

Thea Musgrave

Born: 27 May 1928

Nationality: British-American



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 works were first performed under the auspices of the BBC and at the Edinburgh International Festival. As a result, they have been widely performed in Britain, Europe and the USA, at 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 as part of many regular symphony concert series.

From time to time she has conducted her own works: the premiere 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 Angeles 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 Musgrave has earned great respect for her work both as a composer and conductor at a time when these were still uncommon professions for a woman.

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 personality 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 opera conductor Peter Mark, and has lived in America since 1972. In 1974 she received the Koussevitzky Award, resulting in the composition of *Space Play*, which, after its London premiere 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 recognised 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 CBE in The Queen's New Year's Honours List in January 2002. As Distinguished Professor at Queens College, City University of New York from September 1987-2002, she 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 incorporating physical movement to enhance the musical and dramatic impact of her works. 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 *Concerto for Clarinet*, 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 *Concerto for Clarinet* 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 thirty years, *The Voice of Ariadne* (1972), *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1977), *A Christmas Carol* (1979), *Harriet, the Woman Called Moses* (1984), and *Simón Bolívar* (1993), are in every sense the true successors to the instrumental concertos.

Word Count: 699

Short Biography

Thea Musgrave (b.1928), composer of over a dozen operas, began her studies in Edinburgh and in 1950 went to Paris to study with Nadia Boulanger. While still at the Paris Conservatoire her music began attract attention in her native Scotland. By the mid-sixties she was a much-respected and widely-commissioned composer in the UK, conducting many of her own works. In 1972, Musgrave moved with her husband, the violist and conductor Peter Mark, to Virginia, USA where he was invited to set up the Virginia Opera. From there her career as an opera composer took off, and in 1977 Scottish Opera premiered her watershed grand opera *Mary, Queen of Scots*.

During the late sixties- early seventies, Musgrave began working on group of works which sought to elevate the inherent drama of the concerto form, extending the conventional boundaries of instrumental performance by directing players in their physical movement around the performance space. While instruments took on a 'character' in doing so, such early works were by no means programmatic, and soon after were referred to by the composer as being examples of 'dramatic-abstract'. In recent years her musical style has developed into something more lyric and immediate, but certainly no less inventive, dramatic or unique.

With over 160 mature works to date for choir, orchestra, chamber ensemble and the stage, Musgrave remains a respected voice in composition, having been commissioned by some of the world's finest companies such as the Royal Opera House, The BBC Orchestrs and Choirs, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Word count: 252

Press

Behind the aural glitter is an inventive mind, drawing the listener in with compelling narrative. One is never placed at ease enough to settle back – there is always a twist, a sudden shift that grabs you.

Robin Newton, Classical Music 'Premieres of the Year'

...as naturally gifted a composer for the stage as anyone writing today...Musgrave has an infallible sense of theatrical pace and effect.

Rodney Milnes, The Times

Musgrave is a musical dramatist par excellence. *The Seasons* seethes with dramatic incident... two real Musgrave fingerprints stamp the piece: the long-limbed gorgeous romanticism of spring, which becomes as ardent as Strauss; and the unstoppable, hectic, racing momentum of her celebration of summer – at subtly depicting high-velocity action, she is almost without parallel.

Michael Tumelty, Glasgow Herald

Unstoppable dramatic momentum... the most gifted operatic composer this country has produced since Britten.

John Allison on Simón Bolívar, The Times

Rarely since Peter Grimes have I been as impressed by the first hearing of a contemporary stage work.

Harold Rosenthal on Mary, Queen of Scots in Opera Magazine