

13 | THE THIRTEEN

Cassandra in the Temples

Elena Ruehr (b. 1963)
Gretchen Henderson, libretto

The Thirteen

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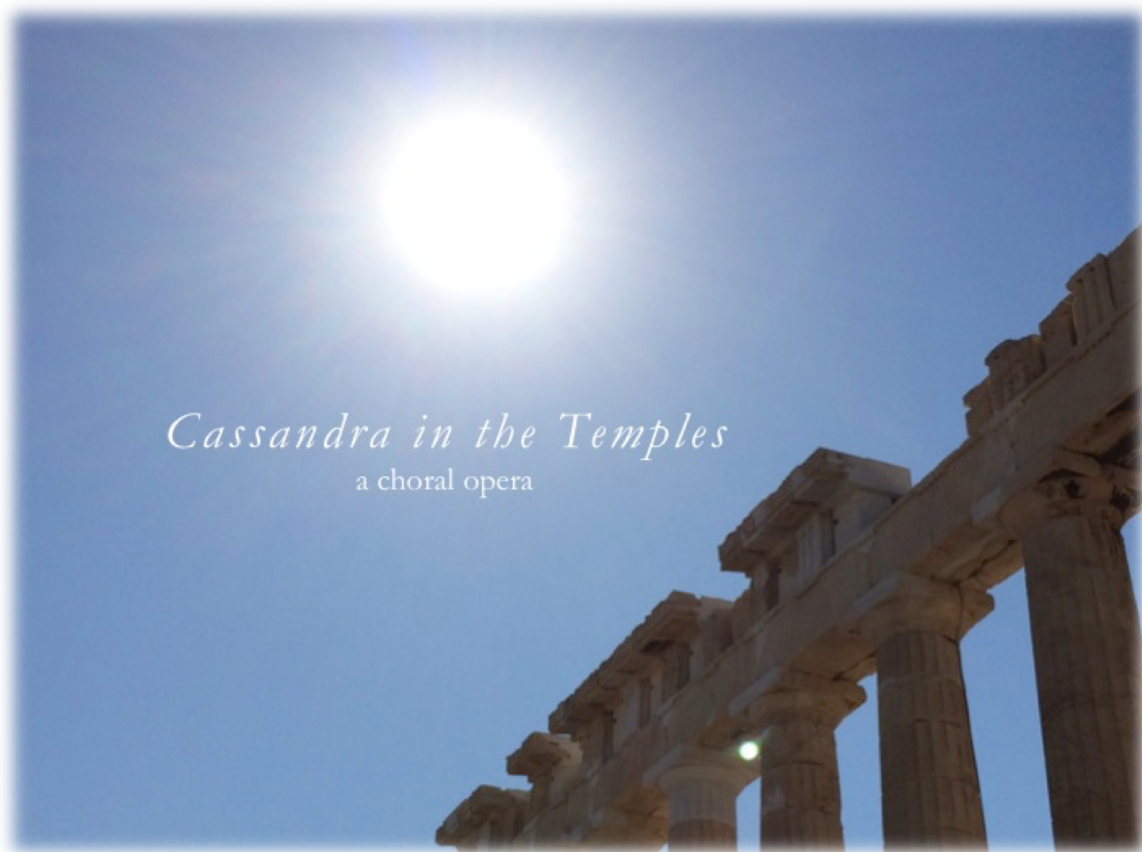
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Cassandra in the Temples
a choral opera

Libretto © Gretchen E. Henderson (2014)

No temple can have any compositional system without symmetry and proportion, unless, as it were, it has an exact system of correspondence to the likeness of a well-formed human being.

~ Vitruvius, “Temples”

If Vitruvius says no temple can be coherently constructed unless it is put together exactly as the human body is . . .

Then . . .

~ Anne Carson, *Decreation*

SETTING

Cassandra in the Temples is a poetic opera based on the mythic figure of prophecy, set in varied temples to fuse ancient and modern times. The arc of the opera journeys over the course of a full day: before sunrise into day into night back to sunrise and a new day. The hours are hinged to events in Cassandra's life, extended to her death and mythic afterlife, framed by a contemporary visit to her grave. For vocal purposes, events of her life have been streamlined. Cassandra's presence "In the Temples" refers to the opera's setting not only in varied temples (akin to shrines for deities) but also within the temples of her head. The stage becomes a memory palace, an early mnemonic device, blurring memory and prophecy, past and future, to erect the temples that house Cassandra's buzzing brain. The opera implicates the audience in her "gift" and "curse" by following her story toward an untraditionally hopeful end, where her legacy lives in us, as we speak and hear prophecies (related to climate change, economics, religious wars, technology, privacy, and more) that catch us at a moment of culpability and capability.

CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

Chorus
Cassandra
Contemporary Pilgrim
Helenus
Apollo
Laocoön
Athena
(Ajax)
Agamemnon
Clytemnestra

ARCHITECTURE

- | | |
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| <p>I. Raising the Columns
 <i>Sing we here, a salvaged grave</i></p> | <p><i>Chorus</i>
 Cassandra's grave (before sunrise)</p> |
| <p>II. Echoes in the Temples
 <i>Off tempo drums a tympanum beat</i></p> | <p><i>Cassandra as girl & Contemporary Pilgrim</i>
 Ancient Temple Modern Ruin</p> |
| <p>III. Whispering of the Snakes
 <i>There's something to the salience of hissing</i></p> | <p><i>Apollo & Snakes</i>
 Apollo's Temple</p> |
| <p>IV. Rejecting the Gift
 <i>No</i></p> | <p><i>Cassandra</i>
 Outside Apollo's Temple</p> |
| <p>V. Awaiting the Moon
 <i>Not for the moon, I mourn</i></p> | <p><i>Cassandra</i>
 Inside Cassandra's temples</p> |
| <p>VI. Avowing the Curse
 <i>Do you hear how to bare</i></p> | <p><i>Apollo, Cassandra, & Chorus</i>
 Outside/Inside Temples</p> |
| <p>VII. Stirring of Prophecy
 <i>I am stirring in my temples</i></p> | <p><i>Cassandra & Chorus</i>
 Inside/Outside Temples (dusk)</p> |
| <p>VIII. Strangled Truth
 <i>Belief can be bereaving</i></p> | <p><i>Laöcoon & Sea Serpents</i>
 Outside Temple with Trojan horse</p> |
| <p>IX. Praying off Prey
 <i>A pall appears, appealing</i></p> | <p><i>Cassandra & Athena (& Ajax)</i>
 Athena's Temple</p> |
| <p>X. The Moon at Sea
 <i>Not for the sun, I sing</i></p> | <p><i>Cassandra & Agamemnon</i>
 Ship between Troy & Mycenae</p> |
| <p>XI. Of Whales, Wails, and Winds
 <i>If shards of us remain, like seeded hulls</i></p> | <p><i>Cassandra & Clytemnestra</i>
 Ancient Temple Modern Ruin</p> |
| <p>XII. Listen Again:
 <i>Sing—We—Home</i></p> | <p><i>All Characters / Chorus</i>
 Modern Temple Ancient Ruin
 (sunrise)</p> |
| <p>XIII. Razing the Columns
 <i>Sing we through a passage home</i></p> | <p><i>Chorus</i>
 Cassandra's grave Our temples</p> |

ARGUMENT

The setting opens at Cassandra's grave, a disputed location thought to be Mycenae or Amyclae in Greece. The arc of the opera journeys over the course of a full day: before sunrise into day into night back to sunrise and a new day. The Chorus sings an invocation, when a modern visitor arrives to pay homage (whether as pilgrim, archaeologist, scholar, poet, composer, tourist, or other wayfarer). The contemporary visit fuses with Cassandra's first visit to the temple as a girl (with her twin brother, Helenus), when snakes reputedly licked clean her ears while she slept, granting her the gift of prophecy. Another version of her story claims that Apollo granted her gift in exchange for being seduced, and her rejection of the god bestowed her curse: to foretell the truth but not to be believed. The opera moves inside and outside of varied temples, conflating physical and mental realms. When Cassandra makes ominous predictions about the Trojan gift horse, she is believed only by the priest, Laocoön. He is strangled by monstrous sea serpents for supporting her claim. Upon the sacking of Troy, Cassandra flees to Athena's temple for protection but is dragged out by Ajax, who rapes her before she is taken a slave by Agamemnon, who sails with her back to his home of Mycenae. His wife, Clytemnestra, welcomes the king on a carpet dyed from the sea, then murders the pair. Cassandra's and Agamemnon's alleged twins also are murdered. However, her death is not the end of her story, refusing to be reduced to a cliché of doom, instead raising questions about our abilities to listen.

At times in the text, sections are faded to indicate multiple voices and to allude to the fact that much ancient material has eroded with time. Abundant texts are lost, leaving fragments for reconstruction and interpretation. For instance, one aria shifts Sappho's fragment of "lyre lyre lyre" into a misheard sequence by Apollo ("Lie here!"), Cassandra ("Lyre?"), and Chorus ("Liar!").

In this poetic adaptation, snakes become an important recurring motif, transforming from literal characters into more metaphysical elements into sound states: from sacred snakes that Cassandra encounters as a girl in Apollo's temple and other ancient healing serpents, to the monstrous sea serpents that strangled Laocoön, to more historic associations of serpents marked on the edge of maps (in *terra incognita* or "unknown earth"), also associated with whales. The motif of snakes extends to the kundalini, or dormant yogic serpent thought to coil at the base of the human spine that can uncoil upwards toward enlightenment through meditative chanting practices (built into the text as: "Sing we home"). The association of snakes with speaking, singing, and listening bleeds into the fabric of the opera, as Cassandra survives beyond death in story through natural elements, communicating in ways that surpass human hearing. Obliquely referenced, sounds like military sonar reduce vocalizations of whales and fatally draw them off migration routes, also bursting their eardrums and brains. Whale songs might be considered one variation of Cassandra's prophetic wails. Over the course of the opera, various serpents snake (as a verb) outwardly and inwardly, narratively and aurally growing in and out of one another, licking a listener's ears. As Cassandra's wails become conflated with natural sounds, like whalesong and winds (from the ancient belief of wind leaving a human body at death, to Hurricane Sandy as a nickname of Cassandra), the legibility of articulated sounds breaks down to require a form of listening beyond words: more physiological and intuitive. As nature in some ways foretells the fate of the planet, Cassandra's legacy becomes interdependent with our own. As we speak about contemporary prophecies, we become the Chorus, albeit unstated: we are all Cassandras.

I. Raising the Columns

[*Sing we here, a salvaged grave*]

Setting: *Cassandra's grave (before sunrise)*

Voices: *Chorus*

Sing—

we here, a salvaged grave
where temples start to rise

as ruins bury savage
ends, tales veer off
course and freeze, tire but try to

begin again.

Tremble, flame—
light this rank world

darkened under dreams
of reticence and fight, numbed
by sighs of centuries. All is not

lost, we cannot help but hope
to flee to this spot, good
as any place to start

(middle of no-
where but here)

misplaced as robbed relics
aching for home and oracles
of bones. Sing we home.

Sing of home. Sing for:

This is the day we make.
This is the fray we mark.

This is the may that might
yet again, then as now,
believe that someone may hear

from this ledge of her grave
on the edge of spun seas
where mind turns to sky.

Sing—

II. Echoes in the Temples

[Off tempo drums a tympanum beat]

Setting: *Ancient Temple / Modern Ruin*

Voices: *Cassandra, Pilgrim, Helenus*

Off tempo	drums a tympanum beat
On I go	to rhyme and tune a hymn
Like a child	counting time, foot by foot
Dancing with	tones as shadows, bones cast
Out knowing	to dig up mounds of earth
To name this	refuge, prison, asylum
So my arms	reach in valleys as seas
Move my alms	as mountains crowd out stars
Not more than	clouds sear suns with thunder
Being moved	to realms not understood

(More than what we see lies here)

III. Whispering of the Snakes

[There's something to the salience of hissing]

Setting: *Apollo's Temple*

Voices: *Apollo & Snakes*

There's something to the salience of **hissing**—sibilants pulsing past silences, breaths of vocals, pauses as sieves, veils as voices, surging sung choruses of sutras sutured around cries, crises of sounds, scars of ghosts stirring up stars compressed to sands, pressured for rites of passage. Sustenance submerges a surface of stones displacing scales with swoons, consorts, horses, gods, salves, slaves, snakes, ships, wars, sleeping sighs, kisses unsealing these lips. This is a summary of a story. Sense and nonsense. Senseless violence. Suspended suspense. **Cassandra** and some serpents. And the rest. Whisper, speech, and song focus on a specific sound—*yes*—snaking past innocence to fuse *yes* with seduce, ecstasy, prophecy, chaos, silence—unsung and unspun—

IV. Rejecting the Gift

[No]

Setting: *Outside Apollo's Temple*

Voices: *Cassandra*

N

O

O

O

O

O

O

O

O

O

V. Awaiting the Moon

[Not for the moon, I mourn]

Setting: *Inside Cassandra's temples*

Voices: *Cassandra*

Not for the moon, I mourn
for dark and night. Bright
blur of breath and flight—
a pluck, a plume, a pledge
of light and gift—then hear.
Numb dread. Dull drum.
Bee brain. A hum, a buzz,
grave trill before a rage.
And then? A multitude of
gone. Not for the moon
I mourn, but for her, who
might mourn the moon.

VI. Avowing the Curse

[Do you hear how to bare]

Setting: *Outside / Inside Temples*

Voices: *Chorus, Apollo, & Cassandra*

Liar!

Lie here!

Lyre?

Do you hear
how to bare
what will speak
you will tremble

I will tremble

not reverse
from this (curse
is this?) voice
ringing vision

Liar!

that reverbs
what to know
who to tell
to remember

not believe
what will come
listen now

Liar!

Let me tremble
till you hear

VII. Stirring of Prophecy

[I am stirring in my temples]

Setting: *Inside / Outside Temples (dusk)*

Voices: *Cassandra & Chorus*

I am stirring in my temples
with a plea for tempering
your lyres—

Dire rhythms, reddening visions
rail and listen at our gates
unbarred—

Shuddering faces haunt my murmurs
as cries cocoon me in
a cage—

Knowledge reckons toward confusion—
blurring questions: Who is mad and
Who is sane?

~

She is veering through our temples
in a scheme for tampering
with liars.

Tiresome rhythms, deadening visions
list and blister from the wrath
of gods.

Muttering faces taunt her rumors
as lies entrap her in
a rage.

Knowledge beckons toward revision—
burying questions: Are we mad and
Is she sane?

VIII. Strangled Truth

[*Belief can be bereaving*]

Setting: *Outside Temple with Trojan horse*

Voices: *Laöcoon & Sea Serpents*

Belief can be
bereaving
from deficits

perceived—

Listening may
calm a blame
or grant
a life's reprieve—

If only by
deception
appearance
restores woe—

This *strangling*
will curtail *speech*
to herald
blaring scores—

to predicate
on error
or obligate
by force

forswears this
terror—
War—

strangling
speech—

forswears

War—

IX. Praying off Prey

[*A pall appears, appealing*]

What happens
when the sound
breaks down to
the hum of my
blood, the beat
of my heart?

Help—this mounting error
Of terrorizing truth—
As oaths dismantle prayers
Entangling reins with hooves—

If only for some refuge
I seek asylum in—
Defense will turn my salve
Enslaved—reckoned in arrears—

Fear—

Flee—

Heal and help us—Seized!

Setting: *Athena's Temple*

Voices: *Cassandra & Athena (& Ajax)*

A pall appears, appealing—
Would you know my voice?
How to cipher tensions
Articulate as moans?

If only for some refuge
She seeks asylum in—
Defense will turn her salve
Enslaved—reckoned in arrears—

See—

Stay—

Heal the helpless—Seized!

X. The Moon at Sea

[Not for the sun, I sing]

Setting: *Ship between Troy and Mycenae*

Voices: *Cassandra & Agamemnon*

Not for the sun, I sing
for this swollen sea. If
wars were won, this squall
would long be calm. But wait—
More storms revive in tides
as dirge. No swords.
No words. A swell, a surge,
brave surf erupts in swales.
And us? A symphony of
spume. Not for the sun
I sing, but for you, who
might save the sea.

I sing
for
wars.

Swords
surge.

For the son
I sing.

XI. Of Whales, Wails, and Winds

[*If shards of us remain, like seeded hulls*]

Setting: *Ancient Temple / Modern Ruin*

Voices: *Cassandra & Clytemnestra*

No—

What is the end of this?

If shards of us remain, like seeded hulls
shelled of flesh, a rune of stones, once

sung to deed a plot of land, crime or myth,
expectations plant, solve, tell:

What is the end of this? Displaced snakes
trace a path back to some tomb, exhumed

snakes
trace a path back to some tomb, exhumed

again at sea, while continents shift
shores and wars heavy as broken statues

again at sea, while
shores and wars

pedestaled in museums to help us
remember: we are not the center

help us
remember: we are the center

not even here. What cannot be heard
moves us, stirring in nerve and pulse

not What cannot
stirring in nerve and pulse

bleeding under sea like glacial ice or whales
drifting off course, bursting their ears.

bleeding

What of this looming? If winds unwind
and remind us to reach for what is not

there, absent as air, we might feel or heal,
at least breathe through cracks of these

shards

sloughed off relics of wailing, diverting
attention to what silently sings.

XII. Listen Again:

[Sing—We—Home]

Setting: *Modern Temple / Ancient Ruin (sunrise)*

Voices: *All Characters / Chorus*

emoheWgniS

emoheWgnI

emoheWgN

emoheW**G**

emohe**W**

emohe**E**

emohe**H**

emohe**O**

emohe**M**

emohe**E**

emohe**Me**

emohe**Ome**

emohe**Home**

emohe**Ehome**

emohe**Wehome**

emohe**Gwehome**

emohe**Ngwehome**

emohe**Ingwehome**

emohe**Singwehome**

XIII. Razing the Columns

[Sing we through a passage home]

Setting: *Cassandra's grave / Our temples*

Voices: *Chorus*

Sing—

we through a passage home
of excavated lore

as columns tumble
down to stones, a masquerade
of tones, quaking, reviving us to

forgive again.

Tremble, blame—
pardon this proud world

echoing reprieve
from negligence and blights
reprised from past centuries. All is not

won, we cannot fear but hope
to return to lost spots, hard
as any place to chase

(middle of no-
where but here)

embraced by shadows
snaking toward koans and oracles
of bones. Sing we home.

Sing of home. Sing for:

These are the hurts that haunt.
These are the hearts we wrought.

These bear more ways to care
yet again, then as now,
as we hasten to hear

from this ledge of our grave
where wind sings through sea
so mind turns to sky.

Sing—



Photos by Gretchen E. Henderson from the Acropolis in Athens and inside a tholos tomb at Mycenae, Greece (2014)