



Jayson Greene
Managing Editor

Jayson Greene writes about music for Pitchfork, the Village Voice and other publications. From 2004-07, he was associate editor for SYMPHONY Magazine, where he [...more »](#)

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live review: Julia Adolphe's *Sylvia*



Julia Adolphe

Last night on “[New York's floating concert hall](#)” Bargemusic, I witnessed the world premiere of a short, sharp, powerful opera called *Sylvia*, written by the young and prodigiously gifted composer Julia Adolphe. Clocking in at a searingly vivid 50 minutes, the work deals in only the cheeriest stuff: Holocaust survivors, child abuse, sexual predators, ruined families. If you read that list and felt it heaviness club you like sledgehammer hits to the brain, take heart: Adolphe's touch is light. Both as the work's composer and its librettist, Adolphe is sensitive, personal, and thoughtful, revealing characters a cast of characters that swing trickily from sensitive and sympathetic to revolting and back again. Rather like real people.

The opera's dramatic framework is ingenious: with the aid of a group of encouraging doctors and

patients, the work's titular protagonist (acted and sung with riveting poise by soprano Sophie Wingland) examines a painful childhood memory through the aid of a psychodrama session, a unique form of therapy in which the patient explores past trauma through role-playing. The doctors probe and encourage her to switch perspectives –assuming the role of her artist father, for instance, or even taking the perspective of her father's art works — whenever her recollections grow too painful. As a result, the opera flows in a long, fluid, uninterrupted arc through five different scenes, the same four performers switching roles with the dream-logic of childhood memory.

The story peels back in clammy layers, with a family friend of Sylvia's discontented family revealing a leering interest in the 13-year-old Sylvia. The character, Nathan, is both repugnant and tragic; like Sylvia's father, he is a descendant of Holocaust survivors. The way these two wounded men around Sylvia react to her – her father by withdrawing, Nathan by advancing inappropriately – forms the work's emotional double-bind, and at the center you can feel the young, discomfited 13-year-old girl, squirming and wondering what she's done wrong.

The music, set smartly for a cello, piano, and clarinet alternating with alto saxophone, provided the emotional subtext to every scene; at a tense moment at a dinner party, the cello fluttered nervously; the clarinet bleated small plaintive notes and the piano played in sharp, disruptive bursts. When the first of five questions traditionally asked at a Seder is uttered, (“Why is this night different from all nights?”) the music halts for a moment of stillness, as the opera's characters reflect on the ritual meaning of the question and its import on their inner lives. By the time the work has reached its bracing conclusion, I felt cleansed, and abraded, and Adolphe has established herself, in my mind, as a major new composer.

TAGS: Julia Adolphe, live, opera, Artist to Watch, classical