

the little match girl passion (2007)

by **David Lang** (born 1957)

David Lang first came to prominence as co-founder in 1987 of the populist and experimental music festival Bang on a Can. But his musical background was thoroughly academic: studies at Stanford, the University of Iowa, and Yale, under such bastions of modernism as Lou Harrison, Jacob Druckman, Morton Subotnik, and Hans Werner Henze. As with many composers who came to musical awareness during the 1980s, Lang's works often show stylistic hallmarks of minimalism: short, repeated notes; recurring rhythmic cells; static, tonal harmonies; steady, gradually shifting dynamics; complex structures built on overlapping or slowly expanding these elements. But nods to pop music often appear in harmonic progressions, driving rhythms, and instrumentation. He has written for the world's most esteemed music organizations, ranging from the adventuresome Kronos Quartet, to radical choreographer Twyla Tharp, to early-music mavens Anonymous 4, to the ultra-traditional halls of the Boston Symphony. Lang now lives in New York and teaches at Yale.

To read the many program notes on Lang's website is to delve into a questing, inquisitive, humanistic heart who yearns constantly to inspire a spirit of connectedness, of universality. For those interested in further exploring his output, I suggest listening to the following: *Are You Experienced?* (1989), for fourteen instruments and a narrator who catalogs various thoughts that may pass through the mind as the listener is hypothetically dealt a fatal blow to the head; *pierced* (2007), a driving triple concerto for cello, piano, percussion, and strings; *oh graveyard* (2010), a nearly silent choral adaptation of the spiritual "Lay this body down"; and *mountain* (2014), a veritable monolith for orchestra. One bio calls Lang "passionate, prolific, and complicated", the embodiment of "the restless spirit of invention." That just about sums him up, if anything can.

One day, David Lang was casually asked by the then Artistic Advisor of Carnegie Hall, Ara Guzelimian: "If Carnegie Hall commissioned something from you, what would it be?" Lang's wife suggested that he set her favorite story, Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Match Girl*. As Lang pithily puts it: "That was a good idea." The resulting work was scored for four solo voices playing simple percussion parts (brake drum, sleigh-bells, crotales, glockenspiel, bass drum, and tubular bells). Paul Hillier conducted his Theatre of Voices in the premiere at Carnegie Hall in 2007. The next year, Lang crafted a version for full mixed chorus. The work received the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2008 and has since been heard around the globe.

Andersen's story recounts a poor girl who sits outside on a cold New Year's Eve, hoping to sell matches but failing. She dares not return to an abusive home that isn't much warmer than the nook where she has nestled. So she sits and slowly freezes. She lights a single match for some warmth, and is greeted with a vision. Three more times she lights a match as more visions follow. The final time, she sees her dead grandmother, "the only one who had ever loved her," surrounded in light. At dawn, the child is found dead.

Lang was fascinated by this story as a Christian allegory and thus interpolated into it elements of the Passion of Christ, the story of his torture, crucifixion, and death. *the little match girl passion* comprises

fifteen connected sections rather than self-contained movements in the classical sense. In this he recalls Arvo Pärt's 75-minute contiguous *Passio* (1989). But the sections alternate between Andersen's narrative and commentaries based roughly on the arias and chorales in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* (1727). Listeners familiar with Picander's libretto for Bach will hear many illuminating links, especially in the first and final movements. The Christian parallel is most clear in the ninth section, when the dying girl calls out, "Eli, Eli" ("My God, my God"), just as Christ had cried from the cross. In this way the Christian story become more universal, for poverty is everywhere.

The altos lead the recitative-like narrative sections, built from a four-pitch germinal cell in F minor: C–F–G–A-flat. The cell is occasionally expanded to B-flat and C, and over the course of the narrative, the phrase rises higher, pitch by pitch, movement by movement, to D-flat, E-flat, F, and finally, at the girl's death, a top G. The narrative becomes louder and more rhythmically active. Similarly, the sections of commentary grow more dissonant and anguished, inviting the listener to observe the scene helplessly. We know from the outset that the girl will die; we observe as it happens. As Johann Jacob Van Niekerk has recently demonstrated, Lang's handling of the Passion "allows the audience ... to feel as if they were somehow part of this injustice." In the final movement, the music drifts away, leaving the germinal cell to the percussionists, which Lang has described as "just the skeletons of their voices... a kind of ghostly abstracted community." Lang further observed: "People are suffering all over the place. We live in a world where if we actually noticed everyone's suffering it would be impossible to live."

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1. **Come, daughter**

Help me, daughter
Help me cry
Look, daughter
Where, daughter
What, daughter
Who, daughter
Why, daughter
Patient daughter
Guiltless daughter
Gone

2. **It was terribly cold** and nearly dark on the last evening of the old year, and the snow was falling fast. In the cold and the darkness, a poor little girl, with bare head and naked feet, roamed through the streets. It is true she had on a pair of slippers when she left home, but they were not of much use. They were very large, so large, indeed, that they had belonged to her mother, and the poor little creature had lost them in running across the street to avoid two carriages that were rolling along at a terrible rate. One of the slippers she could not find, and a boy seized upon the other and ran away with it, saying that he could use it as a cradle, when he had children of his own. So the little girl went on with her little naked feet, which were quite red and blue with the cold.

So the little girl went on.
So the little girl went on.

3. **Dearest heart**

Dearest heart
What did you do that was so wrong?
What was so wrong?
Dearest heart
Dearest heart
Why is your sentence so hard?

4. **In an old apron** she carried a number of matches, and had a bundle of them in her hands. No one had bought anything of her the whole day, nor had anyone given her even a penny. Shivering with cold and hunger, she crept along; poor little child, she looked the picture of misery. The snowflakes fell on her long, fair hair, which hung in curls on her shoulders, but she regarded them not.

5. **Penance and remorse**

Tear my sinful heart in two
My teardrops
May they fall like rain down upon your poor face
May they fall down like rain
My teardrops

Here, daughter, here I am
I should be bound as you were bound
All that I deserve is
What you have endured

Penance and remorse.
Tear my sinful heart in two
My penance
My remorse
My penance

6. **Lights were shining** from every window, and there was a savory smell of roast goose, for it was New-Year's eve—yes, she remembered that. In a corner, between two houses, one of which projected beyond the other, she sank down and huddled herself together. She had drawn her little feet under her, but she could not keep off the cold; and she dared not go home, for she had sold no matches, and could not take home even a penny of money. Her father would certainly beat her; besides, it was almost as cold at home as here, for they had only the roof to cover them, through which the wind howled, although the largest holes had been stopped up with straw and rages.

Her little hands were almost frozen with the cold.
Her little hands were almost frozen with the cold.

7. **Patience.**
Patience!

8. **Ah! perhaps** a burning match might be some good, if she could draw it from the bundle and strike it against the wall, just to warm her fingers. She drew one out—"scratch!" how it sputtered as it burnt! It gave a warm, bright light, like a little candle, as she held her hand over it. It was really a wonderful light. It seemed to the little girl that she was sitting by a large iron stove, with polished brass feet and a brass ornament. How the fire burned! and seemed so beautifully warm that the child stretched out her feet as if to warm them, when, lo! the flame of the match went out, the stove vanished, and she had only the remains of the half-burnt match in her hand.

She rubbed another match on the wall. It burst into a flame, and where its light fell upon the wall it became as transparent as a veil, and she could see into the room. The table was covered with a snowy white table-cloth, on which stood a splendid dinner service, and a steaming roast goose, stuffed with apples and dried plums. And what was still more wonderful, the goose jumped down from the dish and waddled across the floor, with a knife and fork in its breast, to the little girl. Then the match went out, and there remained nothing but the thick, damp, cold wall before her.

9. **Have mercy, my God.**

Look here, my God.
See my tears fall. See my tears fall.
Have mercy, my God. Have mercy.

My eyes are crying.
My heart is crying, my God.
See my tears fall.
See my tears fall, my God.

10. **She lighted another match**, and then she found herself sitting under a beautiful Christmas-tree. It was larger and more beautifully decorated than the one which she had seen through the glass door at the rich merchant's. Thousands of tapers were burning upon the green branches, and colored pictures, like those she had seen in the show-windows, looked down upon it all. The little one stretched out her hand towards them, and the match went out.

The Christmas lights rose higher and higher, till they looked to her like the stars in the sky. Then she saw a star fall, leaving behind it a bright streak of fire. 'Some one is dying,' thought the little girl, for her old grandmother, the only one who had ever loved her, and who was now dead, had told her that when a star falls, a soul was going up to God.

11. **From the sixth hour** there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour she cried out:

Eli, Eli.

12. **She again rubbed a match** on the wall, and the light shone round her; in the brightness stood her old grandmother, clear and shining, yet mild and loving in her appearance. 'Grandmother,' cried the little one, 'O take me with you; I know you will go away when the match burns out; you will vanish like the warm stove, the roast goose, and the large, glorious Christmas-tree.' And she made haste to light the whole bundle of matches, for she wished to keep her grandmother there. And the matches glowed with a light that was brighter than the noon-day, and her grandmother had never appeared so large or so beautiful. She took the little girl in her arms, and they both flew upwards in brightness and joy far above the earth, where there was neither cold nor hunger nor pain, for they were with God.

13. **When it is time for me to go**

Don't go from me
When it is time for me to leave
Don't leave me
When it is time for me to die
Stay with me
When I am most scared
Stay with me

14. **In the dawn of morning** there lay the poor little one, with pale cheeks and smiling mouth, leaning against the wall; she had been frozen to death on the last evening of the year; and the New-Year's sun rose and shone upon a little corpse! The child still sat, in the stiffness of death, holding the matches in her hand, one bundle of which was burnt. 'She tried to warm herself,' said some. No one imagined what beautiful things she had seen, nor into what glory she had entered with her grandmother, on New-Year's day.
15. **We sit and cry**
And call to you
Rest soft, daughter, rest soft
Where is your grave, daughter?
Where is your tomb?
Where is your resting place?
Rest soft, daughter, rest soft
Rest soft
Rest soft
Rest soft
Rest soft
You closed your eyes.
I closed my eyes.
Rest soft

— David Lang, after H.C. Andersen, H.P. Paull, Picander, and St. Matthew