



THE TRIANGLE FIRE

Chamber Opera in one act with libretto by Ellen Frankel and music by Leonard Lehrman. Community Church of New York City, March 12, 2017 | by Mark Zuckerman

AROUND QUITTING TIME on Saturday afternoon on March 25, 1911, a fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory on the ninth floor of the Asch Building, near Washington Square in New York City. The owners had locked the exit doors to prevent petty thievery by employees, with the cruel side effect of also preventing their escape. Although fire fighters quickly arrived at the scene, their ladders and hoses were too short to reach the fire, so it burned unabated for about 45 minutes until it ran out of fuel. This left those inside — mostly young Jewish and Italian immigrant women, many in their teens — with a gruesome choice: to remain and be roasted alive or to jump from a window — the only available exit — to die on the pavement nine stories below. When it was all over, 146 lives were lost.

The Triangle Fire captured the public imagination in part because of the

gender and age of the victims but also because of the apparent callousness that led to the tragedy, both by the Triangle owners in their treacherous method to stop pilfering and by the absence of adequate safety precautions. The Asch Building (now a part of New York University) was then one of a group of modern “skyscrapers” erected in lower Manhattan. Part of a trend of engineering advances that outdistanced safety regulations, it was supposedly fireproof (indeed the structure itself was unharmed by the fire); but building codes at the time did not require robust fire escapes or sprinkler systems, either of which would have saved many lives.

The Triangle Fire came barely a year after a strike by shirtwaist makers for better conditions resulted in token concessions by the factory owners. The strike had received a fair amount of publicity and had attracted the atten-

tion and involvement of some of New York’s society women. This helped fuel public outrage over the fire, stoked even more after the two Triangle factory owners, tried for manslaughter, were acquitted.

The Triangle Fire provided the impetus for New York State establishing a Factory Investigating Commission that drafted a set of labor standards, many of which were adopted by a number of state legislatures and, eventually, by the federal government during the New Deal. The Commission’s co-chairs were Al Smith, who as Assembly Speaker and Governor achieved the passage of these measures in New York, and Robert Wagner, who as a U. S. Senator drafted much of the key New Deal labor legislation.

The Triangle Fire story presents several paths for dramatic exploration:





- a human tragedy, with so many promising lives meeting a horrible end
- a window into New York society of the time, with alliances forged between classes to effect social change, and
- a call to political action, with the Triangle Fire as a key milestone in the ongoing struggles of the labor movement and the ensuing trial as an indictment of the justice system.

The Triangle Fire, an ambitious and earnest chamber opera by composer Leonard Lehrman and librettist Ellen Frankel, takes the third path as its principal dramatic focus. This was underscored at the March 12 performance in the basement of the Community Church of New York by the Solidarity Singers of the New Jersey Industrial Union Council, who introduced the opera with a program of traditional labor songs. These included *The Internationale* (in multiple languages) and *Solidarity Forever*, the hymns of the Communist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), respectively, setting the political orientation for the entire presentation.

The Metropolitan Philharmonic Chorus, a choir Lehrman founded and conducts, and the Bronx Opera Company presented the opera itself in concert form conducted by the composer from the piano. Lasting a bit over an hour, the opera consists of one act, comprising four scenes, bracketed by a prologue and two epilogues.

All of the action takes place after the fire. The prologue takes place in the makeshift morgue toured by victims' relatives to identify and claim the bodies. It also introduces the Journalist,

who was an eyewitness to the tragedy and serves sporadically throughout the opera as a narrator. The opera's one act takes place in the courtroom where the Triangle owners were on trial for manslaughter, except for one brief scene that flashes back to the fire during the testimony of the prosecution's star witness. The first epilogue briefly recounts the subsequent enactment of labor protection measures and the people involved in their promulgation; the second relates the Triangle Fire to modern-day industrial disasters, in particular the 2013 Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh that claimed the lives of more than 1,100 garment workers and injured 2,500 more.

Accompanying the singing was a slide show with evocative images—printed matter and pictures—about the fire and the trial and from the period around 1911. These were interspersed among slides of the libretto. The latter were largely unnecessary, owing to Lehrman's adroit setting of the text and the superb diction of the singers, making the words easy to apprehend aurally. Lehrman and Frankel were able to condense the rather lengthy trial by focusing on emblematic moments and by the shrewd deployment of ensembles. The combination of all this made for a convincing presentation, begging the question of whether *The Triangle Fire* might be equally effective (not to mention more practical) as a cantata. Staging it could prove challenging;

and it would take very imaginative direction to add a dimension the music doesn't already provide while not getting in its way.

The creators made a concerted effort to hew closely to the actual record of events. Taking the opposite tack to that of John Adams and Alice Goodman with *The Death of Klinghoffer*, they took pains to make sure their telling of the story met the approval of the fire's surviving

relatives; they even eliminated an invented romance because it proved offensive. Nevertheless, they proved there was a more than adequate supply of dramatic material while remaining authentic.

This project was obviously a labor of love for Lehrman and the performers. He composed the music specifically for the people he knew would sing it and he coached all the singers individually. All that work paid off.

The production of *The Triangle Fire* at the Community Church of New York should serve as a reminder that much worthwhile new music happens in humble places like church basements.

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