

# LIGHT MOTIFS

S. KATY TUCKER PAINTS POWELL HALL WITH THE  
EMOTIONS OF THE MUSIC.

BY EDDIE SILVA



*The world ends during Brunnhilde's Immolation scene.*

A flock of birds appear across a screen: the image grainy, imprecise, as if it were from film made a hundred years ago. Or are those actual birds, you wonder, as St. Louis Symphony violinist Erin Schreiber plays *The Lark Ascending*.

The stage of Powell Hall transforms into a swank, art-deco nightclub, and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* turns a shade of blue it has never been before. You feel the aliveness that must have been felt in the antic 1920s, as Kirill Gerstein plays the modern city's wild syncopation.

Christine Brewer sings the world to its end in *Brunnhilde's Immolation*, and Powell is set aflame. Images swirl, both beautiful and terrifying, as Wagner's relentless chords swell.

S. Katy Tucker, self-described “video and projection designer” created these images for the St. Louis Symphony this season at the behest of Music Director David Robertson. Those images were paradoxically palpable and transparent, as frail yet as powerful as ideas themselves. They moved with the music, or under or around it. They never took away from the musical experience, but rather, gave the audience links to the emotional ideas of the music. At best, audiences found visual mirrors to their own imaginings.

Tucker's “visual enhancements”—which is how the promotional materials describe what she's been up to this season at Powell Hall—were made possible by a special Innovation Fund Grant from the Regional Arts Commission. Tucker is grateful for the grant—organizations such as RAC make the art happen—and she gives additional gratitude to Robertson and Symphony Vice

## Light Motifs

DILIP VISHWANATH



The familiar red velvet of Powell Hall is made bluer than blue for *Rhapsody in Blue*.

President for Artistic Administration Bret Dorhout, for their encouragement of her and the project. She believes they are doing the right things to make live orchestral performance a more appealing art form to more audiences. “Bret and David do a great job of sprinkling in different experiences for concertgoers—you get to try stuff and not blow a budget,” she says.

“The stuff,” Tucker believes, may be one of the elements that will help orchestras to attract new audiences—providing new technological dressing to a 300-year-old art form. “I believe in live performance. I believe in orchestras and operas,” she affirms passionately. “I feel the need to make these art forms more appealing to millennials.”

Tucker herself is not a millennial—“I think I was born one year before the official designation”—but she understands that the present young generation—and those to come after—are looking for entertainment experiences that are not reliant on traditions, especially traditions that they took no part in making, some of which were created to keep them out.

“I feel a lot of times people feel alienated from symphonies and operas,” says Tucker, speaking by phone from her Fort Greene, Brooklyn, studio. “What I do is use the tools of today to bridge audiences—give younger audiences greater accessibility. That’s what I do. I create holistic environments to aid the senses.”

Tucker says that she and Robertson often talk about the bridges between the senses themselves. Sight is our most relied upon sense, with hearing a close second. In the act of listening to an orchestral concert, people have feelings, emotions, thoughts, ideas, but—depending on the experience of the audience—may not be able to filter those impressions adequately, which may create a sense of unease.

Tucker’s best work provides a visual access to those thoughts and emotions. “That’s the most important thing,” Tucker says, “connect with the emotions of the music.” Tucker admits that orchestral audiences can be a skeptical group. It’s one reason why Robertson and Dorhout decided on an easing into the visual experience as the season progressed.

René Spencer Saller is not a millennial—she’s closer to the Gen-Xer tribe—but even this St. Louis Symphony program notes author arrived to the performance of *Brunnhilde’s Immolation* with suspicion. “I privately wondered if it would be cheesy before I actually saw it,” she wrote on social media after the Friday night performance, “but as soon as the sea started undulating and the sky started glowing like a Turner painting, I was 100-percent sold. In some ways the projections seemed like a particularly inspired Wagner set (representing points in the plot or lines from the scene), and in other ways they seemed like one of those psychedelic-’60s happenings, Super-8 projection-behind-the-band affairs. Like the Velvet Underground at the Factory, but more orchestrated—in both senses of the word. Druggy, but not in the numbing kind of way: the senses

## Light Motifs



S. Katy Tucker

heightened in a hyper-acute way. Tucker's designs help fulfill Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* agenda, and they also give concert-hall audiences a feel for the over-the-top drama of a full-on Wagner staging. When Brewer-as-Brunnhilde burned up the world, it seemed as if the entire orchestra was engulfed in flames."

If Wagner had 21st-century technology in 19th-century Bayreuth, he would not have applied the strictures that Tucker places on herself. "I highlight and emphasize," she explains. "I do not tell my own stories. You can do anything with technology. When working with orchestras, I am exercising restraints. I need to be sensitive to the music."

Robertson is an essential collaborator in Tucker's process. "David is unique," she says admiringly. "He's actually a visionary idea-wise and musically—music being the driving force. I respond to him. With Wagner I focused on the leitmotifs. David is sensitive to the composer and all the other elements of performance. All my stuff is cued to the music. I follow David."

Tucker does not come from a musical background, although she went to musicals with her mother in her hometown of Louisville. Tucker was a painter for a while, but gave up the practice for any number of reasons—one of those being that she is much too gregarious to be alone in a studio for hours. With an internship at the Metropolitan Opera she, as she puts it, "fell in love" with the art form. She's gone on to enhance operatic stories and orchestral music around the world.

Next up with the St. Louis Symphony is the season finale, Verdi's *Aida*. She's talked about the staging with Robertson and Dorhout. "I go into the background when the singers sing, but when there's a dance—that's my time."

## "I CREATE HOLISTIC ENVIRONMENTS TO AID THE SENSES."

—S. KATY TUCKER

"I'll be listening to *Aida* every day for the next number of weeks," she says in March. "David has already given me initial ideas. I want to make it feel Egyptian. I listen over and over to recordings and read the libretto over several times. I'm doing a lot of research, including looking at other productions, looking into Egyptian symbolism."

She's got a *Tristan und Isolde* project with Robertson and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra coming up as well. She sighs for a moment, but then rejoices at her found calling. "I really love working with symphonies. People who work at symphonies are so nice. It feels like a communal experience. There's a lot of pride behind the organizations.

"Being invited to St. Louis is like having a little holiday with a family, and I bring my own traditions." And, she adds, "I can't believe how good you guys are!"

*The St. Louis Symphony performs Verdi's Aida May 7 and 9.*

*Eddie Silva is the External Affairs and Publications Manager for the St. Louis Symphony.*