

POPPAEA

libretto

November 28, 2021

music by Michael Hersch
libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann

commissioned by Wien Modern & ZeitRäume Basel
premiere: ZeitRäume Basel, September 2021; Wien Modern, Vienna, November 2021

Characters

Poppaea	soprano
Nero	tenor or baritone
Octavia	mezzo-soprano
Handmaidens	2 sopranos, 1 mezzo-soprano (also sing chorus)
Additional female chorus	same vocal combination as Handmaidens

Instrumentation (18 players)

flute, oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, 2 alto saxophones, bassoon, contrabassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, percussion, piano, 2 violins, viola, violoncello, contrabass

Time/place

The events of the opera are inspired by specific historic moments during the reign of Nero, occurring in Rome or thereabouts between the years 62 to 65 AD. Although the language and its imagery are derived from the history/culture/mythology of Nero and Poppaea's time, we have conceived the opera with the notion that POPPAEA is not set in ancient Rome, per se, but that its characters may inhabit some other space/time, which may evoke a more contemporary world.

Synopsis

Prologue: We begin at the end. We see a man in the act of ferociously beating a woman who is clearly in the late stages of pregnancy. The details of the faces are obscured, in silhouette. We cut away from the beating to the overture—populated by shadowy images of Nero’s monstrous acts, very possibly visions of a semi-conscious Poppaea. The sensation is one of moving backwards through time, to the inciting incident, the moment that hurtles us towards Poppaea’s death.

Three years earlier. Poppaea sings to the statue of her mother, who, falsely accused of adultery, was forced to commit suicide when Poppaea was 16. Nero, the emperor, Poppaea’s lover of 3 years, enters. Poppaea delivers the news that she is carrying his child. Nero, ecstatic, promises to divorce his barren wife Octavia and marry Poppaea, who will now become empress of Rome (thus avenging her mother’s death, which was instigated by Octavia’s mother, Messalina, former empress).

But divorcing Octavia, who is beloved by the people, proves challenging. In response to a wave of rioting in the streets, Nero and Poppaea accuse Octavia of adultery. Nero has Octavia’s handmaidens tortured in an attempt to garner proof of her adultery, but they insist on Octavia’s innocence. This is Poppaea’s first direct involvement in inflicting violence on others. She looks away before confronting her fear, moving in closer, as Nero orders Octavia’s execution despite the maidens’ avowals that she has done nothing. Soon after, Poppaea serves as a kind of midwife to Octavia’s passage into death, witnessing as Nero’s former wife slowly bleeds.

Plagued by nightmares of her mother, Poppaea washes off Octavia’s blood in a bath of the milk of 500 she-asses. Time collapses; Poppaea gives birth. Four months later, she loses the child. Nero laments his daughter’s death, deifying her, as Poppaea’s world crumbles: Rome burns; Nero grows ever more debauched, bankrupting the empire by building a palace as big as a city, desperate to fill it with heirs; and betrayal is everywhere. As the Pisonian conspiracy unfolds, it is Poppaea, pregnant once again, who ruthlessly orders the executions—not Nero, who escapes all responsibility by recklessly racing chariots and chasing the laurels of lyre competitions.

And we are back at the beginning again. A pregnant and utterly disillusioned Poppaea awaits her husband, who returns home from the races to overhear his empress questioning his competence. Nero flies into a rage and beats Poppaea unrelentingly. As Poppaea dies, she sings a lullaby to her unborn child. The chorus, jettisoned into the future, looks back on the end of Nero’s line.

Further Thoughts

There is a degree of ritual to this world, yet the feeling is intimate, even claustrophobic, full of unrelenting close-ups. We imagine a palette of dark greys, blacks, with only a strategic use of whites or brighter colors. We envision a juxtaposition of the stylized and the hyper-real. The scenes, mostly interior, are internally focused yet somehow vast. Severe, stripped down; so that a beating or a bath draws us to its details. One should have the feeling that everything is off-kilter, careening, or about to careen, yet all is held in place by Poppaea’s iron will, her determination to engender love, maneuver power, manufacture respect. This is a stark, spare world, shot through with violence and haunted by death, sited within a culture that devalues and demeans all human life even as it systematically silences its women.

PROLOGUE

Lights up on a man beating a pregnant woman. In media res.

OVERTURE

A kind of limbo. A transitory place between life and death. A netherworld, containing a shadowy collection of images conjuring NERO's monstrousness. A sense of accretion, of journey, of moving through—or of possibly moving backwards through—time.

SCENE 1 • NEW LIFE

Three years earlier. NERO's palace. POPPAEA, in her chambers, praying to a small statue of her mother (a lar, a household god).

POPPAEA

Mater,

Mater, I offer up my breath to you—
this eyelash,
this amber strand of hair.
Nero would have it dipped in gold if he could.

If only you were here,
to greet the child
growing inside me.
Nero's child.
New life, stirring.
A child to change history,
to rewrite the story of your death,
which came to me last night in a dream,
again.
Just sixteen,
I watched you slice yourself open
like a melon
in penance for a crime you didn't commit.
Adultery.
Hardly a crime.
Adultery—
I am the queen of it.
Even if
I am not queen,
not empress, not yet,
but soon.

Mater,

Mater, last night
I felt my lips on yours,
I caught your final breath,
held it in my mouth.

POPPAEA (*cont.*)
 I keep watching
 myself in my sleep,
 watching rivers of blood running down your breasts,
 pooling at your feet,
 and all for the sake of a fraudulent claim
 by Octavia's mother—
 a deceitful woman with a lust for more

NERO enters.

power.

(*to NERO*) My love.

NERO (*to POPPAEA*)

My love.

POPPAEA sings to him.

POPPAEA A blackened sun.
 A portal to an even darker world.
 A horde of frozen elephants.
 Lightning cracking our feast in two.
 All these portents have been eclipsed by this:
 A child.

NERO A child.

POPPAEA Your child.

NERO/POPP New life.

POPPAEA Stirring.

NERO/POPP Our child.

NERO/POPP A blackened sun.
 A horde of frozen elephants.
 Lightning—
 All these portents that have plagued our love

POPPAEA for three long years.

NERO Ever since

POPPAEA you had your mother killed

NERO to pave the way for us.

POPPAEA Or so you said.

NERO/POPP All these omens that have held us back
 have been eclipsed
 by this child.

NERO My divinity is fixed.
 My line will live on through you.

POPPAEA What of Octavia?

POPPAEA The withered branch—

NERO/POPP that has borne me/you no fruit for seven years—

NERO I've no more use for her.

POPPAEA (*to herself*) At last.

NERO

At last I can shed the skin of petty politics
that traps me like a wolf
and have you for my own.
Shake off the shackles of rule that kept you a concubine
and drink you in, everywhere, always.
At last I can eat, sleep, breathe, consume you, my love.
I can be consumed by you, my wife.

POPPAEA

Barren Octavia's dirge of a mother
killed my mother,
she killed my sleep.
But I lay claim to Nero's love, Nero's glory.
I have given Nero a child.

He has promised me the world.

SCENE 2. THE WEDDING

12 days later. The streets of Rome. Nero and Poppaea's wedding.

CHORUS

Swallows flood the sky.
Fire and water have met.
Nero and his veiled bride
wind their way through gilded streets,
Exultate! Jupiter, Juno, Janus!
Rome is whole.
Swallows flood the sky.

CHORUS

The empire is broken.
Octavia,
tossed aside like a soured sack of grain.
Hordes run wrecking, trampling,
toppling
Poppaea's form
in stone and wood and precious metal.
Her radiant face comes crashing down
as we lift up
Octavia
as our own.

SCENE 3 • ADULTERY

Almost contiguous. POPPAEA & NERO are in NERO's palace. OCTAVIA is in another space.

POPPAEA

My beauty is a front
I hide behind.
The blockade that keeps intruders out.
My beauty is a front.

I was never afraid of anything.
Except that I would die too late.
After the bloom had slipped away.

Beauty.
My beauty is a thing
divorced from me.
Like alabaster, or dog's blood,
a moth's wing, that barricade.
The thing
that has kept me safe from them.
That keeps you mine.

I was never afraid of anything.
But now,
terror is this trace of ash,
the astringent grip,
the wormwood taste,
the taste of fear—
of *them*.

I was never afraid of anything.
Except that I would die too late.
My beauty, which has kept me safe,
dissipated.

Twelve days.

The blockade that keeps intruders out.
My beauty kept me safe.
Dog's blood, a moth's wing, that barricade.

But now
terror is this trace of ash,
the astringent grip,
the wormwood taste of fear of them.

NERO
Twelve days.

Twelve days, they clamor,
is too fleet.
The mob is hungry.

The smoldering streets—

The mob. Hungry.

Divorce.
The smoldering streets.
Divorce on grounds of childlessness
won't stave them off.

Our unborn child—

The hungry mob.
Exile is not enough.

I will keep you safe.
Divorce on grounds of childlessness
won't stave them off.
The smoldering streets.

Twelve days.

Our unborn child.
The hungry mob.
Exile is not enough.
I will keep you safe.
The mob is hungry.
Divorce on grounds of childlessness.
Exile is not enough.
Adultery.

OCTAVIA
Twelve days
between one wife
and the next.
I was afraid of everything.
I always knew I'd die too soon.
Twelve days,
The mob—
I always knew I'd die too soon.
Married to him. Nero.
Twelve days.

[Nero,] my father's wife's febrile son.

He held my throat
until I couldn't breathe.
Sodomized my little brother
and poisoned him.

It rained the day we buried him.
My brother.
The rain washed the gypsum off his
[poison-]clouded skin.
Uncovered the truth of that.

It rained the day we buried him.
Uncovered the truth of that.
Poison-clouded.
Nero sodomized my little brother.

Twelve days.
I was afraid of everything. I wanted to die.
He held my throat until I couldn't breathe.
It rained the day we buried him.
Rain washed the gypsum off
his poison-clouded skin.
Uncovered the truth of that.
The truth of this.

POPPAEA

Terror, this trace
of ash.
Now I'm terrified.

Terrified our child will die.

Terrified.

Our unborn child.
That I...
we will die today.

Our unborn child.

What if we die today?
Before my skin turns lusterless,
my hair grows dull and grey.

Exile is not enough.
Husband, have her killed.

NERO

Unborn.

Our unborn child.
Our unborn child will die.

The mob is hungry.
Adultery.
We will charge her.

Adultery.
We will charge her.
We will have her killed.

OCTAVIA

The truth.
Afraid.
Married to him, Nero.

It rained the day we buried him.

Adultery.
Held my throat.
What Nero has done to me.

The truth.
Will live.
Whatever Nero has done to me.
Adultery.
Whatever he will do.
The truth will live.

SCENE 4 • OCTAVIA IS INNOCENT

The next day. The HANDMAIDENS are being tortured. POPPAEA is in a separate space that somehow allows her to witness the torture.

HANDMAIDENS

My lady Octavia,
she is innocent—

I am with her
every hour
of every day.
Lady Octavia.

Drown me.
Burn me.
Brand me with molten metal.
Pull the nails off my fingers.
Crush my hands and feet with stones.

My lady Octavia
is innocent.
She has never been
with those
you accuse her of consorting with—
nor any man.
With Nero for a husband,
she hates them all.

My lady Octavia
is innocent.

POPPAEA

I can't bear to see
what will become of them
if they don't confess
that adulterous Octavia
has defaced the father of my child.

I can't stand to watch
and yet (*drawn to the torture, to watching it*)
they will not flinch,
they have no fear.
Are they so devoted they would rather die
than sabotage, inform, on her?
I can't stand—

Who will stand by me
when I'm in need of fealty?

I can't bring myself to witness
and yet
I can't pull my eyes away
from flaying skin,
grinding bones— *NERO enters.*

NERO

It's a waste of time.
It doesn't matter what they say or don't.
Octavia must die.

POPPAEA (*commanding the torturers*)
Stop! Enough!

Octavia will die.

SCENE 5 • OCTAVIA

Octavia is in her cell. No real time has elapsed between this scene and the last.

OCTAVIA

Seneca has been sent away.

Nero's tutor.

He was—a kind of gate.

Kept me safe enough.

Steered this keeling skiff of state.

But even *he* could not stop Nero, his protégé
from rigging his own mother's ship to wreck.

She would not drown.

So next, Nero, Agrippina's son,
ordered a henchman to assassinate

his own mother,

whom, Nero said, was too obstinate.

My brother, Britannicus,

I loved, I lost.

Knocked off by my husband.

I was gutted then.

I was gutted when my mother was killed.

I was nine.

Three years later, I was gutted again on my wedding day.

Every day since.

I have been gutted.

Devoid.

Of love.

Of lust for living.

In this wasted land.

I have been wasting.

I am wasting away.

Seneca has been sent to Spain.

Poppaea is Nero's wife.

Who will keep us from calamity?

There is no one, nothing for me here
but death.

SCENE 6 • POPPAEA WITNESSES OCTAVIA'S DEATH

A few hours later. OCTAVIA, sentenced to death, is perhaps suspended from a beam, deep incisions in her arteries, her arms and legs, bleeding profusely, even if the blood flows slower than is expected. POPPAEA sits with her, watching, initially from a distance. As the scene progresses, POPPAEA comes closer, circling, pausing, examining, even touching, OCTAVIA's face, her wounds.

POPPAEA

Octavia—

Mmmmm....

What does it feel like?

Is the pain sharp or dull?

Octavia—

Do you see me?

What do you see?

Octavia—

Bitter almond of a girl,
your heart is too true.

You look as if you've seen
 your brother's ghost.

You'll be with him soon.

Look at me.

Why won't you bleed?

Too true for this world.

Bleed.

Be free of all this.

Tell me, is death tender?

Is it reprieve?

Does it hurt?

What do you see?

Ungenerous veins!

Sssshh...

OCTAVIA is now moved to a warm bath to speed the flow of blood. The container is simple, utilitarian; perhaps a trough from which large animals would drink.

You are so naïve.

I am death.

Do you see me?

Mmmmm....

Octavia.

Ah.

Now it flows.

It won't be long....

Poor Octavia.

It's over.
Sssshh...

By the end of this scene, POPPAEA's clothing, her hands and feet, her hair, her face, are splattered in OCTAVIA's blood, which now pools on the floor beneath OCTAVIA's suspended body, and spills and sloshes from the tub in which she has been placed.

(libretto continues on following page)



SCENE 7 • MILK BATH

Soon after OCTAVIA's death. POPPAEA is bathing in her chamber, tended by her handmaidens.

HANDMAIDENS

Five-hundred slaves
milk five-hundred she-asses
every day.
So that *she* can soak.

Bathing in donkey's milk
is restorative, they say.

Donkey's milk,
a beauty salve
that saves face,
keeps sister age at bay,
soothes tired skin,

wards off disease.

Donkey's milk
keeps sister age at bay,
soothes,
wards off disease.

Donkey's milk
wipes away bloodshed,
the burden of guilt.

POPPAEA

Mater, mater,
you came to me again in my sleep.
I watched you cut yourself open
in penance for a crime you didn't commit.

Adultery.
It has made me queen,
I am Empress of Rome.
And yet—
Octavia, hardly cold,
my emperor is already off,
strumming his lyre, racing Apollo's chariot,
wearing a mask in his own image,
(*sarcastically*) playacting.

Leaving me alone,
dreaming as I wash myself clean.
Waking dreaming.
Besieged by visions:
My own body in this pool of milk.
Watching myself retch,
heaving—
disgorging an ancient, wasted crone
out of my mouth.
Giving birth
to beauty grown old.
Vomiting
a sapless, corpselike hag,
wrapped in the skins of goats,
crawling with insect larvae.

Time elapses.

I am giving birth.
Giving birth.
Giving—

*She pulls a baby out of the milk bath.
This is Claudia Augusta.*

SCENE 8. CLAUDIA AUGUSTA

The streets of Rome. Apart from the crowd, we see POPPAEA and NERO parading or being presented in a glorious fashion.

ENSEMBLE

Exsultate!

A divine light!

Diva Poppaea Augusta's child,

Claudia Augusta, is born to us!

Nero's inheritor!

We celebrate!

Exsultate!

We celebrate Fortuna's gift to Rome!

We dedicate this temple to Alma Venus

even as the earth quakes, boding ill.

Claudia Augusta is born to us!

A divine light! Nero's inheritor!

Divine!

We celebrate Fortuna's gift to Rome.

We avert our gaze.

Earth quakes.

We avert our gaze from a siege of maleficent auguries

as Nero races chariots in honor of his baby girl—

Nero's inheritor!

Born to us!

Diva Poppaea Augusta's child, Claudia.

As time elapses:

Rome is whole.

Swallows flood the sky.

Exsultate!

A divine light!

Poppaea August's child, Claudia Augusta,

Nero's inheritor!

We celebrate!

Claudia born to us.

A divine light!

Exsultate!

We celebrate Fortuna's gift to Rome...

We avert our gaze as Nero races chariots in honor of his baby girl...

His baby, who is dead.

Not four months old.

SCENE 9. NERO'S LAMENT

NERO'S chambers. POPPAEA is in a place apart from him. OCTAVIA is a ghost.

NERO My child.	POPPAEA Diva Claudia	OCTAVIA <i>as ghost</i> Their child, she is dead. She is dead.
For one hundred days, I held her perfect, tiny head in my hands. For one hundred days I fell into her eyes, burning like her mother's.	Augusta. Our child, dead.	She is dead. She's dead.
	If our dead child is a god then what am I? Hardly a god. Married to a man who seeks solace in song, poetry, play-acting.	Diva Poppaea, Augusta, Diva Augusta, your marriage is as barren as mine.
	I want, I wanted the power to right my world.	The truth— The truth is wasting, death.
My child is dead. The gods have taken my god. Diva Claudia, my life, my divinity, my child is dead.		
I have died with her.	I am not a god. I wanted the power to right my world.	The truth is nothing but death.

SCENE 10. THE GREAT FIRE

The streets of Rome. The city is ablaze. All is chaos.

CHORUS

Immolation!

Rome

eternal

burns!

Raging flames blaze, they—

Plunder our streets! Engulf our homes!

Shattering our gods, household gods!

Searing lives!

Rome is lost. My city. My home!

Rome

eternal

burns

as Nero sings,

he plays his lyre.

He sings, he plays his lyre,

he sings, he plays...

SCENE 11. AFTER THE FIRE

POPPAEA alone in her chambers. Offstage/outside: revelry, feasting, debauchery in NERO'S gardens, which are lit by human torches. NERO enters POPPAEA'S chamber.

NERO

The gardens are empty without you, my love.

POPPAEA

The gardens are overrun

by wanton, lackluster hangers-on.

NERO

I need you by my side.

POPPAEA

I can't stand to see the lights.

Human torches?!

NERO

I will snuff them out. Come.

POPPAEA

I can't bear the stench of charcoaled human flesh—

NERO

Arsonists, they deserve nothing less.

POPPAEA

They say it was *you*—
you who set fire to the city,

NERO

They say?

POPPAEA

They say you set it on fire
so you could build yourself
a feasting hall with revolving heavens
and saffron-spraying pipes.
A “Golden House.”

NERO

I built this golden house for us.
For our children.

POPPAEA

Our daughter, dead,
you “marry” a man in jest.

NERO

Pythagoras? But that was just—
Your breath reeks of onions.

NERO

Alliums are good for the voice.

POPPAEA (*sarcastic*)

Good for singing,
for pretending to play the lyre—

NERO (*angry now*)

I don't pretend.

POPPAEA

You squander your days racing chariots,

NERO

Squander—
I squander?
I win, I conquer.

POPPAEA

The Satyricon follows you like your shadow.

NERO

They're my friends!

POPPAEA

Your Satyricon:
A herd of exotic antelope
hand-plucked for ravaging.

NERO

My friends.

NERO

A herd?

POPPAEA (*she holds her own*)

And you say you're building this house for us?

NERO

I will ravage you.

NERO

Come, my love. I built this house for you.

POPPAEA

It's too big. I get lost when I try to take a bath.
This house is as big as a city.
A labyrinth of passages leading nowhere.

NERO

I will lead you through it.
No house is big enough
to hold our love.

POPPAEA

Our love?

NERO

I built this house for us,
for you.

POPPAEA

Our love?

POPPAEA

It's a labyrinth.
It's too big.
I get lost.

NERO

I will show you the way.

POPPAEA

I'm lost.

NERO

We will fill this house with children.

POPPAEA

Children?
I am lost.

They make love. At first as two equals, although each very much in his/her separate emotional/psychic space. A shared but incredibly lonely gesture, a loveless union. Soon the lovemaking grows rough, bordering on violent. NERO is now the dominant force, POPPAEA, at his mercy. Initially terrified, she submits. NERO loses himself in her. It is possible that we see moments of connection between them. If so, it is not clear whether these are real, imagined, longed for... And then, that connection, if it is there, evaporates. We see POPPAEA's consciousness rise to the surface. For a moment, she has her power back. A shift.

OCTAVIA *as ghost*

Conspiracy.

MAIDENS (*whisper*)
Seneca,
Piso,
Petronius,
Lucan,
Claudius Senecio.

OCTAVIA
Conspire.
Conspiring.
Conspiracy.

MAIDENS
Piso,
Petronius,
Lucan,
Claudius Senecio.

Conspiracy has turned on them.
Nero and Poppaea.
It must be stopped.
Seneca, back from Spain,
must take his own life.
Pregnant Poppaea's decree.

NERO and POPPAEA extricate themselves from each other. Time has elapsed. POPPAEA's maidens attend to her. She is now pregnant.

MAIDENS
Her beauty is a front.
Alabaster,
dog's blood,
a moth's wing.

OCTAVIA
Alabaster,
dog's blood,
a moth's wing.

POPPAEA
Seneca is dead.
And Piso,
Lucan,
Petronius
must die—
And Claudius Senecio and—

OCTAVIA
41 men, sentenced to death.
As Nero goes off to the races
Poppaea keeps the peace.

SCENE 12. NEW LIFE

The Golden House. A pregnant POPPAEA in her chambers, praying to the statue of her dead mother.

POPPAEA

Mater,
Mater, I offer up my breath to you—
this eyelash,
this amber strand of hair.

If only you were here
to greet this child.
Our shining hope.
[I know]
she will fill the crater left behind
by her dead sister.
She will change this world.
Safeguard us from danger.

If only you were here, Mater,
to witness how she will
unveil
the darkness shrouding Rome,
disperse
the storm clouds bearing down on me,
vanquish
the tribunals,
the countless deaths I've had to ordain
because he—
my husband,
the emperor,
Nero—
the countless deaths

*NERO enters, but hangs back, momentarily unseen.
POPPAEA doesn't hear him come in.*

because he—
Nero
is too impetuous,
too weak,
too distracted by his lyre,
his chariots—

NERO makes himself known.

NERO
Impetuous, weak?

POPPAEA
And late.

NERO
Late?

POPPAEA

Gone for days on end, racing your shiny chariots, playing at being a god.

NERO

Playing?

POPPAEA

Playing, racing...

What if you were to crash into a pile of stones and smash to smithereens?

What would happen to me and your—

POPPAEA

New life, stirring.

Your child.

A blackened sun.

A horde of frozen elephants.

Lightning.

All these portents that have plagued our love.

NERO

New life.

Our child.

A blackened sun.

Lightning.

A horde of frozen elephants.

POPPAEA

And here you are, playing at being a god.

NERO

Playing?

NERO swings and strikes POPPAEA.

She falls to the ground.

POPPAEA (*recoiling, falling to the ground*)

Our child—

Nero beats POPPAEA brutally. At last he stops. Near death, POPPAEA drags herself across the stage, bleeding from the groin. She sings a lullaby to her unborn child (clearly no longer living.)

POPPAEA

This world
you will not see
still spins
in spite of me.
In spite.
Keeps spinning.

This world
spins,
singing
you to sleep—

ENSEMBLE

Diva Poppaea Augusta
will be deified.
She has become a god

in Nero's Pantheon.

POPPAEA
Now sleep.
A tender,
unsullied
sleep—

Don't dream,
don't dream—
you will not see your mother die—
just sleep.

This world,
this world—

ENSEMBLE
There will be no funeral pyre.
for Nero's alabaster bride.
He embalms her instead,
with all the perfumes in Arabia.
For all time.
He grieves.

POPPAEA
This world—
You are
released.

ENSEMBLE
He grieves
and then he finds himself a lookalike.
The boy, Sporus, who could be Poppaea's twin.
Nero castrates him, paints his face.
Grants him this name:
Poppaea.
And they are wed.
No children will come of this.
Nero will be the last of his line.

-fin-