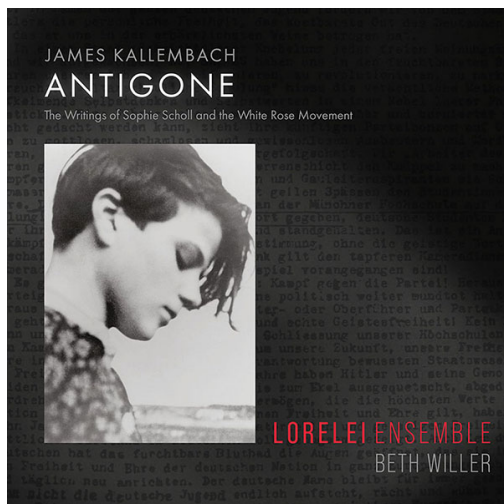


# OPERA NEWS

**Recordings** (<http://www.operanews.org/operanews/templates/recordings.aspx?date=11/1/2022>) > Opera and Oratorio

## KALLEMBACH: *Antigone*

**CD** English, Brailey; Lorelei Ensemble, cello quartet, Willer. Texts and translations. New Focus Recordings FCR333



**JAMES KALLEMBACH'S** *Antigone*, a commission from the Lorelei Ensemble and its artistic director, Beth Willer, bears the subtitle “The Writings of Sophie Scholl and the White Rose Movement.” The White Rose was a World War II-era, student-led resistance group that dared to stand up to Nazism. Scholl and her brother Hans, core members of the group, were arrested and executed. In Kallembach’s piece, Sophie’s writings and White Rose pamphlets are given mythic weight through their juxtaposition with excerpts from Sophocles’s *Antigone*. Kallembach’s two female martyrs—one ancient and mythical, the other contemporary and real—illuminate and resonate with each other across the ages.

From the text alone, this is *Antigone*’s story: we hear her name, as well as those of her sister Ismene and her uncle Creon, as the chorus sings her narrative. We know about Sophie Scholl and the White Rose only from reading the liner notes and the bracketed attributions in the libretto. The texts from the various sources, however, flow together with startling seamlessness, as if they were part of the same enduring narrative of resisting tyranny in the name of justice.

Kallembach’s *Antigone*—scored for the unusual combination of women’s chorus and cello quartet—is in fourteen movements, many of them about two minutes or less in length. The opening prologue begins with pretty, a cappella choral singing on “ooh,” and it manages to sound mournful despite the bright G-major tonality. About a minute in, we hear fraught, dissonant interjections from the individual cellos. The chorus sings the Latin text “Ecce quomodo moritur” (Behold how the righteous one dies), now accompanied by the full cello quartet, with grinding harmonies that imply menace and foreboding. The coexistence of triadic, meditative choral textures with startling discordant outbursts creates a distinctive and fitting juxtaposition of the ancient and the modern, a technique the composer uses effectively throughout.

Kallembach deploys his forces with variety. A short movement for Ismene is sung by a mezzo (Christina English, rich and mellifluous) with solo cello accompaniment. *Antigone*, voiced by the full chorus, responds in the next movement with words from both Sophie’s diary and Sophocles. It’s poignant and mournful, until a fortissimo section at the end drives home her heightened emotion. The fifth movement, an excerpt from the Fourth White Rose Pamphlet, is motet-like, contrapuntal and colorfully harmonized as it delivers its

somber message (“Everywhere and at all times evil is lurking in the dark / Waiting for the moment when people are weak”).

We first hear from Creon, as rendered with clarity and authority by soprano Sarah Brailey, in the sixth movement, after a bracing introduction sung by a trio of voices. Creon’s calm, soothing melodic line disguises the authoritarian message contained in the subtext. Brailey summons more overt menace in her later confrontation with Antigone, whose response (once again provided by the full chorus, plus the blazing cello quartet) is gratifyingly defiant.

The Epilogue, titled “Sophie’s Dream,” is from her diary and describes a vivid and moving encounter with her brother. It begins as a duet, which deftly implies the presence of both the dream Sophie and the real Sophie. Soon, the narrative is taken over by the full chorus with dense, brightly colored harmony.

The work has a total running time of just thirty-seven minutes, but it doesn’t feel slight at all. The members of the Lorelei Ensemble provide unusually good pitch and diction under Willer’s decisive leadership. *Antigone* has a refreshingly unique concept, demonstrating that its antiauthoritarian message is relevant for both ancient and modern times—and, alas, probably well into the future. —*Joshua Rosenblum*