

NEW FOCUS RECORDINGS

A nominee for the 2023 Austrian Music Theater Prize for Best Contemporary Music Theater, **Michael Hersch's** epic setting of **Poppaea** turns the classic tale of Nero inside out, examining it from multiple angles and unearthing the powerful lessons it holds for contemporary society. Hersch, along with vocalists **Ah Young Hong**, **Steve Davislim**, **Silke Gäng**, with **Ensemble Phoenix Basel** and **Ensemble SoloVoices**, delivers a wrenching version of the tale, challenging assumptions and forcing the listener to ask difficult questions about history and the inherent biases that are ingrained into its mainstream understanding.

Track List

Poppaea

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
10. Scene VII - Milk Bath	8:28
11. Interlude II	0:56
12. Scene VIII - Claudia Augusta	2:52
13. Scene IX - Nero's Lament	4:41
14. Scene X - The Great Fire	5:40
15. Scene XI - After the Fire	10:56
16. Scene XII - This World	13:03

Poppaea: Ah Young Hong, soprano
Nero: Steve Davislim, tenor
Octavia: Silke Gäng, mezzo-soprano
Ensemble SoloVoices
Ensemble Phoenix Basel
Jürg Henneberger, music director

Total Time: 101:03

Program Notes

Michael Hersch's arresting new one-act opera **Poppaea** begins and ends with a shocking act of violence. The first, the Prologue, feels like a punch, throwing us back in our seats, stunning us with its audacity. The last we see coming from the start, the tragic conclusion to a tale of transgression perpetrated against women caught up in a depraved, misogynistic world.

Poppaea Sabina (approx. 30 AD – 65 AD) is usually portrayed in history as a conniver, a striver of middling birth who orchestrated the death of Octavia (daughter of Claudius, approx. 42 AD – 62 AD) so

Michael Hersch: Poppaea

A one act opera setting the classic story
of Poppaea, composed by
Michael Hersch with a libretto by
Stephanie Fleischmann

US Street Date	2/23/2024
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Catalog Number	FCR390
Audio Resolution	44.1kHz, 16 bit; 48kHz, 24 bit
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Featured Track	Track 2

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that she could take her place as the wife of Nero, Emperor of Rome. Hersch's opera, with a libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann, seeks to explore this story from a woman's perspective, seeing both Octavia and Poppaea as victims of men's fury and appetites. Like much of Hersch's work, it foregrounds the psychological effects of trauma, confronting the audience with music that is emotionally searing and deeply profound.

Scene I – New Life opens with Poppaea in prayer to her mother. She wishes her mother could be there to witness the birth of Nero's child, who can "rewrite the story" of her mother's death. She tells of her dreams of how her mother committed suicide after a baseless claim of adultery. ("Just sixteen, / I watched you slice yourself open / like a melon / in penance for a crime you didn't commit.")

Poppaea and Nero sing of how the birth of their child will erase all the bad omens since Nero killed his mother. Their marriage and the birth of their child will be a fresh start, legitimizing their relationship and leaving past sins behind. However, foreboding tension is held in close dissonances in the orchestra, creating unstable beating and difference tones which are illusory but nonetheless powerful.

Poppaea is portrayed by soprano Ah Young Hong, for whom many of Hersch's vocal works were written. Hong's dramatic range is exceptional, and she and the orchestra entwine each other like a single stream, both human and ethereal. The instruments, against a dark ground, follow her every word with slashes of color and light.

In Scene V – Octavia we find Octavia in her cell, awaiting her death. She tells how Nero murdered her brother, Britannicus, when she was nine. She grieves that the philosopher Seneca, who could advise Nero to some degree ("He was—a kind of gate. / Kept me safe enough"), has been sent to Spain, and there is no one left to protect her or the city from Nero. By Scene VI – Poppaea Witnesses Octavia's Death she's bleeding out, but not fast enough. Poppaea, asking her what pain and death are like, and saying her heart is too true, has Octavia moved to a warm bath to speed up the process.

Octavia is portrayed by German mezzo-soprano Silke Gäng, whose sweet tone and fragile vibrato show us she is blameless. Both Octavia and Poppaea express pain by singing soaring, sustained tones near the top of their register; it is as if terror has destroyed language itself. Then their voices drop down low to express what words they have, in hoarse tones that portray their emotional exhaustion.

Nero is richly sung by the Australian tenor Steve Davislim, with an affect that befits a mad king, ranging from cool indifference to crazed fury. Nero is not just a character but also a catalyst: he doesn't change, but in his presence, women die.

Hersch's orchestral gestures flash second by second, creating a constantly roiling soundscape, like the endless treachery and violence of ancient Rome. There are individual scenes, but they are all caught in a nightmare from which they can't awaken.

The libretto was written by Stephanie Fleischmann, one of the most acclaimed librettists in contemporary music. She portrays the characters through spare, myth-like scenes and evocative images (one of the ill omens Nero and Poppaea witness is "a horde of frozen elephants").

The listener will hear extra-musical sounds through this live recording, mostly in the second half. In the Wien Modern/ZeitRäume Basel production of the opera, to portray the sparkling imperial palace, thousands of clear plastic bottles were strung up as curtains on the stage (the excellent CD booklet has photos of this). As the story descends into greater violence and depravity, these curtains gradually fall, leaving the palace in ruins. Ultimately what the listener hears is the sound of the singers walking through huge piles of worthless detritus, a deft commentary on ancient Rome's toxic world of power and lust.

Bio

A composer of "uncompromising brilliance" (The Washington Post), **Michael Hersch's** work has been described by The New York Times as "viscerally gripping and emotionally transformative music ... claustrophobic and exhilarating at once, with moments of sublime beauty nestled inside thickets of dark virtuosity." 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. Mr. Hersch has been the recipient of the Rome Prize, the Berlin Prize, the Goddard Lieberson 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.