
THEA MUSGRAVE

BIOGRAPHY

Rich and powerful musical language and a strong sense of drama have made Scottish-American composer Thea Musgrave one of the most respected and exciting contemporary composers in the Western world.

Her compositions were first performed under the auspices of the British Broadcasting Corporation and at the Edinburgh International Festival. As a result her works have been widely performed in Britain, Europe and the USA, and at the major music festivals, such as Edinburgh, Warsaw Autumn, Florence Maggio Musicale, Venice Biennale, Aldeburgh, Cheltenham and Zagreb; on most of the European and American broadcasting stations; and on many regular symphony concert series.

In honor of her distinguished and varied catalogue and career over 60 years, the BBC presented Total Immersion: Thea Musgrave with three concerts of her chamber, choral, and symphonic works performed and recorded at the Barbican in a single day -- February 15, 2014.

From time to time she has conducted her own works: the premiere performance of *Mary, Queen of Scots* at the 1977 Edinburgh International Festival and later with the San Francisco Spring Opera; the premiere performances of *The Voice of Ariadne* in Britain and again in New York and Los Angeles for the New York City Opera; and many orchestral concerts (Philadelphia, San Francisco, St Paul Chamber, Los Chamber, BBC Symphony, BBC Scottish Symphony, Royal Scottish National, Hong Kong Philharmonic, Jerusalem Philharmonic etc). It is a measure of her talent and determination that Thea Musgrave has earned great respect for her work both as a composer and conductor at a time when these were still rather uncommon professions for a woman.



Photo: Christian Steiner

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland on 27 May 1928, she studied first at the University of Edinburgh and later at the Conservatoire in Paris, where she spent four years as a pupil of Nadia Boulanger, before establishing herself back in London as a prominent member of British musical life. In 1970 she became Guest Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which anchored her increasing involvement with the musical life of the United States. In 1971 she married the American opera conductor Peter Mark, and has resided in the U.S. since 1972. In 1974 she received the Koussevitzky Award, resulting in the composition of *Space Play*, which after its London premier was performed in New York by the Lincoln Center Chamber Players. She has also been awarded two Guggenheim Fellowships, in 1974-75, and again in 1982-83, and was recognized with honorary degrees by Old Dominion University (Virginia), Smith College, Glasgow University and in May 2004, the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. She was awarded a C.B.E. on the Queen's New Year's Honour List in January 2002. As Distinguished Professor at Queens College, City University of New York from September 1987-2002, Musgrave has guided and interacted with many new and gifted young student composers.

Musgrave has consistently explored new means of projecting essentially dramatic situations in her music, frequently altering and extending the conventional boundaries of instrumental performance by physicalizing their musical and dramatic impact. As she once put it, she wanted to explore dramatic musical forms: some works are dramatic-abstract, that is without programmatic content (such as the *Clarinet Concerto*, the *Horn Concerto*, the *Viola Concerto*, and *Space Play*), and others project specific programmatic ideas (such as the paintings in *The Seasons* and *Turbulent Landscapes*, the poems in *Ring Out Wild Bells*, *Journey through a Japanese Landscape*, and *Autumn Sonata*, and the famous Greek legends in *Orfeo*, *Narcissus*, *Helios*, and *Voices from the Ancient World*); -- all extensions of concerto principles. In some of these, to enhance the dramatic effect, the sonic possibilities of spatial acoustics have been incorporated: in the *Clarinet Concerto* the soloist moves around the different sections of the orchestra, and in the *Horn Concerto* the orchestral horns are stationed around the concert hall. Thus the players are not only the conversants in an abstract musical dialogue, but also very much the living (and frequently peripatetic) embodiment of its *dramatis personae*.

It was therefore not surprising that her focus on the lyric and dramatic potential of music should have led to Musgrave's fluency in the field of opera, and it is interesting to see that her large-scale operas of the past 30 years, beginning with *The Voice of Ariadne* (1972) and followed by *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1977), *A Christmas Carol* (1979), and *Harriet, The Woman Called Moses* (1984), are in every sense the true successors to the instrumental concertos. *Simón Bolívar* (1993), like many of her operas, focuses on a historic figure whose life takes on an epic or archetypal dimension -- in this case the heroic liberator of several South American countries from Spanish colonial rule. Her newest opera, *Pontalba*, (2003), again places the heroic struggle of its heroine in a larger historical context, in this case the Louisiana Purchase and the forging of the young United States.

With such a large and varied career and catalogue, Thea Musgrave is frequently interviewed and questioned about being a "woman" composer, to which she has replied; "Yes, I am a woman; and I am a composer. But rarely at the same time."