

Melissa Hughes

SOPRANO

"A magnetic presence" – THE NEW YORK TIMES

"A dazzling diva adept at old and new music" – TIME OUT NEW YORK

"note-perfect...by turns coolly composed and legitimately frightening" – **Pitchfork**

"Riveting" – THE NEW YORKER

"Haunting and beautiful" – Feast of Music

"I actually wasn't prepared for the strength of her physical performance..." – THE AWL

"A postclassical siren" – TIME OUT NEW YORK

"indispensable to New York's new-music ecosystem." – THE NEW YORK TIMES



Photo: Mark Hughes

Brooklyn-based soprano **Melissa Hughes** enjoys a busy career in both contemporary and early music. A dedicated interpreter of living composers, Ms. Hughes has collaborated with Julia Wolfe, Michael Gordon, David Lang, Steve Reich, Neil Rolnick, and has premiered works written expressly for her by Caleb Burhans, Missy Mazzoli, Ted Hearne, Jacob Cooper, Matt Marks, Corey Dargel, David T. Little and Frederic Rzewski, among others.

In the classical concert hall she has sung Mozart's *Vespers* and *Requiem* under the baton of Sir Neville Marriner, Handel's *Dixit Dominus* with Sir David Willcocks, and the title role in *Dido and Aeneas* under the direction of Andrew Lawrence King. Equally at home in front of a rock band, Ms. Hughes is lead vocalist of Newspeak, an amplified alt-classical band created by composer David T. Little.

Recent highlights include the world premiere of David T. Little's *Am I Born*, a solo orchestral work written for Ms. Hughes, commissioned by the Brooklyn Philharmonic for Alan Pierson's inaugural season as Music Director; rapturously-received performances of David Coll's *Position, Influence* and Matt Marks's Christian nihilist pop-opera *The Little Death, Vol. II* for the MATA Festival; the acclaimed world premiere of Alex Temple's *Liebeslied* with George Manahan and the American Composers Orchestra at Zankel Hall for the opening of the SONiC Festival; a performance of Jonathan Berger's song cycle *Theotokia* with the St. Lawrence String Quartet and Pedja Muzijevic for Stanford Lively Arts; a Weill Hall performance and Naxos recording of Mohammed Fairouz's *Tahwidah* with the clarinetist David Krakauer; Bryce and Aaron Dessner's multimedia song cycle *The Long Count* at the Muziekgebouw in Amsterdam for the Holland Festival; the US premiere of Adrian Utley and Will Gregory's score for *The Passion of Joan Arc* as part of Lincoln Center's 2011 White Light Festival; and featured solos in the May 2011 Carnegie Hall Dawn Upshaw/Donnacha Dennehy Workshop, for which Steve Smith wrote in the New York Times: "the standout was the versatile soprano Melissa Hughes, whose dynamic singing and theatrical flair in the concluding song, 'The Last Toast,' made for an extravagant star turn."

Ms. Hughes's discography includes releases on Nonesuch, New Amsterdam, and Bang on A Can's Cantaloupe Music. As a New Amsterdam Artist, Ms. Hughes is heard on many critically acclaimed albums, including Matt Marks's *The Little Death: Vol. I*; Newspeak's *Sweet Light Crude*; and the debut release of Missy Mazzoli's band, Victoire's *Cathedral City*.

Renowned for her collaborative artistry, Ms. Hughes has provided supporting vocals for My Brightest Diamond, The Roots, The National and The Breeders, and performs regularly with Alarm Will Sound, Clarion Music Society, Vox Vocal Ensemble, Ensemble Signal, AXIOM Ensemble, Ensemble ACJW, Ensemble de Sade, for Trinity Wall Street and the Wordless Music series. She holds degrees from Westminster Choir College, Princeton University and Yale University.

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Reviews

MATA FESTIVAL 2012, Roulette, Thursday Night, Matt Marks' *The Little Death Vol. 11*, Friday Night, David Coll's *Position, Influence*

The New York Times

Slashes and Shrieks in a Clamorous Return to the Barricades

MATA Festival at Roulette in Brooklyn MUSIC REVIEW

By STEVE SMITH Published: April 22, 2012



MATA Festival Melissa Hughes performing "Position, Influence" by the American composer David Coll at Roulette in Brooklyn. Ruby Washington/The New York Times

David Coll, a young American composer based in Belgium, provided a perfectly reasonable accounting for the impulses that led him to create "Position, Influence," a work presented at Roulette on Friday evening during the third and last program of this year's MATA Festival. In an onstage interview Mr. Coll said that the piece reflected his political

awakening during two years spent in Paris recently.

Specifically, "Position, Influence" requires a soprano to recite, sing, yelp and otherwise intone passages from Charles de Gaulle's responses to the May 1968 student uprising in Paris. The words, in Mr. Coll's view, are devoid of meaning; hence the singer wears a laryngophone, a contact microphone that picks up sounds from the throat before the mouth can shape them into words. Those amplified tones are then used to stimulate sheets of metal hung from a rack.

Ingenious and eloquent in theory, the piece takes a special artist to make it stick; here, happily, Mr. Coll had access to Melissa Hughes, a versatile, charismatic soprano endowed with brilliant technique and superlative stage instincts. By turns diva, seductress, scold and gorgon, as her voice resounded in piteous shrieks and livid roars, Ms. Hughes was astonishing, demonstrating anew why she has become indispensable to New York's new-music ecosystem.



Pitchfork

Report: MATA Festival

Jayson Greene surveys last week's contemporary-classical fest in NYC

By Jayson Greene on April 24, 2012 at 11:46 a.m.



Melissa Hughes. Photo by Alex G. Knight.

Soprano Melissa Hughes flounced her way gamely through Matt Marks' musical theater camp spectacle *The Little Death, Vol 2*, the very vision of a gawky nerd striving to let loose. The work, which traces a story of two young evangelical Christians in love, was unsure of its tone, whiffing at air quotes when it strove for sarcasm, but Hughes' over-bright, chirpy performance felt **note-perfect**.

She reappeared on Friday for David Coll's blood-freezing "Position, Influence", standing at a podium, flanked by an imposing wall of metal sheets. The

piece, which Coll explained concerned "becoming political while abroad," outfitted Hughes with a laryngophone, the throat microphone that fighter pilots wear as standard regulation. Hughes was by turns coolly composed and legitimately frightening as she raged in librarian-prim horn rims, repeating, in French, the words of Charles De Gaulle: "I will not step down." Malevolent bursts of noise poured from her mouth, transforming the sound of feedback into something like a dry-heave-- there were moments where Hughes' body language suggested someone being force-fed electrical wire.

BROOKLYN VILLAGE, Roulette, David T. Little's *Am I Born*, Alan Pierson and the Brooklyn Philharmonic and Brooklyn Youth Chorus

The New York Times

MUSIC REVIEW

Meditations on a Borough's History, Through Booms and Bad Times

Brooklyn Philharmonic and Brooklyn Youth Chorus at Roulette

By STEVE SMITH Published: March 26, 2012

Opening the program's second half, chorus members stationed throughout the space led audience members in "Idumea," a shape-note hymn by Charles Wesley. That work provided the melodic germ and temperament for David T. Little's "Am I Born," an elaborate, multimovement cantata also inspired by a Francis Guy painting, "Winter Scene in Brooklyn."

Most closely associated with small ensembles, Mr. Little demonstrated a thrilling authority in writing for larger forces, mixing orchestral movements of cinematic sweep and urgency with rich a cappella choral passages and instances of chamberlike intricacy. The soloist, the soprano Mellissa Hughes, combined classical poise with torch-song emotionalism, confirming her status as one of New York's freshest, most compelling interpreters.

SONIC FESTIVAL, Opening night at Carnegie Hall, Alex Temple's *Liebeslied*, George Manahan and the American Composers Orchestra

THE NEW YORKER, NOVEMBER 28, 2011



MUSICAL EVENTS

THE LONG HAUL

Nico Muhly's first two operas.

BY ALEX ROSS

"Alex Temple's 'Liebeslied,' which the American Composers Orchestra performed at Zankel Hall, is a surreal takeoff on love songs of the forties and fifties.

It begins with lushly orchestrated vocal kitsch – 'But when I hear you call my name/ The birds stop singing/ The bells stop ringing' – and then disintegrates into nightmarish fragments, with the singer (**the riveting Mellissa Hughes**) muttering about 'dark unending corridors.'

It's like a Buñuel film in miniature, and it achieves perfection."

CARNEGIE HALL WEILL MUSIC INSTITUTE, Dawn Upshaw/Donnacha Dennehy Workshop

The New York Times

MUSIC REVIEW

A Star Brings Singers and Composers Together

By STEVE SMITH

Published: April 18, 2011

For the soprano Dawn Upshaw, mixing styles and interacting with composers have been signature elements since the start of her illustrious career. Since 2004 Ms. Upshaw has shared her insights, training young singers and composers to collaborate during workshops presented under the auspices of Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute. That year she worked alongside the composer John Harbison; in 2007 and 2009 she teamed up with Osvaldo Golijov.

In this year's workshop, a weeklong event that culminated in a well-attended free concert at Zankel Hall on Sunday evening, Ms. Upshaw worked with Donnacha Dennehy, a prominent Irish composer and the founder of the new-music group Crash Ensemble...

Electronica figured more prominently in Aviya Kopelman's "Grief Measure," three songs linked by computer-enhanced wordless choruses and breakbeat drumming. Ms. Kopelman's lively conception involved amplification, digital static and non-classical vocal techniques. Two bass-baritones, Jeongcheol Cha and Leroy Y. Davis, adapted comfortably, but **the standout was the versatile soprano Mellissa Hughes, whose dynamic singing and theatrical flair in the concluding song, "The Last Toast," made for an extravagant star turn.**



Joe Kohen for The New York Times
The soprano Mellissa Hughes performing in "Grief Measure," by Aviya Kopelman, in a concert capping a weeklong workshop.

Matt Marks' THE LITTLE DEATH, VOL. 1, Incubator Arts Project

THE AWL

CULTURE AND TV

Showed Up: Matt Marks' "Post-Christian Nihilist Pop Opera" at St. Mark's Church

By Seth Colter Walls / July 13, 2010

How much time will you give an unfamiliar work of art? When I was six or seven, I complained straight away about the slow narrative trot of *The Silence*, prompting my father to retort: "It's Bergman. You give a master at least 15 minutes before you start fidgeting." But obviously we don't give young bucks (who aren't in the canon) quite the same attention-span leash. And then what if you're giving some new art "a try" on the internet? My sense is "15 seconds" may be the stick-it-out-or-fidget Rubicon. Which is to say, if you only give the above music video from a new "post-Christian nihilist pop opera" 15 seconds of your time, you might think it "meh." Give it three and a half minutes, though, and I suspect there's a much better chance you'll be wowed. For me, the coolest turn begins at the 2:18 mark, and climaxes with the chord that hits at 2:35.

"I Don't Have Any Fun On My Own" comes from Matt Marks' album *The Little Death, Vol. 1*, which is now in the midst of a two-week workshop as a stage work at St. Mark's Church in the East Village, courtesy of the Incubator Arts Project. (The video above was directed by the Satan's Pearl Horses collective.)

Is this thingy an opera? Well, first off, it's only an hour long—but, that fact aside, the correct answer would be "no." Is it musical theater? Certainly not by any traditional yardstick. But *The Little Death, Vol. 1* is catchy,



conceptual and rambunctious—so call it whatever you like. Either way, the baseline "story" here (such as it is), involves two characters named Boy and Girl, who are having trouble balancing the carnal with the godly. Over the course of 11 songs, they push and pull against each other, their respective desires and philosophies, and—as singers—the genre divides between Christian Pop, old-school hymns and frantic electro.

It's not a completely finished work by any means. As the title suggests, we're only seeing one part of the narrative. Also: the most suspenseful action happens near the front of the piece, when Boy shoots Girl, before the story leapfrogs back in time to their first meeting. (Presumably Vol. II will show us what happens after the gunshots.) As a stage work, *The Little Death* is clearly still gestating. Nothing wrong with that; the Incubator Arts Project in fact exists to usher works-in-progress along. (And even so, the direction, by Rafael Gallegos, contains a few well-wrought surprises.)

So, fine, these kids are all still figuring everything out. But that actually turns out to be the best argument for spending your time with them. Marks himself is a founding member of the new-music Alarm Will Sound crew, and has recently been working with the Dirty Projectors to arrange their piece *The Getty Address* for the stage. That is to say: he's got skills across a pleasing range of disciplines. Here, even when I was confronted with moments or gestures that I found awkward or too call-attention-y, I respected his overall compositional attack.

Equally impressive is his co-vocalist Melissa Hughes. I saw her sing in Louis Andriessen's *De Staat* at Carnegie's new music space a couple months back, and with the Signal ensemble at this year's Bang On A Can festival, but those were both stand-and-deliver performances behind sheet music. So I actually wasn't prepared for the strength of her physical performance in *The Little Death*. When she gutted out the familiar tune "He Touched Me" while wearing a virginal wedding dress and sashaying toward Boy, Hughes came across as confused in the most delectable of ways. But when she turned it into a degraded, Madonna-at-the-1984-VMAs pole dance, everyone in the tiny St. Mark's Church gym seemed under her crypto-erotic-religious spell. Developmental hiccups aside, I can always make time for that.

The Little Death, Vol. 1 plays four more times this week, from Wednesday through Saturday.

The New York Times

MUSIC REVIEW

Boy Meets Girl. Desire Clashes With Piety.

By STEVE SMITH

Published: July 9, 2010



Ari Mintz for The New York Times

Matt Marks, with Melissa Hughes, in "The Little Death, Vol. 1" on Thursday at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery.

Just what qualifies a substantial evening of vocal music, run together in a sequence that more or less defines a dramatic arc, to be designated as an opera? If you answered "an onstage murder," you're more likely than the average audience member to accept "The Little Death, Vol. 1," a vibrant, enigmatic new work that opened on Thursday at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery, as the opera it is billed to be.

More precisely, the composer Matt Marks's piece — roughly an hour long, including brief transitional blackouts and costume changes — is described as a "post-Christian nihilist pop opera," a designation that implies much while confirming little. "Post-Christian" and "nihilist" seem to suit the opera's slim, sketchy story: Boy courts Girl (the only names given); Girl first rebuffs Boy's advances, then embraces them with an unsettling mix of missionary zeal and conflicted desire. Corporeal desire clashes with evangelical piety, tragedy ensues — just not in that order.

"Pop opera" requires less deciphering. Mr. Marks, best known for his work as a French-horn player, arranger and composer in the new-music ensemble Alarm Will Sound, constructed his score as a mostly continuous sequence of cheerily seductive original pop tunes with simple, repetitive lyrics, interspersed with a

handful of familiar hymns and gospel songs.

Saturated with sampled timbres and driven by sputtering hip-hop break beats, Mr. Marks's music is bright and sentimental, at times even cloying in a manner meant to evoke anodyne commercial Christian pop. But Mr. Marks's crafty juxtapositions, clashes and transformations add to the opera's overall sense of ambiguity; in moments when he underscores sexual urges scarcely hidden within his squeaky-clean borrowed sources, substantial heat results.

Mr. Marks, a capable singer and skillful vocal arranger, played Boy as sympathetically overzealous and insecure by turns. **He was ideally partnered by Mellissa Hughes as Girl. A versatile soprano who excels in both standard classical repertory and modern works, Ms. Hughes sounded idiomatic and perky in indie-pop songs, and brought convincingly soulful grit to gospel numbers. The singers were amplified to mix with recorded backing tracks played rock-club loud.**

Most of those elements were clear enough on a CD of “The Little Death, Vol. 1,” issued by the New Amsterdam label in May. But here, in a shrewd stage production for the Incubator Arts Project, the director Rafael Gallegos deftly homed in on aspects of Mr. Marks’s piece that could be refined and clarified within a margarine-and-lavender-colored school-gym set equipped with only the barest of props.

“I Like Jesus,” a peppy list song on the CD, became an imaginary montage of social outings, giving the relationship between Boy and Girl a sense of duration and development. **And Ms. Hughes, a magnetic presence throughout, was particularly riveting during a seduction scene in which the gospel standard “He Touched Me” came with a sweaty grind straight out of a Madonna music video.**

If, in the end, “The Little Death, Vol. 1” leaves questions unanswered — some of which might well be addressed in “The Little Death, Vol. 2,” reportedly under way — the work’s mix of catchy tunes and unsettling themes nonetheless makes for a consistently affecting evening of theater.

“The Little Death, Vol. 1” runs through July 17 at St. Mark’s Church in the Bowery, 131 East 10th Street, East Village; (212) 352-3101, incubatorarts.org.

Press



Classical & Opera



The best (and worst) of 2010


An audacious New York Philharmonic event set the year's tone. *Steve Smith*



The best albums

Matt Marks *The Little Death, Vol. 1* (New Amsterdam) Teen spirit—in both the spiritual and earthy sense—animated this flamboyant electropop opera, exuberantly voiced by Marks and soprano Mellissa Hughes.



Enlarge

Katie Hayes/NPR

Mellissa Hughes — pictured on a recent music-video shoot in Brooklyn, N.Y. — plays Britney Spears in *Timberbrit*, an experimental opera by composer Jacob Cooper.

All Things Considered

August 4, 2009 - Opera has a long history of over-the-top spectacle and melodramatic plots. Composer Jacob Cooper decided to embrace that excess, creating a contemporary opera that imagines the tragic end of one particularly tempestuous pop diva.

The work is called *Timberbrit* — as in Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears. It's a tragic tale that imagines Spears' last concert, in the final hours of her life. Timberlake returns after a long absence to win back Spears' love, but in the end she chooses the audience's love

above all else.

Cooper began work on the opera by experimenting with a technique called time-stretching. Using digital audio software, he slowed down Spears' songs — and suddenly the light pop tunes seemed hauntingly tragic. Phrases like "Hit me baby one more time" took on an entirely different and more weighted meaning.

Cooper then collaborated with his performers to create new pieces of music inspired by those slowed-down hits, and writer Yuka Igarashi crafted fresh lyrics using the vernacular of Spears' songs — tears, love, dreams, innocence.

As a doctoral student at Yale, Cooper has looked at the psychological aspects of how traditional operas stretch time during death scenes — the way a dying character in *Rigoletto* or *Boris Godunov*, say, will pause to sing a 10-minute aria. Not realistic perhaps, but it packs a punch.

Cooper has expanded on that distinctive musical tradition by creating an entire opera enveloped by a fatal slowness of action. The idea is that in *Timberbrit*, Spears' prolonged destruction amplifies the tragedy of her downfall.

The opera premiered in New York City as a semistaged production in 2008 and is currently being developed into a fully staged version.

Meanwhile, the cast and crew of *Timberbrit* recently shot a music video of Cooper's song "Worst Fantasy," inspired by Spears' "Toxic." In keeping with the opera's process, the videographers started with a slowed-down, stretched-out recording of the original, then manipulated it and built on it to create something new.

The result: a distillation of Spears' music videos and public meltdowns that forces viewers to take a second look at both pop-star lives and the way the public devours them.

This piece was originally produced for NPR's Intern Edition by Claire Happel and Sarah Metcalf.

www.melissahughes.com

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