This Woman Just Won The 2015 Pulitzer Prize For Music

By Hugh McIntyre
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The Pulitzer Prize winners of 2015 were announced earlier this week, and there is one honoree that stands out from the rest of those awarded. Julia Wolfe is not a journalist or a writer, at least not in the way that most people think of the word. Wolfe is a composer, and this year her piece Anthracite Fields took home the medal (and the $10,000 purse that comes with it), as the jury found it to be the best in a crowd of amazing work.

Anthracite is a historic piece that focuses on the coal miners of Pennsylvania from the past. After being commissioned to write a piece (which ended up being over and hour long) by the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, the composer spent over a year researching every aspect of these miners’ lives, in order to properly tell their story. She went to museums and spoke with surviving family members of those that had worked in the mines, even visiting some herself.

The work debuted last April in Pennsylvania, where Wolfe is also from. Anthracite was performed by music collective Bang on a Can, which Wolfe helped co-found with her husband. Another member of the group, David Lang, won the same prize several years ago.

No recording of Anthracite has yet been released, but if it is not already in the works, it is likely that after winning such a prestigious prize, it will likely be available for the public to own at some point in the near future.

In a release revealing the winners of this year’s prizes, the Pulitzer organization called the piece a “powerful oratorio for chorus and sextet evoking Pennsylvania coal-mining life around the turn of the 20th century.” Wolfe has been nominated before, and this time she beat out fellow composers Lei Liang’s Xiaoxiang and John Zorn’s The Aristos for the top prize. In addition to working on pieces like Anthracite, Wolfe is the Director of Music Composition at New York University.

Though it is primarily known as a prize awarded to journalists, media organizations, and works of literature, the Pulitzer organization also honors other mediums, such as music and plays.