

# Melissa Hughes

## SOPRANO

**“A magnetic presence”** – THE NEW YORK TIMES

*“A dazzling diva adept at old and new music”* – TIME OUT NEW YORK

*“note-perfect...by turns coolly composed and legitimately frightening”* – Pitchfork

**“Riveting”** – THE NEW YORKER

*“Haunting and beautiful”* – Feast of Music

*“I actually wasn't prepared for the strength of her physical performance...”* – THE AWL

**“A postclassical siren”** – TIME OUT NEW YORK

*“Melissa Hughes ratcheted the work to a wild, intoxicating pitch.”* -- THE WASHINGTON POST

**“indispensable to New York’s new-music ecosystem.”** – THE NEW YORK TIMES



Hailed by *The New York Times* as “a versatile, charismatic soprano endowed with brilliant technique and superlative stage instincts...indispensable to New York’s new-music ecosystem” **MELISSA HUGHES** enjoys a busy career in both contemporary and early music.

A dedicated interpreter of living composers, Hughes has worked closely with Julia Wolfe, Michael Gordon, David Lang, Steve Reich, Neil Rolnick, and has premiered works by David T. Little, Missy Mazzoli, Ted Hearne, Caleb Burhans, Christopher Cerrone, Jacob Cooper, and Frederick Rzewski, among others.

In the classical concert hall she has performed Mozart’s *Vespers* and *Requiem* under the baton of Sir Neville Marriner, Handel’s *Dixit Dominus* with Sir David Willcocks, and the role of Dido under the direction of Andrew Lawrence King. Equally at home in front of a rock band, Hughes has received widespread acclaim in her role as lead vocalist of Newspeak, an amplified alt-classical band, and for her work with Missy Mazzoli’s Victoire.

In the 2013/14 season, Hughes continues touring with John Zorn for Zorn@60 celebrations, singing his “Madrigals” and “Earthspirit” in Jerusalem, Paris and at Alice Tully Hall in New York (having sung the works last season in Montreal, Ghent, Warsaw, at the Barbican in London, and at the Guggenheim New York.) She also stars in Jonathan Berger’s double bill opera, *Visitations*, in a Beth Morrison Production/HERE production for Prototype 2014 at Roulette, led by Christopher Rountree. Other highlights include a recital with pianist Lisa Moore for Kettle Corn New Music, and Bach cantatas with Julian Wachner and Trinity Wall Street.

Last season featured Hughes performing *Silver Threads*, a solo cycle written for her by Jacob Cooper on a bill with Corey Dargel at (le) Poisson Rouge; a New York City Opera debut in John Zorn’s *The Holy Visions*; tours with Missy Mazzoli and Victoire; Bay Area performances of works by Steve Reich with

Alan Pierson and Alarm Will Sound; a national tour with Missy Mazzoli and Victoire; and a performance with Newspeak at Atlas in Washington, DC.

Other recent highlights include the world premiere of David T. Little's *Am I Born*, a solo orchestral work written for Ms. Hughes, commissioned by the Brooklyn Philharmonic for Alan Pierson's inaugural season as Music Director; rapturously-received performances of David Coll's *Position, Influence* for the MATA Festival; the world premiere of Alex Temple's *Liebeslied* with George Manahan and the American Composers Orchestra at Zankel Hall for the opening of the SONiC Festival; a performance of Jonathan Berger's one-act opera *Theotokia* with the St. Lawrence String Quartet and Pedja Muzijevic for Stanford Lively Arts; a Weill Hall performance and Naxos recording of Mohammed Fairouz's *Tahwidah* with the clarinetist David Krakauer; Bryce and Aaron Dessner's multimedia song cycle *The Long Count* at the Muziekgebouw in Amsterdam for the Holland Festival; and the US premiere of Adrian Utley and Will Gregory's score for *The Passion of Joan Arc* as part of Lincoln Center's 2011 White Light Festival.

Ms. Hughes recorded "Shelter", a video opera by Bang on a Can composers Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe, and Pulitzer Prize winner David Lang, released by Cantalope records. Her discography also includes albums on Nonesuch and New Amsterdam. She has also provided supporting vocals for My Brightest Diamond, The National and The Breeders.

Based in Brooklyn, Ms. Hughes holds degrees from Westminster Choir College and Yale University.

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## *Reviews*

**ZORN@60, Lincoln Center, Alice Tully Hall**

### **The New York Times**

#### **It's His Party, He Can Play With Elbows if He Wants**

**John Zorn Performing at Alice Tully Hall**

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER Published: July 19, 2013

"While the organ work proved witty, weird and loud, the a cappella vocal pieces that opened the concert, part of the Lincoln Center Festival's "Zorn@60" programs, were radiant...Wearing white dresses, the ensemble of five women — the sopranos Lisa Bielawa, Mellissa Hughes, and Jane Sheldon, the mezzo-soprano Abigail Fischer and the contralto Kirsten Sollek — sang with potent intensity. At times the lower voices created a pedal tone, above which the sopranos soared. Eerie harmonic layers were built upon the wordless syllables, an austere medieval aesthetic punctuated with colorful contemporary twists."

**Zorn@60, “Sacred Voices”, The Guggenheim Museum**

## The New York Times

### Under Installation, Vocal Colors

#### John Zorn’s ‘Sacred Voices’ at the Guggenheim Museum

By STEVE SMITH Published: June 24, 201



Tina Fineberg for The New York Times

**Zorn@60: Sacred Voices** Foreground from left, Kirsten Sollek, Mellissa Hughes and Jane Sheldon performing on Sunday evening at the Guggenheim Museum.

“Mr. Zorn presented two new pieces, “Earthspirit” and “Madrigals,” for unaccompanied women’s voices. Notable about both, and novel for Mr. Zorn, is that each employs words. Of the two, “Earthspirit” seemed best suited to its situation. Inspired by Mr.

Zorn’s visit to Newgrange, an ancient burial site in Ireland cannily designed to admit daylight on the winter solstice, the piece included passages from “The Song of Amergin,” a Celtic sacred text. **The sopranos Mellissa Hughes and Jane Sheldon and the mezzo-soprano Kirsten Sollek sang sublimely, their precise pitch and clear tones shimmering and resonating in discordant harmonies and intricate metrical maneuvers.**

Those singers and three more — the sopranos Lisa Bielawa and Sarah Brailey, and the mezzo-soprano Abby Fischer — brought the same exactitude and luster to “Madrigals,” for which Mr. Zorn assembled phrases inspired by reading Percy Bysshe Shelley.

**Newspeak at the Atlas Theatre, Washington, DC**

## The Washington Post

### Music review: Newspeak at the Atlas Performing Arts Center

By Stephen Brookes, Published: June 23, 2013

“In the tiny but essential niche of punk-classical music, Newspeak pretty much rules. Driving rhythms, sophisticated compositions by cutting-edge composers, virtuosic playing on electrified instruments — there’s little not to like about the New York-based ensemble, and after canceling a show here last fall because of Hurricane Sandy, Newspeak arrived at the Atlas Performing Arts Center on Friday night for a set steeped in rock, politics and a kind of nostalgia for the revolutionary violence of the 1960s.

“But the real climax of the evening was Frederic Rzewski’s “Coming Together,” inspired by the Attica prison riots of 1971. Its spare music built from a single riff, and slowly gathered in power as

the text — a self-admiring screed from the 1960s bomber Sam Melville, who was killed at Attica — is chanted over and over and over again. Yes, there's a hectoring quality to it, and yes, the thing reeks of self-righteousness and the musty revolutionary politics of 50 years ago. **But Newspeak's gutsy soprano Mellissa Hughes, leading the ensemble with fire and purpose, ratcheted the work to a wild, intoxicating pitch,** with fine playing all night from the entire group — particularly the dangerously gifted Courtney Orlando, who sat in at the last minute for violinist Caleb Burhans.

**MATA FESTIVAL 2012, Roulette, Thursday Night, Matt Marks' *The Little Death Vol. 11*, Friday Night, David Coll's *Position, Influence***

## The New York Times

### Slashes and Shrieks in a Clamorous Return to the Barricades

MATA Festival at Roulette in Brooklyn MUSIC REVIEW

By STEVE SMITH Published: April 22, 2012



MATA Festival Mellissa Hughes performing "Position, Influence" by the American composer David Coll at Roulette in Brooklyn.

David Coll, a young American composer based in Belgium, provided a perfectly reasonable accounting for the impulses that led him to create "Position, Influence," a work presented at Roulette on Friday evening during the third and last program of this year's MATA Festival. In an onstage interview Mr. Coll said that the piece reflected his political

awakening during two years spent in Paris recently.

Specifically, "Position, Influence" requires a soprano to recite, sing, yelp and otherwise intone passages from Charles de Gaulle's responses to the May 1968 student uprising in Paris. The words, in Mr. Coll's view, are devoid of meaning; hence the singer wears a laryngophone, a contact microphone that picks up sounds from the throat before the mouth can shape them into words. Those amplified tones are then used to stimulate sheets of metal hung from a rack.

**Ingenious and eloquent in theory, the piece takes a special artist to make it stick; here, happily, Mr. Coll had access to Mellissa Hughes, a versatile, charismatic soprano endowed with brilliant technique and superlative stage instincts. By turns diva, seductress, scold and gorgon, as her voice resounded in piteous shrieks and livid roars, Ms. Hughes was astonishing, demonstrating anew why she has become indispensable to New York's new-music ecosystem.**



## Pitchfork

### Report: MATA Festival

Jayson Greene surveys last week's contemporary-classical fest in NYC

By Jayson Greene on April 24, 2012 at 11:46 a.m.



Soprano Mellissa Hughes flounced her way gamely through Matt Marks' musical theater camp spectacle *The Little Death, Vol 2*, the very vision of a gawky nerd striving to let loose. The work, which traces a story of two young evangelical Christians in love, was unsure of its tone, whiffing at air quotes when it strove for sarcasm, but Hughes' over-bright, chirpy performance felt **note-perfect**.

She reappeared on Friday for David Coll's blood-freezing "Position, Influence", standing at a podium, flanked by an imposing wall of metal sheets. The piece, which Coll explained concerned "becoming political while abroad," outfitted Hughes with a laryngophone, the throat microphone that fighter pilots wear as standard regulation. Hughes was by turns coolly composed and legitimately frightening as she raged in librarian-prim horn rims, repeating, in French, the words of Charles De Gaulle: "I will not step down." Malevolent bursts of noise poured from her mouth, transforming the sound of feedback into something like a dry-heave-- there were moments where Hughes' body language suggested someone being force-fed electrical wire.

**BROOKLYN VILLAGE, Roulette, David T. Little's *Am I Born*, Alan Pierson and the Brooklyn Philharmonic and Brooklyn Youth Chorus**

## The New York Times

MUSIC REVIEW

### Meditations on a Borough's History, Through Booms and Bad Times Brooklyn Philharmonic and Brooklyn Youth Chorus at Roulette

By STEVE SMITH Published: March 26, 2012

Opening the program's second half, chorus members stationed throughout the space led audience members in "Idumea," a shape-note hymn by Charles Wesley. That work provided the melodic germ and temperament for David T. Little's "Am I Born," an elaborate, multimovement cantata also inspired by a Francis Guy painting, "Winter Scene in Brooklyn."

Most closely associated with small ensembles, Mr. Little demonstrated a thrilling authority in writing for larger forces, mixing orchestral movements of cinematic sweep and urgency with rich a cappella choral passages and instances of chamberlike intricacy. **The soloist, the soprano Mellissa Hughes, combined classical poise with torch-song emotionalism, confirming her status as one of New York's freshest, most compelling interpreters.**

**SONIC FESTIVAL, Opening night at Carnegie Hall, Alex Temple's *Liebeslied*, George Manahan and the American Composers Orchestra**

THE NEW YORKER, NOVEMBER 28, 2011



MUSICAL EVENTS

#### THE LONG HAUL

*Nico Muhly's first two operas.*

BY ALEX ROSS

"Alex Temple's 'Liebeslied,' which the American Composers Orchestra performed at Zankel Hall, is a surreal takeoff on love songs of the forties and fifties.

It begins with lushly orchestrated vocal

kitsch – ‘But when I hear you call my name/ The birds stop singing/ The bells stop ringing’ – and then disintegrates into nightmarish fragments, with the singer (**the riveting Mellissa Hughes**) muttering about ‘dark unending corridors.’ It’s like a Buñuel film in miniature, and it achieves perfection.”

**CARNEGIE HALL WEILL MUSIC INSTITUTE, Dawn Upshaw/Donnacha Dennehy Workshop**

## The New York Times

MUSIC REVIEW

### A Star Brings Singers and Composers Together

By STEVE SMITH

Published: April 18, 2011

For the soprano Dawn Upshaw, mixing styles and interacting with composers have been signature elements since the start of her illustrious career. Since 2004 Ms. Upshaw has shared her insights, training young singers and composers to collaborate during workshops presented under the auspices of Carnegie Hall’s Weill Music Institute. That year she worked alongside the composer John Harbison; in 2007 and 2009 she teamed up with Osvaldo Golijov.

In this year’s workshop, a weeklong event that culminated in a well-attended free concert at Zankel Hall on Sunday evening, Ms. Upshaw worked with Donnacha Dennehy, a prominent Irish composer and the founder of the new-music group Crash Ensemble...

Electronica figured more prominently in Aviya Kopelman’s “Grief Measure,” three songs linked by computer-enhanced wordless choruses and breakbeat drumming. Ms. Kopelman’s lively conception involved amplification, digital static and non-classical vocal techniques. Two bass-baritones, Jeongcheol Cha and Leroy Y. Davis, adapted comfortably, but **the standout was the versatile soprano Mellissa Hughes, whose dynamic singing and theatrical flair in the concluding song, “The Last Toast,” made for an extravagant star turn.**



Joe Kohen for The New York Times  
The soprano Mellissa Hughes performing in “Grief Measure,” by Aviya Kopelman, in a concert capping a weeklong workshop.

**Matt Marks’ THE LITTLE DEATH, VOL. I, Incubator Arts Project**

## THE AWL

CULTURE AND TV

### Showed Up: Matt Marks’ “Post-Christian Nihilist Pop Opera” at St. Mark’s Church

By Seth Colter Walls / July 13, 2010

“How much time will you give an unfamiliar work of art? When I was six or seven, I complained straight away about the slow narrative trot of *The Silence*, prompting my father to retort: “It’s Bergman. You give a master at least 15 minutes before you start fidgeting.” But obviously we don’t give young bucks (who aren’t in the canon) quite the same attention-span leash. And then what if you’re giving some new art “a try” on the internet? My sense is “15 seconds” may be the stick-it-out-or-fidget Rubicon. Which is to say, if you only give the above music video from a new “post-Christian nihilist pop opera” 15 seconds of your time, you might think it “meh.”



Give it three and a half minutes, though, and I suspect there's a much better chance you'll be wowed. For me, the coolest turn begins at the 2:18 mark, and climaxes with the chord that hits at 2:35.

"Equally impressive is his co-vocalist Mellissa Hughes. I saw her sing in Louis Andriessen's *De Staat* at Carnegie's new music space a couple months back, and with the Signal ensemble at this year's Bang On A Can festival, but those were both stand-and-deliver performances behind sheet music. So I actually wasn't prepared for the strength of her physical performance in *The Little Death*. When she gutted out the familiar tune "He Touched Me" while wearing a virginal wedding dress and sashaying toward Boy, Hughes came across as confused in the most delectable of ways. But when she turned it into a degraded, Madonna-at-the-1984-VMAs pole dance, everyone in the tiny St. Mark's Church gym seemed under her crypto-erotic-religious spell. Developmental hiccups aside, I can always make time for that.

The Little Death, Vol. 1 plays four more times this week, from Wednesday through Saturday.

*Press*



## Classical & Opera

**The best (and worst) of 2010**

An audacious New York Philharmonic event set the year's tone. *Steve Smith*



### The best albums

**Matt Marks *The Little Death, Vol. 1*** (New Amsterdam) Teen spirit—in both the spiritual and earthy sense—animated this flamboyant electropop opera, exuberantly voiced by Marks and soprano Mellissa Hughes.




### *All Things Considered*



Enlarge  
 Mellissa Hughes — pictured on a recent music-video shoot in Brooklyn, N.Y. — plays Britney Spears in *Timberbrit*, an experimental opera by composer Jacob Cooper.

August 4, 2009 - Opera has a long history of over-the-top spectacle and melodramatic plots. Composer Jacob Cooper decided to embrace that excess, creating a contemporary opera that imagines the tragic end of one particularly tempestuous pop diva.

The work is called *Timberbrit* — as in Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears. It's a tragic tale that imagines Spears' last concert, in the final hours of her life. Timberlake returns after a long absence to win back Spears' love, but in the end she chooses the audience's love

above all else.

Cooper began work on the opera by experimenting with a technique called time-stretching. Using digital audio software, he slowed down Spears' songs — and suddenly the light pop tunes seemed hauntingly tragic. Phrases like "Hit me baby one more time" took on an entirely different and more weighted meaning.

Cooper then collaborated with his performers to create new pieces of music inspired by those slowed-down hits, and writer Yuka Igarashi crafted fresh lyrics using the vernacular of Spears' songs — tears, love, dreams, innocence.

As a doctoral student at Yale, Cooper has looked at the psychological aspects of how traditional operas stretch time during death scenes — the way a dying character in *Rigoletto* or *Boris Godunov*, say, will pause to sing a 10-minute aria. Not realistic perhaps, but it packs a punch.

Cooper has expanded on that distinctive musical tradition by creating an entire opera enveloped by a fatal slowness of action. The idea is that in *Timberbrit*, Spears' prolonged destruction amplifies the tragedy of her downfall.

The opera premiered in New York City as a semistaged production in 2008 and is currently being developed into a fully staged version.

Meanwhile, the cast and crew of *Timberbrit* recently shot a music video of Cooper's song "Worst Fantasy," inspired by Spears' "Toxic." In keeping with the opera's process, the videographers started with a slowed-down, stretched-out recording of the original, then manipulated it and built on it to create something new.

The result: a distillation of Spears' music videos and public meltdowns that forces viewers to take a second look at both pop-star lives and the way the public devours them.

*This piece was originally produced for NPR's Intern Edition by Claire Happel and Sarah Metcalf.*

*www.melissahughes.com*

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