

MISSY MAZZOLI'S AMERICA

THE COMPOSER MISSY MAZZOLI TALKS TO
HANNAH EDGAR ABOUT A BODY OF WORK ROOTED
IN HER HOME COUNTRY

To hear Missy Mazzoli tell it, there wasn't much to do in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, in the 1990s. The sleepy suburb was just an hour's drive from Philadelphia, with its myriad venues and coveted indie movie house. But to a young and restless creative mind, the city seemed to be a galaxy away. Mazzoli spent most of her teenage years behind the piano or recruiting friends to play in a string of 'terrible' punk bands. She played guitar and bass, and, of course, wrote the music.

One day, her drummer announced he'd secured a rehearsal space. The 'space' turned out to be a shed in the local cemetery, next to his house.

'We barely even played shows,' Mazzoli says on a video call from her apartment in Brooklyn. She is wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with a picture of Luciano Pavarotti in which the tenor is holding a chunky cell phone in one hand and grilling various meats with the other. 'It was just about being in a shed, making noise, eating McDonald's, hanging out.'

Some 30 years later, Mazzoli, who turns 46 on October 27, is preparing for her highly anticipated Metropolitan Opera debut: an adaptation of the Booker Prize-

winning George Saunders novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*, which is set entirely in a place well known to the composer: a cemetery. And while her allegorical opera *The Galloping Cure*, which was premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival in August, isn't explicitly based in Lansdale, its small-town, post-industrial backdrop is central to the story.

'I think it takes place in my home town,' Mazzoli contends. 'But my hope is that anyone watching it will say, "That's *my* home town."'

Missy Mazzoli



OPERA
NEWS



Home town girl: a teenage Missy Mazzoli

Mazzoli says her upbringing provides ‘fuel’ for her macabre, fantastical operas—written, almost always, with the Canadian librettist Royce Vavrek, whom she refers to as her ‘partner in crime, and in opera’. *Proving Up*, her 2018 one-act opera about a doomed family of 19th-century homesteaders, was inspired by the devastation wrought by the 2008 financial crisis. In *The*

Listeners (2022), a suburban schoolteacher’s life is upended, then given new meaning, by a mysterious noise; while writing it Mazzoli tapped into the frustrations of some of her female family members whose professional and personal ambitions were stymied.

Lately, Mazzoli’s past hasn’t felt quite so far away. After her father’s death in 2024, she and her sister returned to Lansdale to clean up his home. They found a more revitalized, bustling town than the one they left—but they also encountered deep scars from the opioid crisis which had ravaged their generation. Two of their cousins, one of whom had become dependent on prescribed painkillers, died from overdoses.

‘The people I went to high school with, who are now in the grips of addiction—that could have very easily been me if I hadn’t been so distracted by music and had this other thing to put my energy into,’ Mazzoli says. ‘The difference in our circumstances is very small.’

A fortuitous occasion was the arrival of an upright piano in the Mazzoli household when she turned seven. Her parents bought it at a flea market. At the time, her family could claim just one other musician, a great-uncle who had joined the circus. His signature act was playing the piano with his toes. (‘There’s no video that I can find. But we all have weirdly long toes,’ Mazzoli says.)

No one was expecting the young Mazzoli to latch herself to the instrument, much less to become fixated on Beethoven. She ran through the piano sonatas obsessively. Her early compositions, she admits, were written in a Beethovenian mould.

‘What people learn about Beethoven is that he couldn’t hear, and he was really mean. I was like, “This is *great!*”,’ she remembers. ‘His music had this sort of darkness to it that was cool.’

She has words to describe that ‘darkness’ now: the act of intertwining consonance and dissonance, of ‘taking you to the edge of what your ear will accept’. Mazzoli’s

music does the same thing, on 21st-century terms. Her melodic contours tend to be welcoming and familiar, carrying all the hallmarks of tonal music. Yet, uneasiness is always close at hand—queasy harmonies, percussive outbursts. Though her punk band days are behind her, her riot grrrl roots flare through in the explosive, wild emotional climaxes of her operas, sometimes surging with electronics and synths.

She also shares Beethoven's micro-motivic glee. In college Mazzoli discovered Bang on a Can, the New York-based contemporary music organization: while she was a student at Boston University she was accepted into the gamelan ensemble at nearby MIT, directed by the Bang on a Can clarinetist Evan Ziporyn. She later took up the Bang on a Can coterie's penchant for cycling, repeating figures in her own music.

Mazzoli didn't see her first live opera until she attended a Met production of *Wozzeck* while she was in college in 1999. But she has worked in the genre throughout her career, though at first on a smaller scale. She initially collaborated with Vavrek on *Song from the Uproar: The Lives and Deaths of Isabelle Eberhardt*, a 2012 chamber opera prickling with electric guitar. By then Mazzoli had been residing for six years in New York, where she moved after her studies at the Royal Conservatory of the Hague and Yale (from which she received a Master's degree in music in 2006).

Mazzoli and Vavrek followed *Song from the Uproar* four years later with their first full-length collaboration: *Breaking the Waves*, an adaptation of the 1996 Lars von Trier film. Following its 2016 premiere at Opera Philadelphia, a second international co-production was performed in opera houses in four countries—including, in the US, at Houston Grand Opera, which released a commercial recording earlier this year.

'She's musical magic incarnate,' Vavrek says of Mazzoli. 'When you write roles for singers that hug the contours of their instrument or show them off in a beautiful way, or when you create a vibrant theatrical problem that you want the director to solve—it shows off the magic of that person's imagination.'

In an interview sandwiched between rehearsals for *The Galloping Cure*, Vavrek contends that he and Mazzoli work from a place of deep familiarity. Neither grew up in large cities; both spent their childhoods in the kaleidoscopic, self-constructed worlds that only break ground in places of

Missy Mazzoli and Royce Vavrek's first full-length collaboration: the premiere of 'Breaking the Waves' at Opera Philadelphia in 2016



OPERA
NEWS

stifling stillness. (Vavrek grew up on his family's farm in Alberta, singing made-up musical theatre numbers while baling hay.)

'Her parents were teachers, and my mom was a nurse. They had very utilitarian jobs. We both felt like the industry was so unattainable in a certain way,' Vavrek reflects.

The composer and librettist also share the same cultural touchstones—they love many of the same films, listened to the same pop music, devoured the same books. Mazzoli and Vavrek sometimes enlist their favourite writers to devise an original scenario for their operas. The American writer Karen Russell, whose short story inspired their opera *Proving Up*, conceived *The Galloping Cure*, a loose riff on Franz Kafka's *A Country Doctor*. And Jordan Tannahill, a Canadian writer and director, dreamed up *The Listeners*, which he later turned into a novel. A BBC mini-series adaptation followed in 2024.

At the centre of their operas, more often than not, is a female protagonist. 'One of the main subcategories of narrative that Missy likes to tackle is "women in impossible situations",' Vavrek says. 'I think she's definitely encountered a lot of that.'

When *Lincoln in the Bardo* is premiered in New York City this month, starring Peter Mattei as the legendary US president, it will be the Met's first commission written by a woman. Before Mazzoli, only four female composers have had their work performed on America's most storied opera stage: Ethel Smyth (*Der Wald*, produced at the Met in 1903), Kaija Saariaho (*L'Amour de loin*, 2016, and *Innocence*, 2026), Jeanine Tesori (*Grounded*, 2024) and Gabriela Lena Frank (*El último sueño de Frida y Diego*, 2026).

'Proving Up' at Opera Omaha in 2018





The first US staging of 'The Listeners' at Opera Philadelphia in 2024

Throughout her academic composition studies, Mazzoli did not once have a female mentor. 'I would have been so much happier, so much clearer,' she wrote in an email. 'I think any young woman who studied composition before 2017 or so had to put up with a fair amount of overt resistance or negativity related to her gender.'

This negativity took the form of comments 'made under a thin guise of *protection*' by various people including the grad school professor who told her no one would take her career seriously; the composer she worked for who warned her she might be interviewed for academic positions but would never win the job (Mazzoli is currently the composer in residence at the Bard Conservatory of Music); and the leader of an opera company who, in 2019, told Mazzoli the current crop of women and composers of colour weren't ready for 'the big leagues'.

'These comments have reverberated through my mind every time I applied for a job, every time I put myself out there,' she says. 'While I always feel like people want to hear about these instances of overt sexism so that there can be a neat, heroic arc to the story—and while my success is indeed the sweetest form of revenge I can imagine—these comments pale in comparison to the systemic barriers in place.'

To challenge those barriers, Mazzoli and the composer Ellen Reid co-founded Luna Composition Lab, a mentorship programme for female, non-binary and gender nonconforming composers between the ages of 13 and 18. A decade after its founding, the majority of the programme's nearly 60 alumni have furthered their compositional studies; all are involved in music. After one of her conversations with *Opera*, Mazzoli zigzagged from Glasgow—where *Galloping Cure* was being rehearsed before the load-in in Edinburgh—to the Music Academy of the West in California, among the international institutions co-hosting Luna Lab's tenth anniversary celebration.

OPERA
NEWS



‘We never thought the programme could grow to this size and scope,’ Mazzoli confesses. ‘One of my favourite things is to watch our students hang out and laugh and connect with each other, to watch the casualness with which they talk about living a life in music, watching them text each other about their successes or concerns. They’ll never have to wonder, the way that Ellen and I did, about whether or not they belong in this field.’

The Galloping Cure is about a woman in a male-dominated profession who is ensnared in excruciating circumstances: a small-town doctor, Theresa Hart, struggles to manage her patients’ chronic pain, when a charismatic stranger appears and peddles a cure—a carousel that robs all who ride it of pain and fear.

But the ride is not what it seems. To keep spinning the carousel needs human parts—eyes, organs, tongues. In a video chat between *Galloping Cure* rehearsals, Mazzoli proudly showed off behind-the-scenes photos of a decapitated prop horse. In another short video, the soprano Susan Bullock cheerily waved from the back of a carousel steed, lofted by wire pulleys.

Mazzoli, who is usually cool and collected during an interview, buzzed with eager energy. ‘Visually, I think it’s going to be one of the most spectacular shows I’ve ever done,’ she says.

It’s also more wide-reaching than she and Vavrek originally envisioned. During rehearsals, they concluded that the metaphorical potential of *The Galloping Cure* could be expanded. ‘We realized that [the opera] *is* about the opioid crisis, but not as much as it is about this idea of being on this endless carousel of pain, whether that’s the American healthcare system, the education system, or just capitalism,’ Mazzoli says. ‘We’ve been changing some lines to reflect that.’

The Galloping Cure has a distinct sonic signature that places it in Rust Belt America: an Appalachian-flavoured autoharp, the clanging of heavy machinery, and even an EDM interlude via an Act 2 rave scene set in an abandoned movie theatre. In contrast, Mazzoli for the most part avoided overt Americana in *Lincoln in the Bardo* except in moments of criticism or parody; the opera’s kazoo chorus is a hallmark of the score that nods both to Saunders’s irreverent prose and *Proving Up*’s spooky harmonica chorales.

Such moments of levity offset the enormity of Lincoln's grief—not just at the death from typhoid fever of his 11-year-old son Willie, but at the mass deaths of the nation's young men in the Civil War. Here, again, Mazzoli says she leaned on her biography: her late father was a Vietnam veteran whose experiences inspired one of her most performed orchestral works, *These Worlds in Us*.

'Every time I asked my dad what war was like, he would say, "There's no music in war,"' she recalls. 'At one point in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, these dead soldiers confront Lincoln and he says out loud, "I don't think I have the heart for this". The music just grinds to a halt, and they wander away, disappointed in him. I think there's a little bit of my dad's attitude in there, too.'

Because of the financial stresses of the American opera industry, Mazzoli's operas—many of which are co-productions—are frequently mounted in Europe before arriving in the US. But her focus on American stories is getting special play this year, both at home and abroad. This year's Edinburgh International Festival, which oversaw *Galloping Cure*'s premiere, was themed, interrogatively, around American artists and works. The Met has also tied *Lincoln in the Bardo* to the nation's semiquincentennial—though the milestone is, in the eyes of Mazzoli and many Americans, arriving at a decidedly unpatriotic juncture.

'I think we should reschedule the 250th anniversary and the Fourth of July this year,' she said with a groan a few days before the national holiday weekend began.

At the same time, Mazzoli is resolute in her belief that America's Faustian bargains—the kind that appear all over her operas—are not unique to the US. The Metropolitan Opera has been roundly scrutinized for a \$200 million deal with the Saudi government, which fell through earlier this year. At the same time, Mazzoli

The premiere of 'The Galloping Cure' at this summer's Edinburgh International Festival, with Daniela Mack (l.) as Theresa



OPERA
NEWS

notes, the grand, spiralling staircase at the Theatre Royal in Glasgow—where *The Galloping Cure* was largely rehearsed—was once named for the Sackler family, the owners of the OxyContin manufacturer Purdue Pharma and the face of the American opioid crisis depicted in the opera.

‘Where do you draw the line?’ Mazzoli ponders. ‘If it’s like, “Oh, look at those dumb Americans who can’t figure out how to care for their citizens in the most basic way,” then, OK, piece over, curtain. But if it’s about capitalism more broadly, then it becomes about deals with the devil.’

From *Proving Up*’s hollow American Dream to *Lincoln in the Bardo*’s divided nation, Mazzoli’s operas sing of America as it is, not as we wish it to be. Everyone, she warns, should heed its songs.

‘It’s easy to look at America and say, “At least we’re not like them.” But I often feel like we’re the canary in the coal mine: things tend to become explosive here faster than they do in other countries because of our big personalities and lack of a social safety net. I try to make work that uses America as a lens through which to view issues and joys that are universal.’

‘Lincoln in the Bardo’, with music by Missy Mazzoli and a libretto by Royce Vavrek based on the George Saunders novel, has its premiere at the Metropolitan Opera on October 19, c. Yannick Nézet-Séguin, d. Lileana Blain-Cruz. www.metopera.org



HAT TOURS

EUROPEAN OPERA TOURS

Where will opera
take you in 2027?



Small Groups of Fifteen | Orchestra Seats | Since 1982

- Spring Opera Week in Vienna
- Beethoven Bicentennial in Leipzig & Dresden
- Hamburg & Berlin with Lise Davidsen, Cecilia Bartoli
- Munich Ring Cycle 1
- Munich Ring Cycle 2

Scan to View
Itineraries



www.europeanoperatours.com | +1 (727) 367 3973