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For Ensembles and Singers, a Night of Backbreaking Labor

NY Phil Biennial Offers Themes of Mining and Building

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NY Phil Biennial The Bang on a Can All-Stars and Choir of Trinity Wall Street, conducted by Julian Wachner, performing "Anthracite Fields" at Avery Fisher Hall, commemorating Pennsylvania coal miners. Richard Perry/The New York Times

The NY Phil Biennial presented a diptych of New York premieres dedicated to manual labor on Friday evening at Avery Fisher Hall. Julia Wolfe's "Anthracite Fields" (2014) commemorates the Pennsylvania coal miners whose work fueled the industrial revolution. Steven Mackey's "Dreamhouse" (2003) examines the process of building a house. Both works feature singers and an ensemble mixing acoustic and amplified instruments; both express unease with the American culture of comfort and consumption.

"Anthracite Fields" contains a raw indictment of the exploitation of workers, particularly the children employed in the mines as breaker boys, sifting through coal and debris with bleeding fingers. In Ms. Wolfe's polished and stylistically assured cantata, the overall coherence of the musical material helped her expressions of outrage to burn cleanly and brightly.

For "Anthracite Fields," the meticulous Julian Wachner conducted the brilliant Bang on a Can All-Stars and his own Choir of Trinity Wall Street. Evocative, but sometimes didactic, video projections by Jeff Sugg (mostly black-and-white portraits of miners, diagrams and maps of Pennsylvania mining country) added visual interest. Occasionally, they displayed parts of the libretto, assembled from oral histories, local children's rhymes and an index of Pennsylvania mining accidents, which provided the chillingly long litany of victims with the first name John that opened the work. Repetition is also the foundation of Ms. Wolfe's music, which was enlivened by her subtle writing for voices and the inventive ways she used the Bang on a Can players. The cellist Ashley Bathgate's chanting of children's ditties had an impish ferocity to it; the electric guitarist Mark Stewart turned a speech by the miners' leader John L. Lewis into a rock anthem.

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