

Opera exploring gender identity wins Grawemeyer music award

Austrian composer Olga Neuwirth has won the 2022 University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition for “Orlando,” an opera based on a Virginia Woolf novel about a gender-switching poet whose adventures span more than three centuries.

The [opera](#), an unconventional piece embracing a vast range of musical styles from Tudor-era ballads to modern electronic sound layering, was commissioned by Vienna State Opera and premiered on its stage in 2019.

[Neuwirth](#) drew inspiration for the three-hour work from “Orlando: A Biography,” Woolf’s 1928 fictional account of a young male poet in 16th century England who mysteriously becomes female at age 30 and lives until the early 20th century. The book, which shows how gender can be fluid in different circumstances, is considered a feminist classic and has been extensively studied by scholars focusing on women’s, gender and transgender issues.

“I wanted to reflect the wonderful diversity of life and evoke a subtle form of sexual attraction that cannot be pigeonholed into a single gender,” Neuwirth said. “What’s more, the main character refuses to be patronized and treated in a condescending manner, something that continually happens to women with no end in sight.”

Neuwirth studied composition at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and painting and film at San Francisco Art Institute. She lives and teaches in Vienna.

Earlier this year, she won the 2021 Wolf Prize in Music, a prestigious international award presented in Israel that also went to Stevie Wonder.

“‘Orlando’ is an enormous, supremely ambitious work,” said Marc Satterwhite, who directs the Grawemeyer music award. “The libretto and multifaceted score challenge our preconceptions of gender and sexual roles and test our ideas of what opera is and is not. It also seems appropriate that the first female-composed opera to be performed at the Vienna State Opera, a venue long regarded as a bastion of tradition, should take aim at these issues.”

Ricordi Berlin, the German branch of Italian music publisher Casa Ricordi, published the winning work.

The annual \$100,000 Grawemeyer Awards, which also honor seminal ideas in world order, psychology, education and religion, are named each December pending final trustee approval. Winners will visit Louisville in April to accept their awards and give free talks on their winning ideas.

For more details on the music award, contact Marc Satterwhite at marc.satterwhite@louisville.edu.