions.

And we are back at the beginning again. A pregnant and utterly disillusioned Poppaea awaits her husband, who returns home from the races to overhear his empress questioning his competence. Nero flies into a rage and beats Poppaea unrelentingly. As Poppaea dies, she sings a lullaby to her unborn child. The chorus, jettisoned into the future, looks back on the end of Nero's line.

DISC 1

1 PROLOGUE

Lights up on a man beating a pregnant woman. In media res.

2 OVERTURE

A kind of limbo. A transitory place between life and death. A netherworld, containing a shadowy collection of images conjuring NERO's monstrousness. A sense of accretion, of journey, of moving through—or of possibly moving backwards through—time.

3 SCENE I - NEW LIFE

Three years earlier. NERO's palace. POPPAEA, in her chambers, praying to a small statue of her mother (a lar, a household god).

POPPAEA
Mater, Mater,
I offer up my breath to you—
This eyelash,
this amber strand of hair.
Nero would have it dipped in gold if he could.

If only you were here
to greet the child
growing inside me.
Nero's child.
New life, stirring.
A child to rewrite the story of your death,

which came to me last night in a dream,
again.
Just sixteen,
I watched you slice yourself open
like a melon
in penance for a crime you didn't commit.
Adultery.
Hardly a crime.
Adultery—
I am the queen of it.
Even if
I am not queen,
not empress, not yet,
but soon.

Mater, Mater,
last night I felt my lips on yours,
I caught your final breath,
held it in my mouth.
I keep watching
myself in my sleep,
watching rivers of blood
running down your breasts,
pooling at your feet,
and all for the sake of a false claim
by Octavia's mother—
a deceitful woman with a lust for more
(NERO enters)
power.
(to NERO) My love.

NERO (to POPPAEA)
My love.

POPPAEA (to NERO)
A blackened sun.
A portal to an even darker world.
A horde of frozen elephants.
Lightning cracking our feast in two.
All these portents have been eclipsed by this:
A child.

NERO
A child.

POPPAEA
Your child.

NERO/POPPAEA
New life.

POPPAEA
Stirring.

NERO/POPPAEA
Our child.

NERO/POPPAEA
A blackened sun.
A horde of frozen elephants.
Lightning—
All these portents that have plagued our love

POPPAEA
for three long years.

NERO
Ever since

POPPAEA
you had your mother killed

NERO
to pave the way for us.

POPPAEA
Or so you said.

NERO
All these omens that have held us back

POPPAEA
A blackened sun,
a horde of frozen elephants,

N: have been eclipsed by this child.
P: lightning— All these portents—

NERO
My divinity is fixed.
My line will live on through you.

POPPAEA
What of Octavia? Your wife?
The withered branch

NERO/POPPAEA
that has borne me/you no fruit
for seven years—

NERO
The withered branch.
I've no more use for her.

POPPAEA (*to herself*)
At last.

NERO
At last I can shed the skin of petty politics

P: Barren Octavia's dirge of a mother
killed my mother.
N: that traps me like a wolf
and have you for my own.

POPPAEA
She killed my sleep.

NERO
Shake off the shackles of rule
that kept you a concubine.

P: But I lay claim to Nero's love, Nero's glory.
N: And drink you in, everywhere, always.

NERO
At last I can eat, sleep, breathe,
consume you, my love.

POPPAEA
I have given Nero a child.

NERO
I can be consumed by you, my wife.

POPPAEA
He has promised me the world.

[4] SCENE II - THE WEDDING

12 days later. The streets of Rome. Nero and Poppaea's wedding.

CHORUS 1
Swallows flood the sky.
Fire and water have met.
Nero and his veiled bride
wind their way through gilded streets.
Exsultate! Jupiter, Juno, Janus!
Rome is whole.
Swallows flood the sky.

CHORUS 2
The empire is broken.
Octavia,
tossed aside like a soured sack of grain.
Hordes run wrecking, trampling,
toppling
Poppaea's form
in stone and wood and precious metal.
Her radiant face comes crashing down
as we lift up
Octavia
as our own.

5 SCENE III - ADULTERY

Almost contiguous. POPPAEA & NERO are in NERO's palace. OCTAVIA is in another space.

POPPAEA

My beauty is a front I hide behind.

NERO

Twelve days.

POPPAEA

The blockade that keeps intruders out.

OCTAVIA

Twelve days between one wife and the next.

P: My beauty is a front.

N: Twelve days, they clamor, is too fleet.

P: I was never afraid of anything.

O: I was afraid of everything.

P: Except that I would die too late.

N: The mob is hungry.

O: I always knew I'd die too soon.

OCTAVIA

Twelve days, the mob—

P: After the bloom had slipped away.

O: I always knew I'd die too soon.

N: The mob is hungry.

N: The smoldering streets—

O: Married to him. Nero.

P: Beauty.

N: The mob.

O: Twelve days.

NERO

Hungry.

POPPAEA

My beauty is a thing divorced from me.

Like alabaster, or dog's blood,
a moth's wing, that barricade.

OCTAVIA

Nero. My father's wife's febrile son.

N: Divorce. The smoldering streets.

P: The thing that has kept me safe
from them.

O: He held my throat

P: That keeps you mine.

O: until I couldn't breathe.

P: I was never afraid of anything.

N: Divorce on grounds of childlessness
won't stave them off.

O: Sodomized my little brother
and poisoned him.

P: But now, terror is this trace of ash.

O: It rained the day we buried him.

N: Our unborn child—

OCTAVIA

My brother.

P: The astringent grip,

O: The rain washed the gypsum off
his clouded skin.

POPPAEA

the wormwood taste,

NERO

The hungry mob.

POPPAEA

the taste of fear—

NERO

Exile is not enough.

POPPAEA

I was never afraid of anything.

O: It rained the day we buried him.

P: Except that I would die too late.

N: I will keep you safe.

O: Uncovered

P: My beauty, which has kept me safe,
dissipated.

N: Divorce on grounds of childlessness

O: the truth of that. Poison-clouded.

N: won't stave them off.



O: Nero sodomized my little brother.

N: The smoldering streets.

POPPAEA/NERO/OCTAVIA

Twelve days.

OCTAVIA

I was afraid of everything. I wanted to die.

O: He held my throat

until I couldn't breathe.

P: The blockade that keeps intruders out.

N: Our unborn child. The hungry mob.

P: My beauty kept me safe.

N: Exile is not enough.

O: It rained the day we buried him.

P: Dog's blood, a moth's wing, that
barricade.

N: I will keep you safe. The mob is hungry.

O: Rain washed the gypsum off his poison-
clouded skin.

N: Divorce on grounds of childlessness.

P: But now terror is this trace of ash,

O: Uncovered the truth of that.

N: Adultery.

P: the astringent grip,
the wormwood taste of fear—of *them*.

O: The truth of this.

P: Terror, this trace

O: The truth.

P: of ash.

O: Afraid.

O: Married to him, Nero.

P: Now I'm terrified.

N: Our unborn child.

P: Our unborn child will die.

O: It rained the day we buried him.

POPPAEA

Terrified our child will die.

NERO

The mob is hungry.

N/O: Adultery.

P: Terrified.

N: We will charge her.

P: Our unborn child

O: Held my throat.

P: That I...

we will die today.

O: What Nero has done to me.

POPPAEA

Our unborn child.

OCTAVIA

The truth.

Will live.

Whatever Nero has done to me.

Adultery.

Whatever he will do.

P: What if we die today?

O: The truth will live.

POPPAEA

Before my skin turns lusterless,
my hair grows dull and grey.

Exile is not enough.

Husband, have her killed.

NERO

Adultery.

We will charge her.

We will have her killed.

[6] SCENE IV - OCTAVIA IS INNOCENT

*The next day. The HANDMAIDENS are being
tortured. POPPAEA is in a separate space that
somehow allows her to witness the violence.*

HANDMAIDENS

My lady Octavia,
she is innocent—
I am with her
every hour
of every day.
Lady Octavia.

POPPAEA

I can't bear to see
what will become of them
if they don't confess
that adulterous Octavia
has defaced the father of my child.

P: I can't stand to watch.

H: Drown me. Burn me.

P: And yet they will not flinch,
H: Brand me with molten metal.

P: they have no fear.
H: Pull the nails off my fingers.

P: Are they so devoted
that they would rather die
H: Crush my hands and feet with stones.

POPPAEA
than sabotage, inform, on her?
I can't stand—

Who will stand by me
when I'm in need of fealty?

HANDMAIDENS
My lady Octavia is innocent.

P: I can't bring myself to witness
H: She has never been with those

P: and yet I can't pull my eyes away
H: you accuse her of consorting with—

P: from flaying skin, grinding bones.
H: nor any man.

HANDMAIDENS

With Nero for a husband,
(*Nero enters.*)
she hates them all.

NERO

It's a waste of time.
It doesn't matter what they say or don't.
Octavia must die.

HANDMAIDENS

My lady Octavia,
she is innocent.

POPPAEA (*commanding the torturers*)
Stop! Enough!
Octavia will die.

[7] INTERLUDE I

[8] SCENE V - OCTAVIA

*Octavia is in her cell. No real time has elapsed
between this scene and the last.*

OCTAVIA

Seneca has been sent away.
Nero's tutor.
He was—a kind of gate.
Kept me safe enough.

Steered this keeling skiff of state.

But even *he* could not stop Nero, his protégé,
from rigging his own mother's ship to wreck.
She would not drown.

So next, Nero, Agrippina's son,
ordered a henchman to assassinate
his own mother,
whom, Nero said, was too obstinate.

My brother, Britannicus,
I loved, I lost.
Knocked off by my husband.
I was gutted then.
I was gutted when my mother was killed.
I was nine.
Three years later, I was gutted again on my
wedding day.
Every day since.
I have been gutted.

Devoid.
Of love.
Of lust for living.
In this wasted land.
I have been wasting.
I am wasting away.

Seneca has been sent to Spain.
Poppaea is Nero's wife.
Who will keep us from calamity?
There is no one, nothing for me here
but death.

9 SCENE VI - POPPAEA WITNESSES OCTAVIA'S DEATH

A few hours later. OCTAVIA is slowly bleeding out. POPPAEA sits with her. As the scene progresses, POPPAEA, initially sitting at a distance, comes closer, circling, pausing, examining, even touching OCTAVIA's face, her wounds.

POPPAEA

Octavia—

Mmmmm...

What does it feel like?

Is the pain sharp or dull?

Octavia—

Do you see me?

What do you see?

Octavia—

Bitter almond of a girl,

your heart is too true.

You look as if you've seen

your brother's ghost.

You'll be with him soon.

Look at me.

Why won't you bleed?

Too true for this world.

Bleed.

Why don't you bleed?

Tell me, is death tender?

Is it reprieve?

Does it hurt?

What do you see?

Ungenerous veins!

Sssshh...

(OCTAVIA is now moved to a warm bath to speed the flow of blood. The container is simple, utilitarian; perhaps a trough from which large animals would drink.)

You are so naïve.

I am death.

Do you see me?

Mmmmm...

Octavia.

Ah. Now it flows.

It won't be long...

Poor Octavia.

It's over.

Sssshh...

(POPPAEA is covered in OCTAVIA's blood, which now pools beneath OCTAVIA's body.)





DISC 2

1 SCENE VII - MILK BATH

Soon after OCTAVIA's death. POPPAEA is bathing in her chamber, tended by her handmaidens.

HANDMAIDENS

Five hundred slaves
milk five hundred she-asses
every day.
So that *she* can soak.

POPPAEA

Mater, mater,
you came to me again in my sleep.
I watched you cut yourself open
in penance for a crime you did not commit.
Adultery.

HANDMAIDENS

Bathing in donkey's milk
is restorative, they say.

POPPAEA

Adultery.
It has made me queen,
I am Empress of Rome.
And yet— Octavia, hardly cold,
my emperor is already off,
strumming his lyre, racing Apollo's chariot,
wearing a mask in his own image,
playacting.

HANDMAIDENS

Donkey's milk,
a beauty salve
that saves face,
keeps sister age at bay,
soothes tired skin,
wards off disease.

POPPAEA

Leaving me alone,
dreaming as I wash myself clean.
Waking dreaming.
Besieged by visions:
My own body in this pool of milk.
Watching myself retch,
heaving—
disgorging an ancient, wasted crone
out of my mouth.
Giving birth

H: Donkey's milk

P: to beauty grown old.

P: Vomiting

H: keeps sister age at bay,

P: a sapless, corpselike hag,

H: soothes,

P: wrapped in the skins of goats,

H: wards off disease.

POPPAEA

crawling

HANDMAIDENS

Donkey's milk

POPPAEA

with insect larvae.

HANDMAIDENS

wipes away bloodshed,
the burden of guilt.

(Time elapses.)

POPPAEA

I am giving birth.
Giving birth.
Giving—

(She pulls a baby out of the milk bath. This is Claudia Augusta.)

2 INTERLUDE II

3 SCENE VIII - CLAUDIA AUGUSTA

The streets of Rome. Apart from the crowd, we see POPPAEA and NERO parading or being presented in a glorious fashion.

CHORUS

Exsultate!

A divine light!

Diva Poppaea Augusta's child,

Claudia Augusta, is born to us!

Nero's inheritor!

We celebrate!

Exsultate!

We celebrate Fortuna's gift to Rome!

We dedicate this temple to Alma Venus
even as the earth quakes, boding ill.

Claudia Augusta is born to us!

A divine light! Nero's inheritor!

Divine!

We celebrate Fortuna's gift to Rome.

We avert our gaze.

Earth quakes.

We avert our gaze from a siege

of maleficent auguries

as Nero races chariots

in honor of his baby girl—

Nero's inheritor!

Born to us!

Diva Poppaea Augusta's child, Claudia.

(As time elapses:)

Rome is whole.

Swallows flood the sky.

Exsultate!

A divine light!

Poppaea Augusta's child, Claudia Augusta,

Nero's inheritor!

We celebrate!

Claudia, born to us.

A divine light!

Exsultate!

We celebrate Fortuna's gift to Rome...

We avert our gaze as Nero races chariots
in honor of his baby girl...

(Time further elapses:)

His baby, who is dead.

Not four months old.

4 SCENE IX - NERO'S LAMENT

*NERO'S chambers. POPPAEA is in a place
apart from him. OCTAVIA is a ghost.*

POPPAEA

Diva Claudia.

OCTAVIA *(as ghost)*

Their child, she is dead.

NERO

My child.

P: Augusta

O: She is dead.

NERO

For one hundred days,

I held her perfect, tiny head in my hands.

P: Our child, dead.

O: She's dead.

NERO

For one hundred days,

I fell into her eyes,
burning like her mother's.

P: If our dead child is a god

O: Diva Poppaea,

P: then what am I?

O: Augusta,

POPPAEA

Hardly a god.

O: Diva Augusta,

P: Married to a man who seeks solace
in song,

O: your marriage is as barren as mine.

P: poetry, playacting.

P: I want, I wanted

O: The truth is

P: the power to right my world.

O: wasting, death.

NERO
My child is dead.
The gods have taken my god.
Diva Claudia,
my life,
my divinity,
my child
is dead.

N: I have died
P: I wanted the power
O: The truth is nothing

N: with her.
P: to right my world.
O: but death.

[5] SCENE X - THE GREAT FIRE

The streets of Rome. The city is ablaze. All is chaos.

CHORUS
Immolation!
Rome
eternal
burns!
Raging flames blaze, they—
Plunder our streets! Engulf our homes!
Shattering our gods, household gods!
Searing lives!
Rome is lost. My city. My home!
Rome
eternal
burns

as Nero sings,
he plays his lyre.
He sings, he plays his lyre,
he sings, he plays...

[6] SCENE XI - AFTER THE FIRE

POPPAEA alone in her chambers. Offstage/ outside: revelry, feasting, debauchery in NERO's gardens, which are lit by human torches. NERO enters POPPAEA's chamber.

NERO
The gardens are empty without you, my love.

POPPAEA
The gardens are overrun
by wanton, lackluster hangers-on.

NERO
I need you by my side.

POPPAEA
I can't stand to see the lights.
Human torches?!

NERO
I will snuff them out. Come.

POPPAEA
I can't bear the stench
of charcoaled human flesh—

NERO
Arsonists, they deserve nothing less.

POPPAEA
They say it was *you*—
you who set fire to the city.

NERO
They say?

POPPAEA
They say you set it on fire
so you could build yourself
a feasting hall with revolving heavens
and saffron-spraying pipes.
A "Golden House."

NERO
I built this golden house for us.
For our children.

POPPAEA
Our daughter, dead,
you "marry" a man in jest.

NERO
Pythagoras? But that was just—

POPPAEA
Your breath reeks of onions.

NERO
Alliums are good for the voice.

POPPAEA (*sarcastic*)
Good for singing,
for pretending to play the lyre—



NERO (*angry now*)
I don't pretend.

POPPAEA
You squander your days racing chariots.

NERO
I squander?
I win, I conquer.

POPPAEA
The Satyricon follows you like your shadow.

NERO
They're my friends!

P: Your Satyricon—
N: My friends.

POPPAEA
A herd of exotic antelope
hand-plucked for ravaging.

NERO
A herd?

POPPAEA
And you say you're building this house
for us?

NERO
I will ravage you.
Come, my love. I built this house for you.

POPPAEA
It's too big.

P: I get lost when I try to take a bath.
N: I will lead you through it.

P: This house is as big as a city.
N: No house is big enough

P: A labyrinth of passages leading nowhere.
N: to hold our love.

P: Our love?
N: I built this house for us, for you.

POPPAEA
It's a labyrinth.
It's too big.
I get lost.

NERO
I will show you the way.

POPPAEA
I'm lost.

NERO
We will fill this house with children.

POPPAEA
Children? I am lost.

*(They make love—a shared but lonely gesture,
a loveless union, bordering on violent.*

*Although NERO dominates at first, the power
dynamic between them gradually shifts, and
POPPAEA prevails, mustering hidden inner
reserves to emerge with the upper hand,
asserting dominion over the emperor.)*

OCTAVIA (*as ghost*)
Conspiracy.

HANDMAIDENS (*whisper*)
Seneca,
Piso,
Petronius,
Lucan,
Claudius Senecio.

OCTAVIA
Conspire.
Conspiring.
Conspiracy.

HANDMAIDENS
Piso,
Petronius,
Lucan,
Claudius Senecio.

OCTAVIA
Conspiracy has turned on them.
Nero and Poppaea.
It must be stopped.
Seneca, back from Spain,
must take his own life.
Pregnant Poppaea's decree.

(NERO and POPPAEA extricate themselves from each other. Time has elapsed. POPPAEA's maidens attend to her. She is now pregnant.)

HANDMAIDENS

Her beauty is a front.
Alabaster,
dog's blood,
a moth's wing.

OCTAVIA

Alabaster,
dog's blood,
a moth's wing.

POPPAEA

Seneca is dead.
And Piso,
Lucan,
Petronius
must die—
And Claudius Senecio and—

OCTAVIA

Forty-one men, sentenced to death.
As Nero goes off to the races,
Poppaea keeps the peace.

7 SCENE XII - THIS WORLD

The Golden House. A pregnant POPPAEA in her chambers, praying to the statue of her dead mother.

POPPAEA

Mater,
Mater, I offer up my breath to you—
this eyelash,
this amber strand of hair.

If only you were here
to greet this child.
Our shining hope.
She will fill the crater left behind
by her dead sister.
She will change this world,
safeguard us from danger.

If only you were here, Mater,
to witness how she will
unveil
the darkness shrouding Rome,
disperse
the storm clouds bearing down on me,
vanquish
the tribunals,
the countless deaths I've had to ordain
because he—
my husband,
the emperor,
Nero—
the countless deaths

(NERO enters, but hangs back, momentarily unseen. POPPAEA doesn't hear him come in.)

because he—
Nero
is too impetuous, too weak,
too distracted by his lyre,
his chariots—

(NERO makes himself known.)

NERO

Impetuous, weak?

POPPAEA

And late.

NERO

Late?

POPPAEA

Gone for days on end,
racing your shiny chariots,
playing at being a god.

NERO

Playing?

POPPAEA

Playing, racing...
What if you were to crash into a pile of stones
and smash to smithereens?
What would happen to me and your—

P: New life, stirring.

N: New life.

P: Your child.

N: Our child.

P: A blackened sun.
A horde of frozen elephants.

N: A blackened sun.

P: Lightning.
All these portents
that have plagued our love.

N: Lightning.

NERO

A horde of frozen elephants.

POPPAEA

And here you are, playing at being a god.

NERO

Playing?

(NERO swings and strikes POPPAEA. She falls to the ground.)

POPPAEA

Our child—

(Nero beats POPPAEA brutally. At last he stops. Near death, POPPAEA drags herself across the stage. She sings a lullaby to her unborn child, who is clearly no longer living.)

POPPAEA

This world
you will not see
still spins
in spite of me.
In spite.
Keeps spinning.

This world spins,
singing you to sleep—

CHORUS

Diva Poppaea Augusta
will be deified.
She has become a god
in Nero's Pantheon.

POPPAEA

Now sleep.
A tender, unsullied sleep—

Don't dream,
don't dream—
you will not see your mother die—
just sleep.

This world,
this world—

CHORUS

There will be no funeral pyre
for Nero's alabaster bride.
He embalms her instead,
with all the perfumes in Arabia.
For all time.
He grieves.

POPPAEA

This world—
You are released.

CHORUS

For all time.
He grieves.

POPPAEA

You are released.

CHORUS

He grieves
and then he finds himself a lookalike.
The boy, Sporus, who could be Poppaea's twin.
Nero castrates him, paints his face.
Grants him this name:
Poppaea.
And they are wed.
No children will come of this.
Nero will be the last of his line.

~fin~



BIOGRAPHIES

Ah Young Hong (Poppaea)

A “transfixing” (*New Yorker*) soprano of “fearlessness and consummate artistry” (*Opera News*), Ah Young Hong has interpreted a vast array of repertoire, ranging from the music of Monteverdi, Bach, Mozart, and Poulenc, to works of Shostakovich, Babbitt, Kurtág, and Haas. *The New York Times* praised Ms. Hong as “the opera’s blazing, lone star,” *The Chicago Tribune* called her “absolutely riveting,” and the *Kronen Zeitung* wrote “her stage presence, her soprano voice ... Breathtaking.” In high demand as a concert and chamber soloist, Ms. Hong has performed with violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja, Ensemble Phoenix Basel, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Camerata Bern, Mahler Chamber Orchestra, FLUX Quartet, the Netherland-based contemporary music group Ensemble Klang, Konzerthaus Berlin’s ensemble-in-residence Ensemble unitedberlin, Ensemble Dal Niente, The Daedalus Quartet, Wiener KammerOrchester, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Charleston Symphony Orchestra, Phoenix Symphony Orchestra, Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, and Tempesta di Mare, amongst others. She has also appeared as soloist at the

Aldeburgh Music Festival, CalPerformances series, Seattle Symphony recital series, and the Ojai Festival. In opera, Ms. Hong premiered Michael Hersch’s *On the Threshold of Winter*, a one woman opera, and his *Poppaea* in the title role. Other roles include the title role in Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, Morgana in Handel’s *Alcina*, Gilda in Verdi’s *Rigoletto*, Fortuna and Minerva in Monteverdi’s *Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria*, and Asteria in Handel’s *Tamerlano*. She has also appeared with Opera Lafayette in *Rebel* and Francoeur’s *Zélindor, roi des Sylphes* at the Rose Theater in Lincoln Center and as La Musique in Charpentier’s *Les Arts Florissants* at the Kennedy Center. A prolific recording artist, Ms. Hong recorded the American premiere of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Alles mit Gott und nichts ohn’ ihn*, BWV 1127, for National Public Radio’s *Performance Today*. Other recordings include the world premiere of *Rebel* and Francoeur’s *Zélindor, roi des Sylphes* (Naxos), Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater*, and *Sentirete una Canzonetta* with Harmonious Blacksmith. Ms. Hong is a featured soloist in Ensemble Klang’s recording of Michael Hersch’s *cortex and ankle*. Early 2018 saw the commercial release of her debut solo CD on Innova Recordings featuring Milton Babbitt’s

Philomel and Michael Hersch’s *a breath upwards*, and was hailed as “an important new soprano undaunted by difficult contemporary challenges” (*The WholeNote*), who gives “landmark performances of two landmark works” (*GappleGate Classical-Modern Music Review*). Fall 2022 saw the release of Michael Hersch’s *the script of storms* with the BBC Symphony Orchestra on the New Focus label. Recent performances include those with Ensemble Phoenix Basel in the world premiere of Hersch’s *one step to the next, worlds ending* and with the Talea Ensemble in Georg Friedrich Haas’s ... *wie stille brannte das Licht*. Ms. Hong currently serves as Associate Professor in the Vocal Studies Department at the Peabody Conservatory of The Johns Hopkins University.

Steve Davislim (Nero)

Steve Davislim has performed with leading ensembles around the world, including the Vienna Philharmonic, the Cleveland and Royal Danish Orchestras, and the symphony orchestras of San Francisco, Chicago, London, Zurich, Vienna, Turin, Madrid, Dresden, Paris, Rome (Santa Cecilia), and Brussels; he has appeared at the Lincoln Center, Mostly Mozart, Salzburg, and Lucerne festivals.

He recently performed Haydn's *Creation* with William Christie on tour, Tippett's *A Child of Our Time* with Sir Colin Davis at London's Barbican Centre, J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in Munich and Boston with Bernard Haitink, Handel's *Messiah* with the New York Philharmonic, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the Melbourne Symphony, London Symphony, and Radio France orchestras; Chausson's *Poème de l'amour et de la mer* with the Queensland Symphony; Schubert's *Lazarus* with the Deutsche Symphony Berlin and Vicente Martín y Soler's *L'Arbore di Diana* at the Montpellier Festival. Mr. Davislim has appeared at the State Opera Berlin, State Opera Vienna, Hamburg Opera, Dresden Semperoper, Royal Opera House Covent Garden, The Australian Opera in Sydney, Châtelet Paris, Liceu Barcelona and at the Montpellier Festival, Zurich Opera, Lyric Opera Chicago, the MET, and Deutsche Oper Berlin. Other appearances include those in Schnittke's *Faust Cantata* at the Musikverein Vienna and Gasteig Munich, *Die Winterreise* with Teodor Currentzis in Perm and Moscow in the Hanz Zender orchestration, Liederabende in Vienna, Adelaide Festival, and Bruckner's *Te Deum* under Riccardo Muti in Chicago. He has worked with other conductors such as Claudio Abbado, Lorin Maazel, Simone Young, Christian Thiele-

mann, Simon Rattle, Riccardo Chailly, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos, Adam Fischer, Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Valery Gergiev, Michael Gielen, Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Thomas Hengelbrock, Philippe Herreweghe, René Jacobs, Armin and Philippe Jordan, Marc Minkowski, Andris Nelsons, Myung-Whun Chung, Sir Roger Norrington, William Christie, Antonio Pappano, Michel Plasson, Sir Georg Solti, Jeffrey Tate, Marcello Viotti, Franz Welser-Möst, and David Zinman.

Silke Gäng (Octavia)

Mezzo-soprano Silke Gäng has performed around the world. She toured Europe and the U.S. with the Venice Baroque Orchestra under the direction of Andrea Marcon, singing Abra in Vivaldi's *Juditha Triumphans*, with concerts in New York (Carnegie Hall), Urbana (Krannert Center), London (Barbican) and Brussels (Palais de Beaux Arts). Further engagements have included the role of Anio in *La clemenza di Tito* and the recording of *Parnasso in Festa* by Handel, together with La Cetra Basel and Andrea Marcon with concerts in Amsterdam (Concertgebouw) and Basel. In season 2017/18 she was part of a new production of *L'Orfeo* by Monteverdi as Messagiera and Proserpina. She was also a guest at Festival Wissembourg/France, giving her debut with Kammerorchester Basel.

She has given song recitals at the Lucerne Festival, Lavaux Festival and at Heidelberger Frühling alongside Thomas Hampson, among others. She has recorded several CDs, including the role of Imilee in a world premiere of J.D. Heinichen's forgotten Baroque opera *Flavio Crispo* with the Il Gusto Barocco Stuttgart Baroque Orchestra under the Baton of Jürg Halubek, and debuted in Venice/Italy with *Gloria* by Vivaldi. In 2015, Gäng returned to Theater Basel, including Juditha in *Juditha Triumphans*, as Nérine in Charpentier's *Médée*, and was a guest as singer and speaker in various concerts at the Davos Festival — young artists in concert. In 2013/14 she took part in Wagner's *Parsifal* as Klingsor's Flowermaid (II/3), Voice from Above and 2nd Esquire at Theatre Freiburg and Royal Theatre of Norwich. 2011/12 she sang the role of Susette Gontard in G.F. Haas' Hölderlin Opera *Nacht* at the Lucerne Festival and Gare du Nord Basel. She has worked with directors including Frank Hilbrich, Sebastian Nübling and Nicolas Brieger, and conductors including Andrea Marcon, Ton Koopman, Jürg Halubek and Fabrice Bollon. Other highlights from recent years include appearances at the Salzburg Festival and Staatstheater Stuttgart, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Handel Festival in Halle, Schwetzingen Festival, Liederhalle Stuttgart, Theater

Basel, Theater Freiburg and the Royal Theatre of Norwich, among others. She was a Heidelberger Frühling scholarship holder in 2012 and had the honor to work with artists like Graham Johnson, Thomas Hampson, Brigitte Fassbaender, Anne Sofie von Otter and Wolfram Rieger. Silke Gäng grew up in Freiburg, Germany and studied singing at the Hochschule für Musik in Basel, Switzerland. She has won various international awards, including at the V. International Ernst Haefliger Competition 2014.

Ensemble SoloVoices (Handmaidens, Chorus)

Ensemble SoloVoices is committed overarchingly to the performance of contemporary music. The core of the ensemble is comprised of vocalists Svea Schildknecht, Francisca Näf, Jean J. Knutti and Jean-Christophe Groffe, and the ensemble can be extended to larger formations of up to 20 musicians. SoloVoices regularly performs challenging literature and premieres of works for solo voice, music which incorporates other instruments, music in dialogue with visual media, scenic concepts, electronics, and the ensemble often explores the juxtapositions of newer with older vocal music. SoloVoices develops its own projects, collaborates with composers, and actively commissions. In

collaboration with the Institute for Computer Music and Sound Technology ICST of the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) and Professor Germán Toro-Pérez, SoloVoices is dedicated to the re-performance of works for voices and electronics composed between 1980 and 2000. SoloVoices has gained international recognition through performances of Karlheinz Stockhausen's work *Stimmung* for six singers with the support of the Stockhausen Foundation for Music in many countries. Among the numerous world premieres SoloVoices has given, are works by Matthias Heep, Hans-Peter Frehner, Hans-Jürg Meier, Lukas Langlotz, Daniel Ott, Darija Andovska, Mike Svoboda, Hans-Martin Linde, Thomas Kessler, Roland Moser, Kevin Juillerat, Isabel Mundry, Marc Garcia Vitoria, Karin Wetzel, Nicolas Buzzi, Rudolf Kelterborn, Verena Weinmann, Balz Trümpy, Mischa Käser, Urs Peter Schneider, and Micha Seidenberg. SoloVoices has been invited by major festivals and events including Culturescapes (Basel), Contrapunkt St. Gallen, musica aperta (Winterthur), KlangBasel, Festival Rümlingen, IGNM Basel, Imago Dei (Krems, A), Lucerne Festival, Société de Musique Contemporaine Lausanne (SMC), Stockhausen Foundation for Music, Festival Ensembles (Valencia, E), Bayerischer Rundfunk, and Wien Modern.

Handmaidens

Svea Schildknecht

Born in Heidelberg, Germany, Svea Schildknecht received her musical training from early childhood in the subjects of singing, piano, violin, dulciana, conducting and theory. She studied music and English in Freiburg, and completed a master's degree in vocal ensemble performance at the Schola Sanctorum Basel. Alongside her work as a song and oratorio singer, she has devoted herself to the field of contemporary music including premieres with groups such as ensemble recherche, Ensemble Phoenix Basel, ensemble 2e2m, Nouvel Ensemble Contemporain, Ensemble neuverBand, Ensemble Mondrian, Ensemble Contrechamps, as well as in the field of musical theater including appearances at ZeitRäume Basel, the Lucerne Festival, Bregenz Festival, Holland Festival Amsterdam, Herrenhausen Art Festival, Les Amplitudes La Chaux-de-Fonds, Festival Klangraum Zurich, Schlossmediale Werdenberg, Mehrklang Freiburg, and in guest performances at Theater Freiburg, Theater Basel, and Theater Rigiblick Zurich. For the CD recording of the Opera Factory Freiburg's production *Kopernikus*, in which she took on the part of the coloratura soprano role, the ensemble received the German Record Critics' Prize and the International Classi-

cal Music Award. As a member of the soloist choir of the experimental studio of the Heinrich Strobel Foundation of the Südwestrundfunks Freiburg, she sang in the CD production *Luigi Nono: Io, frammento da Prometeo*, which received the German Record Critics' Prize. Svea Schildknecht is a founding member of two quartets, Ensemble SoloVoices and Voc_4, as well as the trio Tre Voci. She teaches singing at the Domsingschule des Freiburger Münsters and at the Hochschule für Musik Frieburg.

Vera Hiltbrunner

Born in Bern, Switzerland, Vera Hiltbrunner regularly appears as a soloist and as ensemble performer in both concerts and opera productions. She has appeared with ensembles across Europe, including Die Freitagsakademie, Opera2day, BERNVO-CAL, Il Prete Rosso Barockorchester, Holst Sinfonietta, and Terra Nova Collective. As a soloist, she has performed in, amongst other works, *In furore iustissimae irae* (A. Vivaldi), *Tra le Fiamme* (G. F. Handel), *Carmina Burana* (C. Orff), *Stabat Mater* (Pergolesi), and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Mendelssohn). In 2016, she appeared at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, where she sang the role of Anne in the monodrama *The Diary of Anne Frank* (G. Frid, 1968) directed by Se-

bastian Ukena. During the 2016-17 season, she portrayed Olympia (J. Offenbach) in *Dr. Miracle's Last Illusion* under the direction of Serge van Veggel, and made her debut as Adele in *Der Fledermaus* at the Stadsschouwburg Haarlem. In 2018, she sang the role of Cupido in Reinhard Kaiser's opera *Diana ou la vengeance de Cupido*, directed by Benjamin Prins, and in the same year made her role debut as Miles in Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* in Amsterdam and The Hague. In 2019-20, she made her role debut as Despina in *Così fan tutte* (W.A. Mozart) at the Cuvilliés-Theatre München. Together with the Holst Sinfonietta and the Black Forest Percussion Group and she appeared in Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* in 2019, taking on the role of Voice 1. In addition to her activities as a singer, since 2021 she has been an ambassador for #Seinodernichtsein, an initiative of the Swiss Performers' Foundation, and SWISSPERFORM.

Francisca Näf

Born in Basel, Switzerland, Francisca Näf studied singing and choir conducting at the music academies in Neuchâtel, Zurich, The Hague, and Basel. During her studies she engaged intensively with contemporary music and in the years since has since taken part in many premieres. In 2007, she was a founding

member of Ensemble SoloVoices, a vocal ensemble specializing in contemporary music. With the work *Stimmung* by Karlheinz Stockhausen, the group has received invitations by major organizations such as Imago Dei Krems, Lucerne Festival, Stockhausen Foundation for Music, Festival Ensembles Valencia and Bayerischer Rundfunk. Francisca Näf's interest in early music ultimately led her to Basel to the Schola Santorum Basiliensis, where she completed the AVES course with a master's degree. In addition to participating in SoloVoices, she appears as a soloist and regularly sings with various other ensembles, including the Bach Foundation St. Gallen, Vokalensemble Zurich. She has taken part in various independent music theater projects as well as in productions at the Theater Basel. Francisca Näf teaches singing at the Musikschule Muttens as well as privately. She leads the Choir i Punti, and is also a vocal director assistant at the Basel Münsterkantorei. In 2006, she was named a prizewinner of the public interpretation competition for contemporary music, Concours Nicati.

Jürg Henneberger (Music Director)

The conductor and pianist Jürg Henneberger was born in Lucerne in 1957. He studied in Basel with Jürg Wyttenbach and in Hamburg with Klauspeter Seibel and Christoph

von Dohnányi. He taught at the Hochschule für Musik Basel from 1989 to 2022. He is the Artistic Director of Ensemble Phoenix Basel which he founded in 1998 and which specializes in contemporary music. From 1998-2014 he was president of the International Society for New Music (IGNM) Basel. Mr. Henneberger is also a widely sought-after musical director of major ballet and opera productions. Since 2009, he was professor and, together with Mike Svoboda and Marcus Weiss, Artistic Director of a newly founded Master's program in Musical Performance of Contemporary Music.

Ensemble Phoenix Basel

In 1998, the Ensemble Phoenix Basel first appeared on the cultural landscape in Basel. The conductor and pianist Jürg Henneberger, the flutist Christoph Bösch, and the percussionist Daniel Buess came together and founded the ensemble that has since advanced to become one of the most important of its kind in Switzerland, and one with increasing international renown. While Daniel Buess died tragically in 2016, his vision continues to carry Ensemble Phoenix Basel into the future. From its inception, the ensemble has helped shape the cultural life of its home base of Basel. With variable and flexible instrumentation – from a trio to a constella-

tion of thirty musicians – ideal performance forms and framings are cultivated for contemporary music. The ensemble's work is characterized by a high degree of initiative on the part of the players. Impulses, ideas, and preferences of the group's individual musical personalities are woven into planning and execution. The group's programs are primarily presented in Basel's Gare du Nord, and with evermore frequency also performed in other Swiss cities and further abroad. For additional productions, the International Society for New Music, Theater Basel, Zeiträume Basel, the Wien Modern Festival, the Wiener Festwochen and the Berliner Festspiele have been partners. The commissioning of works is central to the ensemble's mission. Additionally, individual pieces and complete programs are developed in collaboration with artists from the fields of noise, sound art, free improv and electronica. Ensemble Phoenix Basel continues to examine its place in contemporary society and its role in setting new standards both nationally and internationally.

Michael Hersch (Composer)

A composer of “uncompromising brilliance” (*The Washington Post*), Michael Hersch's work has been described by *The New York Times* as “viscerally gripping and emotion-

ally transformative music ... claustrophobic and exhilarating at once, with moments of sublime beauty nestled inside thickets of dark virtuosity.” Recent events and premieres include his *Violin Concerto* at the Lucerne Festival in Switzerland and the Avanti Festival in Helsinki; new productions of his monodrama, *On the Threshold of Winter*, with soprano Ah Young Hong in Chicago (Ensemble dal Niente), Salt Lake City (NOVA Visionary Series), and Washington D.C. (Corcoran New Music Festival), and his elegy, *I hope we get a chance to visit soon*, at the Ojai and Aldeburgh Festivals, where Mr. Hersch was a featured composer. Other recent premieres include his 11-hour chamber cycle, *sew me into a shroud of leaves*, a work which occupied the composer for fifteen years, at the 2019 Wien Modern Festival. During the 2019/20 season, Mr. Hersch was the Composer-in-Residence with the Camerata Bern, and in early 2020, his work *Agatha* had its premiere performances in both Bern and Geneva. In 2022/23, major projects included those for Ensemble Phoenix Basel and a new theater work for Sarah Maria Sun, Schola Heidelberg and Ensemble Musikfabrik. In 2023, the U.S. premiere of his song cycle *one step to the next, worlds ending*, was given by Ah Young Hong and the Talea Ensemble in New York, and the French

premiere of the *Violin Concerto* in Paris performed by Patricia Kopatchinskaja and Ensemble intercontemporain. He recently completed a new opera, *and we, each*, after texts by Shane McCrae to premiere in 2024, with performances scheduled for Baltimore, New York, Washington D.C. and Basel. Also a pianist, noted for his “astounding facility at the keyboard” (*International Piano*), Mr. Hersch has appeared around the world including at the Ojai Festival, Aldeburgh Festival, the Festival Dag in de Branding in the Netherlands, the Warhol Museum, the Romaeuropa Festival, the Phillips Collection, Cleveland’s Reinberger Chamber Hall, Merkin Concert Hall, and Carnegie Hall’s Weill Recital Hall, among others. Hersch came to international attention at age twenty-five, when he was awarded First Prize in the Concordia American Composers Awards. The award resulted in a performance of his *Elegy*, conducted by Marin Alsop in New York’s Alice Tully Hall. Later that year he became one of the youngest recipients ever of a Guggenheim Fellowship in Composition. Mr. Hersch has also been the recipient of the Rome Prize, the Berlin Prize, the Goddard Lieberman Fellowship and Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts & Letters, and Johns Hopkins University’s most

prestigious internal honor, the President’s Frontier Award.

Stephanie Fleischmann (Librettist)

The recipient of Opera America’s 2022 Campbell Librettist Prize, Stephanie Fleischmann is a librettist and playwright whose texts serve as blueprints for intricate three-dimensional sonic and visual worlds. She has been called a “neo Emily Dickinson” (*Backstage*) and “a writer who can conjure something between a dreamy road movie and a theatrical coming-of-age tale, and who can piece these elements together in the style of a jagged ballad for guitar” (*Chicago Sun Times*). Her “lyrical monologues” (*The New York Times*), “finely tuned” opera libretti (*Opera News*), plays and music-theater works have been performed internationally and across the U.S. Opera libretti include: *In a Grove* (music by Christopher Cerrone), *Dido* (music by Melinda Wagner), *After the Storm* (music by David Hanlon), *The Long Walk* (music by Jeremy Howard Beck), *The Property* (commissioned by Lyric Opera of Chicago, 2015). Upcoming: *Another City* (music by Jeremy Howard Beck, for Houston Grand Opera, 2023), *The Pigeon Keeper* (music by David Hanlon, for Santa Fe Opera’s Opera for All Voices, Santa Fe, 2023), *Arkhipov* (music by Peter Knell, developed c/o Seattle Opera;

Jacaranda, 2022, directed by Elkhanah Pulitzer, conducted by Daniela Candillari). Current opera collaborations include 3 projects with Opera America Female Discovery grant composers—*The Visitation*, with Christina Campanella; *Seven Sisters*, with Justine F. Chen (workshop: Manhattan School of Music); *Barrel of Laughs, Vale of Tears*, with Julia Adolphe (National Sawdust/ Brooklyn Youth Chorus)—and *L’Autre Moi*, with Matthew Recio (West Edge’s Aperture; Chicago Opera Theater). Fleischmann recently completed a *Medea*, which premiered in 2023, with music by Michael Hersch, performed by Sarah Maria Sun, Schola Heidelberg and Ensemble MusikFabrik in Cologne. Her texts and songs have been set by composers Anna Clyne (*The Years*, for Scottish National Chamber Orchestra and Choir), Olga Neuwirth (Aldeburgh, Basel, Berlin, Vienna), Christopher Cerrone (*Last Message Received*, for Northwestern, and *Wind Phone, Goleta, CA, April 22*, for Conspirare), Gity Razaz (*She Sings*, for Brooklyn Youth Chorus, Bang on a Can Longplay), Sxip Shirey, Jorge Sosa, Elspeth Brooke, and others. Fleischmann’s rendition of *Carnival of the Animals* has been seen at the Ojai Festival and the Hollywood Bowl.

Markus Bothe (Director)

Markus Bothe studied music theater directing in Hamburg. He has staged music and spoken theater productions for, amongst others, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Staatsoper Stuttgart, Semperoper Dresden, Washington National Opera, Opéra national du Rhin, Oper Köln; for the Schauspiel Frankfurt, Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus, Schauspielhaus Hamburg, Schauspiel Leipzig, and the Schauspielhaus Graz. His directorial work also includes the world premiere performances of Franz Schreker's *Flammen*, Salvatore Sciarrino's *Infinito nero*, and Helmut Oehring's *Gunten*. From 2004 to 2008 he was festival director and member of the artistic direction of the theater biennial New Plays from Europe at the Wiesbaden State Theater. In 2010 he was awarded the German Theater Prize "Der Faust" for his Frankfurt production of *Roter Ritter Parzival*.

Piertzovanis Toews Architekten

In 2019, Ioannis Piertzovanis and Heinrich Toews founded Piertzovanis Toews, a joint architecture firm based in Basel, Switzerland. From their beginnings, the firm has been a prize and award recipient in various competitions. In 2021, their courtyard house in Basel was selected as Best Newcomer Project in Swiss Architecture, an award launched

by Hochparterre, the leading Swiss publishing house for architecture. It was also listed and published in the 2023 Swiss Architecture Yearbook. For the 1000-year anniversary of the Basel Cathedral they launched an exhibition in urban space, in which they critically examined the question of heritage and legacy. They have additionally created and organized *Hardspace*, located in a vacant industrial hall on Hardstrasse in Basel. The site has hosted many participants: from an exhibition with 30 artists to a jazz trio; from close neighbors to international curators — a multitude of different actors able to play participating roles within the transformed area. In addition to running their studio, Ioannis and Heinrich teach as independent lecturers at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Ioannis Piertzovanis was born on the Greek island of Paros in 1986. While studying architecture at KIT Karlsruhe and ETH Zurich, he worked in various Swiss architectural firms. After graduation he worked for Marques Architekten in Lucerne for several years where his responsibilities included project management for several houses, schools and for the ice stadium in Davos. Heinrich Toews was born in 1982 in the Caucasian village of Nartan. After studying architecture at KIT Karlsruhe and ETH Zurich, he received various scholarships for

a research project on modern architecture in the Soviet Union, which took him on extensive travels throughout former Soviet republics. The results of his research were shown in the exhibition *Soviet Modernism* at the Architekturzentrum Vienna and published in the accompanying catalog by Park Books, Zürich. He worked as an independent architect in England before spending several years as a project manager at Miller & Maranta Architects in Basel.

Eva Butzkies (Costumes)

Eva Butzkies, born in Freiburg, studied costume design in Hanover and interned at the Glyndebourne Festival Opera. She then worked as a costume assistant at the Theater Basel. As a freelance costume designer, she works in the fields of drama, dance theater, performance and opera in Germany and Switzerland, both at theaters and on the independent scene. Her Basel production *Dido and Aeneas* was invited to the Berlin Theatertreffen in 2007. At the Lucerne Theater she designed the dance production *Tanz 32: I am who I am*. Her opera work includes Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* at the Konzert Theater Bern, Calixto Bieito's *Così fan tutte* project at the Theater Basel, as well as *Eugene Onegin* at the Staatsoper Hannover and *Katja Kabanova* at the National Theater Prague.

Marius Kob (Puppets)

Marius Kob is a freelance puppeteer who was born in Halle/Saale in 1982. He has worked with many institutions including, amongst others, Kaserne Basel, Theater Basel, Oper Zürich, Oper Bern, Theater Stadelhofen, Schlachthaus theater Bern, Theaterhaus Frankfurt, FITZ Stuttgart, Theatre de Marionnettes de Genève, Staatsoper Stuttgart, and various international theater festivals. From 2004-2009 he studied at the University of Music and Performing Arts Stuttgart, Diploma Figure Theater. At the Bern University of the Arts, Master Scenic Arts Practice he studied from 2009-2011. Since 2013, he has been co-director of BAFF! – International Basel Figure Theater Festival. Marius Kob develops his own theater productions and is engaged with theater companies and theaters as a figure player, actor, figure builder and coach.

Bernhard Günther (Dramaturgy)

Bernhard Günther (born 1970 in Thun/CH) is primarily active as a curator, producer and director of contemporary music festivals (Wien Modern since 2016, ZeitRäume Basel – Biennial for new music and architecture 2012–2021, rainy days 2004–2016, as Chief Dramaturg of Philharmonie Luxembourg). Apart from that, he is working as an author, editor, curator, dramaturg, panel and jury member, typesetter, occasional amateur cellist and small-scale natural wine producer. He is married, has a daughter, and lives in Vienna.





POPPAEA - an opera in one act

2019, Commissioned by Wien Modern and ZeitRäume Basel

Michael Hersch..... Music
Stephanie Fleischmann Libretto
Jürg Henneberger Music Director
Markus Bothe..... Director
Heinrich Toews,
Ioannis Piertzovanis,
Piertzovanis Toews Architekten Set Design
Eva Butzkies..... Costumes
Marius Kob..... Puppets
Bernhard Günther Dramaturg
Thomi Kohler Technical Director, Lighting Design
Stephan Werner..... Project Manager

Christian Rombach,
Kelly Lovelady Music Assistants
Ada Günther..... Assistant Director
Magdalena Zehnder..... Costumes Assistant
Christian Pfütze..... Puppet Coaching
Eren Karakus Puppet Construction Assistant
Jacob Rhodebeck,
Denis Linnik,
Asia Ahmetjanova Rehearsal Pianists
Anja Wernicke Director of ZeitRäume Basel
Judith Holland-Moritz..... Production for ZeitRäume Basel
Elisa Bonomi..... Communications ZeitRäume Basel
Saskia Menges..... Press and Media ZeitRäume Basel
Gerda Saiko..... Production Management for Wien
Modern

Ah Young Hong Poppaea
Steve Davislim Nero
Silke Gäng..... Octavia
Svea Schildknecht,
Vera Hiltbrunner,
Francisca Näf Handmaidens

ENSEMBLE SOLOVOICES Choir
Svea Schildknecht, Vera Hiltbrunner,
Anja Bittner, Tabea Bürki,
Diana Chavarro, Stephanie Hoffman (Soprano)
Francisca Näf, Petra Ehrismann,
Marta Mieke (Mezzo-soprano)

ENSEMBLE PHOENIX BASEL

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Festival

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