

OLGA NEUWIRTH: O MELVILLE!  
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The idea for the opera came to her by accident. Traveling to New York on a bus from Montauk in 2007, she picked up a discarded newspaper and learned that Walt Whitman and Herman Melville — who were born and died in the same year — had great respect for each other, but never met. She became intrigued by Melville's life and the tragic disconnect between Melville and his readers at the time of the publication of *Moby-Dick* in 1851. That a book, which is now held in such reverence had once been ridiculed and censored, resonated with Austrian composer Olga Neuwirth. As a woman in a predominantly male classical music world, she has had to struggle to find her place, and because she has the courage of her convictions, she continues to face both incomprehension and antagonism. In her latest project, *American Lulu*, she has taken on one of the sacred cows of modern music, Alban Berg's *Lulu*, and audaciously recast the title character and several others as African Americans.

Moved by Melville's fate, and inspired by the rich complexity of Melville's prose, his innovative shifting narrative structures, and his ability to express in a spontaneous flow of language the inner workings of the human mind, Olga Neuwirth embarked on a three-year journey of discovery. In addition to extensive reading, she went on pilgrimages to Nantucket and Arrowhead, the farm near Pittsfield, MA where Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*. By September of 2010, Neuwirth had secured a commission, and with a libretto in hand, was ensconced in an apartment on the upper west side of Manhattan composing *The Outcast*. Her strict daily ritual included donning a worker's uniform with "Olga" embroidered on the pocket. Before sitting down at her desk every morning, she first took a photograph of herself, punched a time card like a factory worker, and then spent the rest of the day with Melville writing music.

Olga is unabashedly U.S.-centric. She is drawn to American culture, both high and low, and feels most at home in New York. In her work she has been inspired by Melville and David Lynch, as well as by the TV series *Columbo*, starring Peter Falk. The idea of the mask was in fact lifted from the episode "The Murder of a Rock Star," where the plot involves a person in a car wearing a mask with the face of the murderer to serve as an alibi while the murderer is committing the crime.

In September 2010, Olga selected a photograph of Melville when he was 42 years old, because that was her own age at the time. She scaled the photocopy to conform to her head, and reinforced it with a cardboard backing to which she stapled an elastic band. Armed with her digital camera set to black-and-white, since the mask photo was from a time before color photography, she now had a valid excuse to escape from her solitary composer's "bird-nest" on Broadway. She set forth into the world with Melville, or rather, as Melville. Curious passersby were enlisted to photograph him as he wandered around New York like a time traveler from 120 years earlier. The real human being hidden behind the mask was conflated with Melville into a strange androgynous composite that earned some double takes even from New Yorkers. Parallel to the fugitive sound world that she was creating for Melville in seclusion, Olga had added a tangible and permanent visual record of Melville and herself in the outside world. When I found out what she was up to, I eagerly signed on as a photographer.

When Olga learned that in Melville's time, the only way that a girl could work as a sailor was to masquerade as a boy, it wasn't long before the male narrator in her opera became Ishmaela. Correspondingly, when Olga wore the mask, she was like Ishmaela masquerading as a male. Slight of stature and dressed in timeless trousers and shirts, Olga was quite comfortable in the role of the bearded Melville. As for Melville, he both fit in everywhere and didn't. In front of a basketball fence, next to a slide in a playground, on the beach, in a locker room, on the Fifth Avenue sidewalk, in an empty movie theater, Melville/Olga is an unobtrusive presence – a quiet observer, and always an outsider.

Melville's expression in the mask photograph is serious but serene; his head is turned slightly to the left, the lips are parted, the hair and the full beard are touched with grey, and the light-colored eyes are fixed on something in the distance. The arms are resolutely crossed in front of the chest. This pose — most other photographs of him are head shots — could be interpreted as defensive or resigned if you take into account that by the time it was taken in 1861, Melville had suffered much adversity. *Moby-Dick*, a book for which he'd had high hopes, had foundered. He may even already have sensed that his days as a writer of full-length novels were over. He endured chronic back pain; was given to extreme mood swings and violent rages; and grappled with emotional conflicts that were unfathomable in his pre-

Freudian times. In his writing he dared to address delicate topics for which he lacked the appropriate vocabulary. Words in common usage today like “psyche,” “gender,” “homosexuality,” “manic depression,” were not available to Melville. Neither were they to his contemporaries who simply proclaimed him insane. When his book *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* was published in 1852, the review in *New York Day Book* appeared under the headline “HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY.”

On a hot afternoon in July 2011, Olga and I set out on a photo marathon to Melville’s stomping grounds in downtown Manhattan. From Gansevoort Street (the family name of a relative of Melville’s) we proceeded to Melville’s birthplace at 6 Pearl Street, which is today a homeless shelter; and then on to the Battery, where beginning in 1866 Melville, now acclaimed as the author of the book that set the standard for the Great American Novel, clocked in six days a week for nineteen years as a duty inspector for the U. S. Customs Service. Another destination was the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum. In the gallery of Melville’s contemporaries, the Hudson River School painters, the Russian guard asked if the bearded face represented Lenin!

With her face hidden behind the mask, Olga was a patient and unself-conscious model. In all the photos there is a delightful incongruity between the grave bearded face of Melville and Olga’s casual clothing and relaxed body. And the limitations of the ordinary digital camera we were using lend an improvised, do-it-yourself quality to the photographs that was both unavoidable and intentional.

The final link in the story was Olga’s discovery that the mask project she had contrived had had a close precedent in art some thirty years before. In the guest room of the house in upstate New York where she was invited for a weekend in November 2010, she happened upon *Rimbaud in New York 1978-79*. The book, published by her host Andrew Roth in 2004, contains David Wojnarowicz’s series of black-and-white photographs of young men in New York wearing the mask of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud. A prominent figure in downtown New York in the 1980s, Wojnarowicz was an intensely political and provocative artist — a painter, photographer, writer, and filmmaker, who died from AIDS in 1992 at age 37. His photographs position the Symbolist poet (who also inspired Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe), in the shady and seamy haunts he himself frequented. Wojnarowicz often faced legal battles and censorship during his life, and was again the subject of controversy in the fall of 2010 when one of his works was deemed offensive and removed from an exhibition about sexual difference at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC.

When Olga Neuwirth saw the elegant volume of Caravaggesque photographs, she was intrigued by the photographs and at the same time disappointed that the idea of photographing a person wearing the mask of an admired historic figure in contemporary New York was not hers alone. But in fact, to have been preceded by Wojnarowicz, is totally consistent with Neuwirth’s own vision. Her 1998 *Homage to Klaus Nomi*, is dedicated to the German countertenor who captivated downtown New York in the late 1970s with his vocal range and visionary performances, and died in 1984 at age 39, also a victim of AIDS. Aside from the difference in subject and style, the two series of photographs have something important in common. They both exploit the photo mask as a distancing device that has the contradictory effect of making the figures both fit in and stand out of their surroundings. Possessing the ability to access and express what is universal and at the same time to remain apart and outside, precisely mirrors the dual nature of Melville, Rimbaud, Wojnarowicz and Neuwirth — the artist as everyman and the artist as outcast.

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