

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Fire in My Mouth

Tuesday 22 September 2026, 8pm

Royal Festival Hall

Welcome to the opening of our 2026/27 classical season. In our 75th anniversary year, we are more committed than ever to exploring classical music's full breadth, with a bold *Season Opening Week* that reflects the scope of the year to come.

Tonight's performance is a major collaboration between the Southbank Centre, Resident Orchestra the Philharmonia Orchestra, and artists from the UK and internationally. Presented here in its London premiere, Julia Wolfe's *Fire in my mouth* is a semi-staged oratorio commemorating a New York industrial disaster that led to significant workplace reforms.

Tonight, we experience how classical music can tell human stories with unforgettable power.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Julia Wolfe *Fire in my mouth* (London premiere)

48'

Performers

Philharmonia Orchestra

Marin Alsop *conductor*

London Voices

RSNO Youth Chorus

Farnham Youth Choir

Julia Wolfe *composer*

Anne Kauffman *director*

Jeff Sugg *scenic, lighting, video and production designer*

Máirion Talán *costume designer*

Kenny Savelson *executive producer*

Ash(er) Lloyd Ehrenberg *associate director*

Ben Parry *director of London Voices*

Patrick Barrett *Youth Chorus director*

Produced by Bang on a Can and the Southbank Centre

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour.
There is no interval.*

Fire in my mouth is based on the garment industry in New York City at the turn of the century, with a focus on the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and its aftermath. Drawing upon contemporary accounts of immigration, labour and activism amongst the garment workers of the Lower East Side, *Fire in my mouth* brings the world and words of the garment workers to the forefront.

The work features 146 vocalists – a number commemorating the total who perished in the fire.

For Wolfe, *Fire in my mouth* was an opportunity to recast the women not as voiceless victims, but as protagonists whose actions and sacrifices had a profound effect on United States history. Wolfe writes:

'I had been thinking about immigrant women in the workforce at the turn of the century. They fled their homelands to escape poverty and persecution. The garment workers arrived to these shores with sewing skills. Many of the women wound up working on these huge factory floors – hundreds of women sitting at sewing machines. *Fire in my mouth* tells the story of the women who persevered and endured challenging conditions, women who led the fight for reform in the workplace.'

The piece also incorporates elements derived from protest chants, courtroom testimonials, Yiddish and Italian folk songs, and an elegiac recitation of all 146 victims' names.

Upon its premiere, critics noted *Fire in my mouth* for its sensitivity to the subject matter, as well as its emotional impact and inventiveness. David Hajdu of *The Nation* called *Fire in my mouth* 'a monumental achievement in high musical drama, among the most commandingly imaginative and emotively potent works of any kind that I've ever experienced.' Anthony Tommasini of *The New York Times* noted that Wolfe's 'choice of choral texts, mostly drawn from oral histories and speeches, shows great sensitivity.' In reference to Wolfe's incorporation of folk song into the sonic factory sound of the orchestra, Tommasini writes, 'The way these songs are embedded in Ms. Wolfe's agitated, heaving orchestra, they seem like alternative coping mechanisms for the oppressed.'

Fire in my mouth is the third in a series of compositions about the American worker. Wolfe's first, 2009's *Steel Hammer*, examined the folk-hero John Henry, revelling in the contradictions of over 200 different versions of his life to tell a story that transcends time and space. Her 2015 oratorio *Anthracite Fields* honoured the workers of the Pennsylvania Anthracite coal region at a time when the industry fuelled the nation.

Programme notes courtesy of Julia Wolfe

Fire in my mouth – libretto

I. Immigration

Adapted from an interview with Mollie Wexler, oral history:

Without passports or anything we took a boat
a big beautiful boat
and off we went
five of us girls.
It took about ten days
we went third class
with the poverty stricken
and off we went
five of us girls.
But it was lively
everyone talking
and looking
to God knows what kind of future it was going to be.

II. Factory

Adapted from a Yiddish folk song:

Mit a nodl, on a nodl Ney ikh mir b'kovid godl Zitsn zits ikh mir
A fis oyf a fis
Vayl mayn arbet
iz tsiker zis

With a needle, without a needle
I do my sewing with great dignity I sit on my work-table
With my legs crossed under me
Because my work
Is sugar sweet

Adapted from an Italian Pizzica folk song:

e com' aggiu fare ca vulia te vasu pigliate 'na paletta e
va allu focu
e ca' pe la mamma dice ca hai 'tardatu dinne ca' e' stata
'na spitta te focu
e spitta te focu, nun e' stata mai qualche figiu te mamma
me l'ha vasata

[Girl] What can I do to give you a kiss?
[Boy] Tell your mother that you have to fetch some fire and if
she says that you are late
tell her a spark of fire burned you
[Mother] It never was a spark of fire
Someone kissed her

III. Protest

Women's Choir

I want to talk like an American
I want to look like an American
I want to sing like an American
I want to walk like an American
I want to dream like an American
Scheme like an American
I want to stand like an American
I want to smile like an American
I want to pray like an American
Play ball like an American
Cook like an American
I want to laugh like an American
I want to dance like an American
Have a chance like an American
I want to feel like an American
I want to shout like an American
I want to scream like an American
I want to cry like an American
I want to try like an American
Hurt like an American
Bleed like an American
Burn like, burn like, burn like, burn

Girls' Choir

Excerpt from a speech by Clara Lemlich, 22 November 1909

I want to say a few words.
I am a working girl.
One of those striking against intolerable conditions.

Adapted from *The Jobless Girls*, written by Theresa Malkiel,
in the *New York Call*, 29 December 1909

We laid down our scissors
shook the threads off our clothes
and calmly left the place that stood between us and starvation.

Women's Choir

hem stitcher, sleeve setter, cuff maker, lace runner, ironer, yoke
setter, plain stitcher, belt maker, finisher, sample hand, back
maker, dampener, stamper, starcher, sample maker, steamer,
front maker, rag sorter, labeler, baster, binder, cleaner, closer,
cutter, draper, hemmer, joiner, mender, buttonhole maker,
buttonhole marker, buttonhole stitcher, buttonhole sewer,
presser, plaiter, trimmer, tucker, facer, sorter

Girls' Choir

I WANT TO FEEL LIKE AN AMERICAN

Women's Choir

From an interview with Clara Lemlich:

Ah – then I had fire in my mouth

Girls' Choir

fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire

IV. Fire

Women's Choir

I heard someone cry fire
Everyone said fire

Adapted from the testimony of Kate Alterman, ninth floor
worker, at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire trial:

And then I saw her bending down on her knees.
Her hair was loose.
And the trail of her dress was a little far from her.
Then a big smoke came.
I noticed the trail of her dress, and the ends of her hair, began
to burn like, burn like, burn like, burn like, burn like, burn

Adapted from the eyewitness account of William Shepherd,
reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal*, 27 March 1911

Those of us who were looking,
saw her put her arms about him
and kiss him.
And then he dropped her into space. Then quick as a flash, he
jumped.

All Voices

I see them falling
see them falling

Women's Choir

Excerpt from a speech by Rose Schneiderman at
the Metropolitan Opera House, 2 April 1911

I would be a traitor
to those poor burned bodies
if I were to speak
of good fellowship.
I have tried you good people of the public,
and I have found you wanting.

The names of the workers who perished in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, listed in *The Triangle Fire*, by Leon Stein:

Lizzie Adler, Anna Altman, Annina Ardito, Rose Bassino, Vincenza Benanti, Yetta Berger, Morris Bernstein, Jacob Bernstein, Essie Bernstein, Gussie Bierman, Vincenza Billota, Abraham Binowitz, Rosie Brenman, Sarah Brenman, Ida Brodsky, Sarah Brodsky, Ada Brooks, Laura Brunetti, Josephine Cammarata, Francesca Caputo, Josephine Carlisi, Albina Caruso, Annie Ciminello, Rosina Cirrito, Anna Cohen, Annie Colletti, Sarah Cooper, Michelina Cordiano, Bessie Dashefsky, Josie Del Castillo, Clara Dockman, Kalman Donick, Celia Eisenberg, Dora Evans, Rebecca Feibisch, Yetta Fichtenholz, Daisy Fitzie, Mary Floresta, Max Florin, Jennie Franco, Rose Friedman, Diana Gerjuoy, Molly Gerstein, Catherine Giannattasio, Celia Gitlin, Esther Goldstein, Lena Goldstein, Mary Goldstein, Yetta Goldstein, Rosie Grasso, Bertha Greb, Rachel Grossman, Mary Herman, Esther Hochfeld, Fannie Hollander, Pauline Horowitz, Ida Jukofsky, Ida Kanowitz, Tessie Kaplan, Beckie Kessler, Jacob Klein, Beckie Koppelman, Bertha Kula, Tillie Kupferschmidt, Benjamin Kurtz, Annie L'Abbate, Fannie Lansner, Maria Lauletti, Jennie Lederman, Max Lehrer, Sam Lehrer, Kate Leone, Mary Leventhal, Jennie Levin, Pauline Levine, Nettie Liebowitz, Rose Liermark, Bettina Maiale, Frances Maiale, Catherine Maltese, Lucia Maltese, Rosaria Maltese, Maria Manaria, Rose Mankofsky, Rose Mehl, Yetta Meyers, Gaetana Midolo, Annie Miller, Beckie Neubauer, Annie Nicholas, Michelina Nicolosei, Sadie Nussbaum, Julia Oberstein, Rose Oringer, Beckie Ostrovsky, Annie Pack, Providenza Panno, Antonietta Pasqualicchio, Ida Pearl, Jennie Pildescu, Vincenza Pinelli, Emilia Prato, Concetta Prestifilippo, Beckie Reines, Fannie Rosen, Louis Rosen, Israel Rosen, Julia Rosen, Yetta Rosenbaum, Jennie Rosenberg, Gussie Rosenfeld, Nettie Rosenthal, Emma Rothstein, Theodore Rotner, Sarah Sabasowitz, Santina Salemi, Sarafina Saracino, Teresina Saracino, Gussie Schiffman, Theresa Schmidt, Ethel Schneider, Violet Schochet, Golda Schpunt, Margaret Schwartz, Jacob Seltzer, Rosie Shapiro, Ben Sklover, Rose Sorkin, Annie Starr, Jennie Stein, Jennie Stellino, Jennie Stiglitz, Sam Taback, Clotilde Terranova, Isabella Tortorelli, Meyer Utal, Catherine Uzzo, Frieda Velakofsky, Bessie Viviano, Rosie Weiner, Sarah Weintraub, Tessie Weisner, Dora Welfowitz, Bertha Wendorff, Joseph Wilson, Sonia Wisotsky.

Philharmonia

Violin I

Jonathan Morton
Rebecca Chan
Eugene Lee
Emma Lisney
Joonas Pekonen
Victoria Irish
Soong Choo
Eleanor Wilkinson
Eunsley Park
Karin Tilch
Lulu Fuller
Izzy Howard
Tayfun Bomboz
Sophie Phillips

Violin II

Annabelle Meare
Fiona Cornall
Nuno Carapina
Julian Milone
Marina Gillam
Gideon Robinson
Susan Hedger
Ilhem Ben Khalfa
Mee-Hyun Esther Park
Clara Biss
Nicola Goldscheider
Shuyang Josh Jia

Viola

Scott Dickinson ††
Stanislav Savva
Sylvain Séailles
Linda Kidwell

Stephanie Edmundson

Sara Sheppard
Cameron Campbell
Carol Hultmark
Gijs Kramers
Daichi Yoshimura

Cello

Louisa Tuck
Natacha Colmez
Richard Birchall
Ella Rundle
Tamaki Sugimoto
Yaroslava Trofymchuk
Silvestrs Kalniņš
Alexander Rolton

Double bass

Tim Gibbs ††
Gareth Sheppard
Owen Nicolaou
Benjamin du Toit
Michael Fuller
Ryan Smith

Flute

Samuel Coles †
June Scott
Robert Looman †

Oboe

Timothy Rundle
Imogen Davies
Alex Franklin

Cor Anglais

Alex Franklin

Clarinets

Mark van de Wiel †
Laurent Ben Slimane †
Katie Lockhart

E flat clarinet

Katie Lockhart

Bass clarinet

Laurent Ben Slimane

Bassoon

Robin O'Neill †
Matthew Kitteringham
Luke Whitehead

Contrabassoon

Luke Whitehead

Horn

Norberto López
Oliver Johnson
Kira Doherty †
Zachary Hayward
Carsten Williams

Trumpet

Jason Evans †
Robin Totterdell
Christian Barraclough *

Trombone

Carol Jarvis
Philip White

Bass trombone

James Buckle

Tuba

Peter Smith

Timpani

Peter Smith

Percussion

Paul Stoneman
Tom Edwards
Rachel Gledhill ††
Paddy Davies

Harp

Heidi Krutzen

Piano

Catherine Edwards

Electric guitar

Steve Smith

Bass guitar

Steve Rossell

†† Professor at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama

† Professor at the Royal Academy of Music

* Professor at the Royal College of Music

** Professor at Trinity College of Music

London Voices

Soprano I

Elspeth Piggott
Isabella Gibber
Joanna Songi
Daisy Walford
Elizabeth Armitage
Daisy Livesley
Jenni Harper
Eloise Irving
Juliette Artigala

Soprano II

Danni O'Neill
Lydia Clowes
Verona-India Braich
Isabelle Haile
Dani May
Suzzie Vango
Molly Quinn
Rachel Oyawale
Philippa Murray

Alto I

Clara Sanabras
Anna-Lena Delger
Eleanor Wilson
Sophie Overin
Amy Blythe
Gabriella Liandu
Melanie Sanders
Freya Jacklin
Lucy Potterton

Alto II

Stephanie Dillon
Catherine Backhouse
Lufuno Nduo
Oliva Shotton
Shivani Rattan
Verity Poulston
Helena Raeburn
Nina Vinther
Iris Korfker

RSNO Youth Chorus

Abigail Gallacher
Ailsa Hutchinson
Alexandra Cartmell
Alicia Idessane
Alma Correal-Jarrett
Amelia Philip
Amelia Rathbone
Amy Sanderson
Ana Ryburn-Thomson
Anna Arbuckle
Ayva Kyle
Bernadette Kho
Brónagh McKnight
Cara MacKay
Catrin Ogle
Charlotte Muir
Collette Balmer
Connie Hunter
Cora Robertson
Edie Dunn
Eilidh McIntyre
Elizabeth Poet
Ellie Tonner
Emelia Ewer
Emily McKenzie

Eunice Oyedokun
Faith Wong
Fiamma Milligan
Gabriella Mills
Grace Nickson
Grace Romans
Greta Ingleby
Honor Osmond
Hope Henderson
Indii McCulloch
Iris Stalin
Isla Balitbit
Jessica Ewer
Jessica May-Payne
Jevaiy Dela Santa
Julie Sorel
Katie Rourke
Kimberely McFarlane
Kirsty McLean
Lilianna Nemeth
Louise Morris
Maia Fernandez-McCann
Megan Parsons
Melissa Maffia
Mia Tomb

Mirren McGonigle
Misha Gupta
Molly Kerr
Nirvana Baledi
Nuala-Maria McKnight
Olivia Coccozza
Olivia Tait
Orla Gilligan
Penelope Leithead
Rita El Obbadi
Rosa Caughie
Rowie Bryce
Sage Plakaris Knight
Sarah Orimoloye
Sofia Ortiz
Summer Wang
Susie Wu
Tess Fleming
Thea Heinrich
Winona Shashidara
Yi Han Dong
Yiyi Myler
Zaynash Pinto

Farnham Youth Choir

Aglaiia Hryhorieva
Alice Baron
Anna Duquenoey
Annabel Manning
Anne Davidson
Astrid Scholar
Annabelle Paintin
Briony Davies
Catherine Harris
Chloe Todd
Connie Frith
Eleanor Wain
Elissa Key

Elizabeth Marshall
Emily Bridge
Freya Hanmer
Imogen Henderson
Imogen Sowden
Iris Ward
Isobel Austwick
Isobel Pott
Joanna Chapman
Julia Curry
Liv Finstad
Lola Coxon
Louisa Vassallo

Lucy Callaghan
Maria Awoyode
Natalie Wingfield
Rebecca Whitehouse
Rivka Yugin-Power
Sammy Coffey
Sakura Fukushima-Choularton
Yaroslava Andreiuk
Yin Ching Poon
Yunyin Fang
Zoe Fry

Listings correct at time of going to press.

Find out more

- Philharmonia Orchestra
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- Márion Talán
- Ash(er) Lloyd Ehrenberg
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