

THE AMERICAN OPERA PROJECT  
PRESENTS

# WORKING WOMEN

SONGS OF  
SUFFERING  
& SUFFRAGE

SPECIAL EDITION:  
SONGS OF SUFFERING

NOVEMBER 9, 2020  
8:00PM EST

**PRESENTED BY:**

 **the AMERICAN OPERA PROJECT**



A series of new songs connecting the women of World War I and the women who fought for suffrage, presented and discussed by the creators.

***Working Women: Songs of Suffering and Suffrage*** is an online concert tour that features three **Songs of Suffrage** presented alongside excerpts from the chamber opera ***Letters That You Will Not Get: Women's Voices from the Great War***, connecting the women of World War I, the women who fought for suffrage, and the women of today through the power of song, using archival footage alongside documentary-style music videos.

**Guest Speakers:** the creative team of *Letters That You Will Not Get* – composer Kirsten Volness, librettist and director Kate Holland, librettist Susan Werbe, soprano Sarah Beckham-Turner, mezzo-soprano Caitlin McKechney, mezzo-soprano Briana Hunter, and mezzo-soprano Angel Desai.

**Host:** Mila Henry, music director for the project and Artistic Director of AOP

# PROGRAM ORDER

## Working Women: Songs of Suffering & Suffrage

Running time: 60 minutes, no intermission

### **WELCOME & INTRODUCTION TO WORKING WOMEN**

Mila Henry, Artistic Director of The American Opera Project

### **INTRODUCTION TO SONGS OF SUFFERING**

excerpts from *Letters That You Will Not Get: Women's Voices from the Great War* -  
composer Kirsten Volness

### **AUDIO PRESENTATION - THREE EXCERPTS FROM LETTERS THAT YOU WILL NOT GET**

composer Kirsten Volness, librettists Kate Holland and Susan Werbe,  
soprano Sarah Beckham-Turner, and mezzo-soprano Briana Hunter

"Women of Europe"

text by Lida Gustava Heymann, from A Group of Letters of the Warring Nations (Chicago: Woman's Peace Party, 1915)

"Socks", text by Jessie Pope

"I Sit and Sew", text by Alice Dunbar-Nelson

### **VIDEO PRESENTATION - THREE EXCERPTS FROM LETTERS THAT YOU WILL NOT GET**

composer Kirsten Volness, librettists Kate Holland and Susan Werbe,  
mezzo-soprano Caitlin McKechny, and mezzo-soprano Angel Desai

"War Girls", text by Jessie Pope

"The Dancers", text by Edith Sitwell

"The Gift of India", text by Sarojini Naidu

### **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

Mila Henry

### **AUDIENCE Q&A**

### **VIDEO PRESENTATION - SONGS OF SUFFRAGE**

"Her Sovereign Blackness a Beautiful Light" by Kathryn Bostic

# SONGS OF SUFFRAGE

*Her Sovereign Blackness a Beautiful Light* by Kathryn Bostic  
*Beyond the Power of Any to Deny* by Jessica Rudman, text adapted from Susan B. Anthony  
*Revolution Begins in the Bedroom* by Tony Solitro and librettist Alice Eve Cohen

Created for the 2020 Centennial of the ratification of the 19th Amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote in the United States, three newly commissioned art songs celebrate the complex history of the fight for progress and honor those women that were left behind.

MUSIC DIRECTION BY MILA HENRY  
 VIDEO DIRECTION, EDITING AND 16MM CINEMATOGRAPHY BY LESLEY STEELE  
 ADDITIONAL CINEMATOGRAPHY BY MATT GRAY  
 RECORDED AND MIXED BY ANDRYA AMBRO  
 RECORDED AT BRIC ARTS MEDIA

ARTISTS INCLUDE:  
 EVE GIGLIOTTI / MEZZO-SOPRANO  
 JASMINE MUHAMMAD / SOPRANO  
 LORI PHILLIPS / SOPRANO  
 MILA HENRY / PIANIST

FILMED ON LOCATION AT:  
 A.R.T./NY SOUTH OXFORD SPACE,  
 FORT GREENE, BROOKLYN  
 WOMEN'S RIGHTS PIONEERS MONUMENT, CENTRAL PARK, NYC

## LETTERS THAT YOU WILL NOT GET: WOMEN'S VOICES FROM THE GREAT WAR

Composed by Kirsten Volness  
 Libretto by Kate Holland and Susan Werbe

Combining powerful contemporary music with excerpts from women's writings on both sides of the conflict, *Letters That You Will Not Get: Women's Voices from the Great War* gives voice to American, British, European, Asian, African and Caribbean women affected by WWI through a series of vignettes that share their responses to the war. *Letters* tells the story of the Great War as experienced by the women who lived through it.

DIRECTION BY KATE HOLLAND  
 MUSIC DIRECTION BY MILA HENRY  
 DRAMATURGY BY SUSAN WERBE  
 VIDEO DIRECTION, EDITING AND 16MM CINEMATOGRAPHY BY LESLEY STEELE  
 AUDIO ENGINEERING BY BRETT PARNELL AT BEAR IN A BARN  
 ADDITIONAL AUDIO/VIDEO RECORDING BY CHRIS COMFORT

ARTISTS INCLUDE:  
 MARIA LINDSEY / SOPRANO  
 JESSICA SANDIDGE / SOPRANO  
 SARAH BECKHAM-TURNER / SOPRANO  
 CAITLIN MCKECHNEY / MEZZO-SOPRANO  
 BRIANA HUNTER / MEZZO-SOPRANO  
 ANGEL DESAI / MEZZO-SOPRANO

MELISSA TONG / VIOLIN I  
 ELENA MOON PARK / VIOLIN II  
 ANDIE TANNING / VIOLA  
 MEAGHAN BURKE / CELLO  
 MIMI JONES / DOUBLE BASS

FILMED ON LOCATION IN ARTISTS' HOMES

# SONGS OF SUFFERING

## **Letters That You Will Not Get:** *Women's Voices from the Great War*

Music by Kirsten Volness

Libretto by Kate Holland and Susan Werbe

### Program Note:

On a sunny day in June, 1914, a Bosnian Serb nationalist assassinated the Austro-Hungarian heir Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. One month later The Great War began. The war was fought in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, the Pacific Islands, China, Indian Ocean, North and South Atlantic Ocean. Four years, 3 months and 2 weeks later, the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918. Military deaths on both sides of the conflict: over 9 million. Civilian deaths on both sides of the conflict: over 7 million.

How to make sense of the enormity of WWI, the 20th century's first global conflict? Not by deconstructing these figures, but rather by listening to the stories of the individuals whose lives were lost or forever changed by this catastrophic historical period. Considered the most literary of all wars - The Great War was represented until quite recently through the writings of the young men who fought (and often died) in the war, and the old men who sent these young men to war.

Missing were the voices of women - from both sides of the conflict. Mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, friends, and lovers. White, Black, and Brown Women. Women who worked on the home front in factories, on the land, drove buses in the cities, organized hospitals. Women who were very close to the battles - nursing sisters in casualty clearing stations, women doctors, ambulance drivers, staffers of YWCA rest huts. Women who, by virtue of the color of their skin, were not allowed to participate.

With *Letters That You Will Not Get*, we seek to honor all women whose experiences are an integral part of this history. Their voices are as powerful today as when they responded to the conflict that swept them into the war's bloody and unforgiving maw.

- Susan Werbe, co-librettist and dramaturg

#### WAR GIRLS

There's the girl who clips your ticket for the train,  
And the girl who speeds the lift from floor to floor,  
There's the girl who does a milk-round in the rain,  
And the girl who calls for orders at your door.  
Strong, sensible, and fit,  
They're out to show their grit,  
And tackle jobs with energy and knack.  
No longer caged and penned up,  
They're going to keep their end up  
Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back.

—Jessie Pope (British)

#### THE GIFT OF INDIA

Lo! I have flung to the East and West  
Priceless treasures torn from my breast,  
And yielded the sons of my stricken womb  
To the drum-beats of duty, the sabres of doom.  
Scattered like shells on Egyptian sands,  
They lie with pale brows and brave, broken hands,  
They are strewn like blossoms mown down by chance  
On the blood-brown meadows of Flanders and France.  
When your love shall offer memorial thanks  
To the comrades who fought in your dauntless ranks,  
And you honour the deeds of the deathless ones,  
Remember the blood of my martyred sons!

—Sarojini Naidu (Indian)

#### THE DANCERS

The floors are slippery with blood:  
The world gyrates too. God is good  
That while His wind blows out the light  
For those who hourly die for us—  
We still can dance, each night.

The music has grown numb with death—  
But we will suck their dying breath,  
The whispered name they breathed to chance,  
To swell our music, make it loud  
That we may dance,—may dance.

We are the dull blind carrion-fly  
That dance and batten. Though God die  
Mad from the horror of the light—  
the light is mad, too, flecked with blood,—  
We dance, we dance, each night

—Edith Sitwell (British)

# SONGS OF SUFFERING

**Letters That You Will Not Get:** *Women's Voices from the Great War*

Music by Kirsten Volness

Libretto by Kate Holland and Susan Werbe

## WOMEN OF EUROPE

Women of Europe, when will your call ring out?  
 Summer's glory was shattered by lightning—  
 The lightning of the most frightful of all wars.  
 Millions of women's hearts blaze up in anguish.  
 Women of Europe, where is your voice?  
 Are you only great in patience and suffering?  
 Women of Europe, where is your voice that should be sowing  
 seeds of peace?

- text by Lida Gustava Heymann, from A Group of Letters of  
 the Warring Nations (Chicago: Woman's Peace Party, 1915)

## I SIT AND SEW

I sit and sew — a useless task it seems,  
 My hands grown tired, my head weighed down with dreams —  
 The little useless seam, the idle patch;  
 Why dream I here beneath my homely thatch,  
 When there they lie in sodden mud and rain  
 Pitifully calling me, the quick ones and the slain?  
 You need me, Christ! It is no roseate dream  
 That beckons me—this pretty futile seam.  
 It stifles me—God, must I sit and sew?

—Alice Dunbar-Nelson (American)

## SOCKS

Shining pins that dart and click  
 In the fireside's sheltered peace  
 Check the thoughts that cluster thick—  
 20 plain and then decrease.

He was brave—well, so was I—

Keen and merry, but his lip  
 Quivered when he said good-bye—  
 Purl the seam-stitch, purl and slip.

Never used to living rough,  
 Lots of things he'd got to learn;  
 Wonder if he's warm enough—  
 Knit 2, catch 2, knit 1, turn.

Wonder if he's fighting now,  
 What he's done an' where he's been;  
 He'll come out on top somehow—  
 Slip 1, knit 2, purl 14.

—Jessie Pope (British)

# SONGS OF SUFFRAGE

## Her Sovereign Blackness a Beautiful Light

Music & lyrics by Kathryn Bostic

### Program Note:

The pairing of suffrage-themed songs with excerpts from *Letters That You Will Not Get* began as an optional invitation for participants in AOP's Composers & the Voice (C&V) training program to create songs related to the Women's Suffrage Centennial; it expanded into a conversation about the necessity of including the success and struggles of the Women's Suffrage Movement, and evolved into the trio included here: two songs created during C&V, and a third by composer Kathryn Bostic, commissioned by AOP for soprano Jasmine Muhammad.

Bostic states,

"Her Sovereign Blackness a Beautiful Light' expresses the injustice and disenfranchisement Black women faced during the Women's Suffrage Movement. It was written to commemorate the presence, power, dignity and leadership of African American women suffragists long overlooked who helped pave the way for Equal Rights. During the formation of the Women's Suffrage movement and throughout its history, the blatant lack of acknowledgement of the huge and important contribution by African American women is a travesty that must be rectified. It is my hope that my song be a part of much needed action to heal and truth speak awareness that brings our overall community together."

- Mila Henry, music director and Kathryn Bostic, composer

### Text:

I shine golden  
From a mighty Love Supreme  
And when my journey takes me to walk upon troubled land I shine golden  
Hosanna Hosanna

My ancestral temple holds a Light filled path  
I trail blaze  
I womb speak  
My Brown mother, her mother and all before her  
We Rise and shatter narrow ways of darkness

Her Sovereign Blackness a Beautiful Light  
Her Sovereign Blackness a Beautiful Light

Mighty seeds are scattered from her sun kissed womb  
anointing  
our calling  
from my mother, her mother and all before her  
Deep from her center birthing Queens and Kings

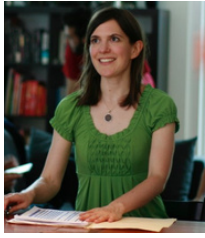
So hear me now to right this wrong  
as history falsely claims  
no mention of our leadership, our fight for equal rights  
Our Black skinned voices silenced  
and kept far out of sight  
and kept far out of sight  
White suffragists demanding justice  
in word but not in deed  
Our Black skinned voices silenced  
so only they succeed  
So hear me now to right this wrong in these United States  
Black woman majesty a greater partner  
commanded equal rights  
I stand above deception shining truth upon this stain  
My sovereign Blackness a beautiful light

I am the opening of all fragile hearts long forgetful of strength  
long forgetful of Birthright  
Sovereign Blackness a Beautiful Light  
Sovereign Blackness a Beautiful Light  
Her Sovereign Blackness a Beautiful Light

CREATIVE TEAM - LETTERS THAT YOU WILL NOT GET



**Kirsten Volness**  
Composer



**Kate Holland**  
Co-librettist / Director



**Susan Werbe**  
Co-librettist

CREATIVE TEAM - SONGS OF SUFFRAGE



**Kathryn Bostic**  
Composer



**Jessica Rudman**  
Composer

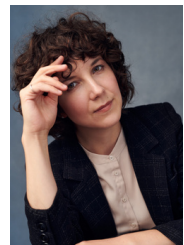


**Tony Solitro**  
Composer

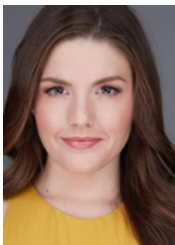


**Alice Eve-Cohen**  
Librettist

ARTISTIC TEAM



**Mila Henry**  
Music Director/  
Piano



**Sarah Beckham-Turner**  
Soprano



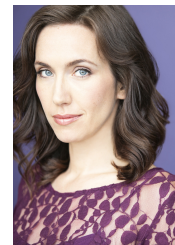
**Angel Desai**  
Mezzo-Soprano



**Briana Hunter**  
Mezzo-Soprano



**Maria Lindsey**  
Soprano



**Caitlin McKechney**  
Mezzo-Soprano



**Jessica Sandidge**  
Soprano



**Meaghan Burke**  
Cello



**Mimi Jones**  
Double Bass



**Elena Moon Park**  
Violin II



**Andie Tanning**  
Viola



**Melissa Tong**  
Violin I



**Eve Gigliotti**  
Mezzo-Soprano



**Jasmine Muhammad**  
Soprano



**Lori Phillips**  
Soprano



**Lesley Steele**  
Video director/  
editor





Founded in 1988, The American Opera Project (AOP) has been at the forefront of contemporary opera for over 30 years. In 2019, American Opera Projects became The American Opera Project. But we are still AOP. We are going beyond being a collection of projects and becoming a mission, a vision, an unending experiment – an experiment in storytelling with the central premise that each life is an operatic story waiting to be told – and each telling of that story is an operatic experience waiting to happen.

"Beyond the Power of Any to Deny" and "The Revolution Begins in the Bedroom" were created through The American Opera Project's Composers & the Voice program, a two-year, tuition-free fellowship for composers and librettists that provides experience writing for the voice and opera stage. To learn more, visit <https://www.aopopera.org/composers-voice>

"Her Sovereign Blackness A Beautiful Light" was commissioned by  
The American Opera Project

**Working Women: Songs of Suffering & Suffrage** is available for touring. For more information, visit <https://www.aopopera.org/working-women> or contact [info@aopopera.org](mailto:info@aopopera.org).

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