

An Interview with Thea Musgrave,

Scottish-American Composer

by

Gena Raps

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"Yes, I am a woman; and I am a composer. But rarely at the same time."

Rich and powerful musical language and a strong sense of drama have made Scottish-American composer Thea Musgrave one of the most respected and exciting contemporary composers in the Western world. Born in Edinburgh on May 27, 1928, she has been a prominent member of British musical life with her orchestral, choral, operatic, and chamber works, which have been performed by major orchestras and opera companies the world over. Since 1972 she has lived and worked in the United States, garnering major awards, honorary degrees, and teaching posts. Her numerous operas include *Mary*, *Queen of Scots* and *Harriet, the Woman Called Moses*.

She is here interviewed by Gena Raps, concert pianist and recording artist.

(Note: At several points near the end of the interview you will have an opportunity to hear Thea Musgrave's music, streaming on our site.)

Thea Musgrave: This thing about singling out women composers drives me nuts.

I think it is so old fashioned. It's time we got over that. I grew up in Scotland, went to Paris, and studied with Nadia Boulanger [renowned composition teacher of composers including Paul Bowles, Aaron Copland, and Elliot Carter].

Gena Raps: Nadia's sister Lili Boulanger was denied entry to the Prix de Rome because she was a woman.

TM: But then she got it.

GR: She had to fight for it.

TM: You have to fight for most things. I think what we have to fight for is for contemporary music to be heard. We are competing against not only pop music, which has a huge distribution and doesn't last as long; we are also competing against the whole nineteenth century, eighteenth century, and to a lesser degree, the seventeenth century. You know, we compete against Brahms, Beethoven, Wagner, et al. When you go to concerts, you occasionally hear a new work. I think that what composers have to fight for is for their voice to be heard, whether they're male or female. It's very difficult.

GR: Did you feel that way when you started your career?

TM: No, it didn't occur to me because my colleagues in England were Dame Ethel Smyth, who was of my grandmother's generation, and Lizzie Lutyens—twelve-tone

Lizzie as she was called—who was of my mother's generation. There was a wonderful man in England, Sir William Glock, who put on my works, Lizzie's works, and other women's as well as the men's. It never occurred to me that one had to fight for that.

If you're a good pianist and musical, you have to work to find the technique. Same with composing. So that was my fight. It was only when I came to the U.S. in my forties that people started saying "woman composer." I was kind of amazed—why now and not in the twenties?

GR: Your experience is unique and different from the American experience. The English were just coming out of World War II with food shortages, rationing, and bombings. Survival was your struggle. Our experience was about building better lives. You didn't feel that you had to jump over hurdles in the music world?

TM: Yes, but it had nothing to do with being a woman. Everyone had to jump over hurdles to get their works done. I was very lucky because when I started out, being Scottish, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra played works by young composers. One of the first conductors who did my work was Colin Davis, a sub-conductor under Ian White, so I had a chance of learning my métier. I guess it's like being a doctor practicing. You can learn a lot of stuff, but until you actually work with patients you don't know your trade. And it's the same with composing. Nowadays, young composers work with computers. I am glad they can, but it's not like working with an orchestra and learning what goes well, what might be difficult, and why. Very difficult for young people to get works played by an orchestra. And now with this economic crisis, it's going

to be even worse. I worry for them.

GR: How did American feminism touch your life?

TM: I suppose I came to America about the time that it had just started, but I was doing other things. My idea was always it's very tough to do what I am doing, and I spent all my energy doing it to the best of my ability, and if I thought about the women's movement at all, I thought: "That was my way of fighting to show that a woman can do this as well."

GR: What was your early educational experience?

TM: I went to a women's boarding school.

GR: Were you supported there?

TM: Not musically. No, not particularly. You had to fend for yourself like everywhere else. But there was an extraordinary headmistress at the time. I don't know whether it's better for women to be in an all female environment during those years rather than a mixed environment.

GR: Carol Gilligan did the research showing that adolescent girls do better in an all female educational environment

TM: She's a great friend of my friend Estela Welldon, who wrote *Mother, Madonna, Whore* [a study of the idealization and denigration of motherhood].

GR: Carol's husband James Gilligan writes about violence in the prison system as a microcosm for examining shame in the larger society. Surely having these conversations with these friends touched both our lives and our work.

TM: I don't mean to be arrogant about the women's movement. When I came to the States in my forties, I was already working, and felt that to do my work well and to be successful was the best way. I did not feel blocked or that opportunities were closed. When I first got here, City Opera, Philadelphia Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic did my work.

GR: Why aren't they now?

TM: That I don't know.

GR: Do you think it is ageism?

TM: I don't know. Things come in cycles. I mean, right now I don't have many works done here. More are being performed in England. Things go in cycles, and you just have to live with that.

GR: But it seems to me you were touched by the feminist struggle too. Just think about the subject matter of your operas. How many heroic women are there in traditional operas? Most of your operas have a heroic woman. In *Harriet, the Woman Called Moses* you have a beautiful scene between Harriet and her mother, which is unique in opera.

TM: There's got to be mother-daughter scenes in previous operas.

GR: I can't think of any.

TM: *Mary, Queen of Scots* for sure. She really made stupid decisions! And when I was writing it, I said: "Mary, don't do that! Don't marry Boswell! That is such a stupid thing to do!" And she didn't listen to me! She married Boswell, and that was really the beginning of the end!

GR: You also wrote a piece about three women. You took bits and pieces of several of your operas for a concert piece. Was it inspired by the book *Mother, Madonna, Whore*?

TM: It has nothing to do with the book my friend wrote fifteen or twenty years ago.

GR: Ideas evolving and inspired by friends. It was on all our tongues and minds.

TM: I compiled a piece for the San Francisco Women's Philharmonic called *Three Women—Queen, Mistress, Slave*. I took extracts from *Mary*, from *Harriet*, and from the

character Manuela in my opera *Simon Bolivar*.

GR: Did Nadia Boulanger give you advice about your personal life?

TM: It was interesting. Nadia was a professor and invited me to dinner. She thought that a woman couldn't both succeed as a musician and have a personal life. Well, that's not true because I have friends in London—one friend, a very famous attorney, who is now in the House of Lords, has three kids and a husband, and who's a busy surgeon. She seems to manage just fine. Estela, who wrote her book, was a single mum having to bring up her son, and she's now a very proud grandparent.

GR: But that's a twentieth-century phenomenon, really. Nadia Boulanger told you not to get married. She didn't tell her male students not to get married.

TM: No, she didn't, but that was her view of what a woman's role should be. Well, that's not necessarily the same anymore. And also women in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have a choice of how to plan their family, which they didn't have in the nineteenth century.

GR: And there's more access to education for women. But making a career while raising a child is a different experience for a woman; that road has its own difficulties. When I was working on my degree at Juilliard, I had a small child; this compromised many aspects of my experience both socially and as a performer.

TM: Yes, of course.

GR: You started Edinburgh University as a medical student. What drew you to the music building?

TM: In Edinburgh, the medical school was adjacent to the music school. I found myself going into the music school to see what was happening, and finally I talked to my teacher who said, “Well, I don't think you should be a musician!” My mum was upset. She thought I should be a doctor. She didn't think that I could support myself as a composer.

GR: What was the attraction? Why did you keep going back to the music room?

TM: Well, I'd always studied music. Music had always been part of my life since age five. I thought that it really wasn't a practical thing to do. I knew I wasn't a performer. I wasn't a pianist; I mean I was a pianist but wasn't a soloist. It was a crazy decision actually, but that's what I wanted to do.

GR: Did you feel differences between composing in Scotland and in America? Your themes are often Scottish as well as American-based.

TM: I don't think so. I'm the same person. You don't just suddenly change your skin because you are living somewhere else. I think it's where you grow up as a kid that

informs your later life. And so that will always be there. It's true, I think what changed things was when my husband [American violist and opera conductor Peter Mark] became involved in the Virginia Opera. I was living around an opera company. Now that had an influence because I was in the rehearsals and watched how he had to build the whole company up from scratch, how an opera company functioned—as well as going to the actual rehearsals of the works, meeting the singers, watching them coached, and how all that worked. I had written operas before coming to Virginia, but it so happened that when we first got to Virginia I was in the middle of a commission for Scottish opera writing *Mary, Queen of Scots*, which was then done at the end of the Edinburgh festival. So when the Virginia board heard about that, they said that maybe we should do the American premiere. Their thinking was that the New York critics would not come to see a *Traviata* in a newly formed regional company. But they might come for a U.S. premiere. Both my husband and I thought that perhaps it was not a good idea to do a contemporary work with a new company. We didn't push for it at all. But Walter Chrysler, who was on our board, sent his wife to Edinburgh to see the opera.

GR: Oh, how marvelous!

TM: That's how it happened. And it's true enough that New York critics came. Andrew Porter, who was music critic for *The New Yorker* came. Virginia Opera got a lot of press as well as me. So that was great.

GR: You've written *Songs For a Winter's Evening* based on poems by the Scottish poet

Robert Burns. And you've written a miniature opera about the South, *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*.

TM: That was a radio opera. I found a story by Ambrose Bierce about the American South, which I probably wouldn't have discovered if I hadn't been living here. And I also had been working a lot in taped sounds. What makes it a radio opera is that I made sound effects to accompany it. The music is the imaginary, and the sound effects are the reality, and the two meshed in. It's about a half-hour long.

GR: It's beautiful. I've heard it.

TM: That was exciting. I don't think I would have written *Harriet, the Woman Called Moses*, which I thought was a provocative title—a woman who calls herself Moses, as a symbol of leading her people out of Egypt—I doubt that I would have written that if I hadn't been here, because you have to hear the voices of black people, the intonation and the language. I did have help with words from friends because my ear is not totally attuned.

GR: You also wrote about the woman who inspired architecture in New Orleans in a recent opera.

TM: That was called *Pontalba*. I was commissioned to write something for the celebration of the Louisiana Purchase in '03. And so I thought, do we do Sacajawea, or do

we do Louis and Clarke? And for me, I didn't find operatic material there. The head of the company suggested this book about Micaela Almonester, better known as Baroness de Pontalba, who married and went to Paris. It wasn't a good marriage, so she eventually came back and was the creator of Jackson Square in New Orleans. She inspired it and while she was not an architect, without her it would not have happened. Again, it's a story about something difficult that somebody went after and did. Like *Harriet*.

GR: Tell me about your work habits. You are so disciplined—when we traveled together to Rouen to see performances of your ballet, you worked every morning.

TM: I used to tell my students at the first meeting, “The world is divided into owls and larks, and it's important you know which you are because you're going to have to work hard for me. Now I don't care if you work at midnight or if you work at seven a.m. You need to know yourself to know when your brain is functioning best for certain kinds of things.” I'm a morning person. I always work in the morning and have done so ever since I can remember. Not always for very long; it depends where I'm at in a particular piece. The beginning, when you're finding ideas, is not usually so long. Later on, when you're scoring and doing more—four or five hours and then I'm through. Then at night, I can let go, sleep, and feel fresh in the morning.

GR: Are there differences between the way you worked as a younger person and the way you are working now?

TM: I still do the same.

GR: Are your ideas about composing more efficient?

TM: Efficient? I don't like that word. Every new work has new challenges and I'm always discovering something new, either something to do with the instruments, with the players, or with the performers.

GR: You just came back from a tour of England and Scotland.

TM: I had three premieres and a lot of other performances of my works. There was a mini-festival of my works at the Sage Gateshead, across the Tyne from Newcastle, entitled “ALL EYES on Thea Musgrave.” And then there's a new work that I was commissioned to do by the Scottish Ensemble, which is an amazing group of twelve string players. I wrote a work called *Green*. I went for the rehearsal, did a whole tour of Scotland, and came back for one of the performances. Then there were performances of a work by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, which was a co-commission with the Manchester Camerata that had actually been performed in February with two performances in Glasgow and Edinburgh. There was a new piece for three flute players called “Taking Turns” in Stirling. I say flute players, because each player played all three instruments during the course of the work—piccolo, flute and alto flute. The world premiere was actually the previous month on Nov. 14 in Banff, Scotland, but the performance in Stirling was the first time that I heard it. It was very exciting. There were

twenty-one performances.

GR: That's fantastic . . . in two weeks!

TM: It was incredible: exhausting and exhilarating.

GR: What has been the evolution of your ideas?

TM: They develop. I've been working since 1966 with the idea of doing "dramatic-abstract" works, meaning there's some kind of confrontation or drama but not necessarily a story. The form of a concerto is essentially dramatic-abstract because you have a soloist and an orchestra, and the whole drama is how a single person can make their voice heard with a crowd. You can't do it by talking louder because an orchestra can drown out anybody if it chooses. You have to do it by eloquence, virtuosity, or expression. There's that inherent imbalance which creates the drama. I've explored those ideas. Sometimes by having players off stage, or out in the audience, or standing, as opposed to sitting, or by moving around. The minute somebody in the orchestra stands up, the focus is on that person. But it's not just haphazard, it has to be part of an overall idea that makes sense in the totality, and it has to have a dramatic reason.

GR: Give me an example of what would constitute a dramatic reason when you're dealing just with instruments and not words.

TM: In the clarinet concerto it looks like a perfectly normal orchestra, with the solo clarinetist standing in a normal position. It's a *concerto grosso* form, which means that there is a *tutti* [for all instruments] section and then there are soloist sections in between. What happens is there's the *tutti* section, then there's a soloist section where the solo clarinet plays with the strings, and then there's another *tutti* section and the clarinetist moves physically over near where the brass and bassoons sit to stage left. At that point the clarinet soloist conducts that group, not by waving his arms but by a system of cues. His part is written into their part so they can follow what he's doing while the conductor conducts the rest of the orchestra. Then there's another *tutti* and the clarinetist moves upstage across to stage right so he's with the horns. And then my secret instrument, which is an accordion . . .

GR: Ah ha!

TM: . . . and the clarinetist plays with that group again, which he leads, and the conductor conducts the rest. Finally, he comes down stage right and plays with the harp and the vibes alone, and there's a very beautiful slow section. Eventually the flute joins in, there's a gathering of momentum, and he walks back to the starting place. He turns and conducts the orchestra just for a few measures of the opening bars, and the conductor takes over again. It's a work out of a very traditional form.

GR: *Concerto grosso* was a popular form in the Baroque period; Bach, Vivaldi and Handel often wrote *concerti grossi*.

TM: The idea is not new, but it's heightened because with the clarinet concerto you can see the form of the piece working out.

GR: Through these clear and visual sections.

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TM: The other piece I wrote like that is the horn concerto, where halfway through there is a horn cadenza. The orchestral horns walk out into the hall, left and right, and then way up to the back, so that it makes a kind of circle with one horn left behind. The solo horn stands by the conductor facing out and gives the cues. He gives a lead like chamber music players, you know, lifts the instrument and brings them in. There're not so many instruments that can work from a distance, but the horn can do it because it envelopes the space. And the audience didn't really know quite where the sound was coming from. Again that was a question of moving around and having people at a distance, and yet it had an interplay of all the horns playing around the soloist. In certain halls we double up and have horns in the upper balcony as well.

GR: I love that antiphonal effect.

TM: We did it in Hong Kong with a famous horn player Barry Tuckwell. I really love this story: Years after the event, apparently, he was asked by the local paper: "What

would have happened if the local Hong Kong people did not like the work?" As quick as a flash, he said: "Well, they wouldn't have been able to get out. There was a horn player guarding every exit." Lovely!

- - - - - STREAMING – FROM HORN CONCERTO ----

GR: What about your musical language: tonality and atonality. I know you've worked in both.

TM: I don't set out with any *a priori* theories. I listen very carefully for what sounds right, both for the work but also what lies well, hopefully, for the instrument.

There's a very famous writer, Donald Francis Tovey. He was at Edinburgh. He died before I got there during World War II. His writing was crucial for me because he had this concept, which I love, of what he called "long-term harmonic planning," which means that you can set up a certain key, certain tonality, for a while, and then you need to balance that with what happens later, in consideration of the overall proportions. Listeners probably don't hear that; it's like going into a house where the foundations are solid and well constructed but not visible. We just see the beauty of the house, but if you're an architect you see the foundation. There has to be a very good structure underneath to support whatever it is you are trying to express. As a performer, you also have to discover that, and it's not that you plunk it in front of the audience, but it's there as a support system.

GR: And people feel it unconsciously. If it's not there, they know something is amiss.

TM: That's right. It's fascinating. People do have a sense of that. A conductor or performer who can illuminate the crucial proportions and how they angle into each other creates a very exciting performance.

GR: What is your vision of the direction for contemporary music? As a teacher, what advice would you give a young composer today?

TM: Don't do it unless you absolutely have to, because it's very tough.

GR: What if somebody comes to you with not much talent?

TM: Well, how do you know? Sometimes the people with apparently not much talent are the ones who have the staying power, and they're the ones who actually go further than the ones with incredible talent and don't actually work at it.

GR: It's true. I've seen that.

TM: I don't have to find talent in a very young person because change is possible over the years. That's also very interesting.

GR: You're quite right. Beethoven is the example of developing at a later age; he was in

his twenties when he began to master his craft and show his gift. What were your difficult choices and what compromises did you make?

TM: That's a tough one. I try not to make compromises, but I do it all the time in small ways to be practical. When I was teaching and my students would do very complicated things, I said: "You have to think how to make that easy to rehearse because you won't have a chance otherwise. So let me show you some ways you might be able to do that. Maybe you lose something of your idea, but you will hopefully retain enough to make it sound better."

GR: Effective in performance.

TM: It's always more important to me what the performers think rather than the critics, because they have to deal with the piece. If they really like it, that means a great deal to me. If I've written an oboe concerto for the wonderful Nick Daniel, and he really gets it and loves it, it's important. And it's very important that conductors get the picture.

GR: A couple of years ago there was an article in *The New York Times* that there aren't many women conductors. Two weeks later there was a letter from a player you had worked with in Philadelphia who said that you were amongst the best!

TM: But what was interesting is that it was twenty-five years later! It was amazing because I conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra in the seventies. This letter was in the

Times six years ago, so that was a long time later! Somehow, he'd remembered.

GR: Do you like to conduct?

TM: I only conduct my own pieces because I know how they work. I don't conduct other works like the Beethoven symphonies.

GR: When you look at a blank page what do you start with?

TM: A blank page is very frightening. The thing is to get it filled in. You need to get something written down, even though you later abandon that. I usually start with an idea, sometimes in the middle of a piece. I begin with what I think I want to do, and then I sort of work backwards and forwards.

GR: The opening of *Harriet* is unique, starting at a climax with huge orchestration, and then it goes back in time. Do you hear the sounds before putting them to paper?

TM: Of course. The craft doesn't change, but you know there are new challenges and you have to find new ways to deal with things. Always interesting. I thought, at my age it would be easier; it doesn't get any easier.

GR: Would you say that is because you take on harder challenges?

TM: I guess because you are fussy about what things sound like—or whether it's not quite right. Some works are easier than others. Or sometimes you have a tremendous struggle with one work, and then you have an easier time for a while; it's like a staircase. But those works that come out easily are not necessarily the best works, looking back on it.

GR: What is your favorite genre?

TM: Whatever I'm working on.

GR: I guess they're all your children!

TM: Music is a very hard taskmaster. But it's wonderful to be involved in something that is so much greater than any one individual. It's always changing—there're so many different kinds of music, so it can reach almost everybody. It's very basic.

For more information on the work of Thea Musgrave go to:

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