



Julia Wolfe and Bang on a Can: *Steel Hammer*



Streaming May 12 – 19

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Cal Performances Department of Artistic Literacy Staff:
Rica Anderson, Interim Director of Artistic Literacy

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How to use this Engagement Guide

If you have photos or lesson plans to share, please let us know! Use #SteelHammer@cal

This engagement guide is organized around 4 key artistic practices (as identified by the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards at <http://nccas.wikispaces.com/>)

Investigating: Questioning, exploring and challenging.

Imagining: Opening the door to what's possible, and even to what seems impossible.

Creating: Making artistic choices with a work of art in mind.

Connecting: Reflecting on both process and product and making connections to other aspects of life and study.

This Engagement Guide invites exploration before and after the performance, giving each student tools to make personal and meaningful connections during the show. You'll be able to link to specific subjects that you or your students may want more information about. We've included a pre-performance engagement activity and a post-performance activity for artistic practice and reflection. By no means should you feel limited by these suggestions! Go, make art, learn more...and share your experiences where you can.

Arts Engagement: More than learning basic information about a performance, we think real arts engagement starts with having the skills and knowledge you need to connect meaningfully with works of art. Through these guides, we aim to give you and your students a glimpse into the artistic process, and the opportunity to work on the same kinds of challenges the artists strive to solve creatively. We hope the next time you see a performance you'll use the insights you gained exploring the artist's process to connect with a work of art, and thus deepen your experience as an audience member.

Students audiences engaged in the arts come to understand that every artist draws from a core set of concepts skillfully chosen and applied in performance to create a work of art both unique to the artist, and connected to other works of art.

And along the way, we hope that students of all ages—and their teachers and adult mentors—will be inspired to experiment with artistic decision-making and creativity themselves.

Enjoy the show!

Steel Hammer

Music and Text by Julia Wolfe

featuring:

Bang on a Can All-Stars

Robert Black, *bass*

Vicky Chow, *piano and melodica*

David Cossin, *percussion*

Arlen Hlusko, *cello*

Mark Stewart, *electric guitar, banjo, mountain dulcimer, harmonica*

Ken Thomson, *clarinets and harmonica*

with

Rebecca L. Hargrove, *voice*

Sonya Headlam, *voice*

Molly Nettner, *voice*

Film:

Jeremy Robins, *film director, editor, and animator*

David Cossin, *film soundtrack producer*

David Bloom, *music director*



Notes on *Steel Hammer*

Steel Hammer is a meditation on over 200 versions of the “John Henry” ballad. The various versions, based on hearsay, recollection, and tall tales, reveal both the evolution of the story, as well as the timeless tale of human versus machine. Many of the facts are unclear: some say that Henry was from West Virginia; some say he was from South Carolina. Some have said that his fate was set before he picked up a hammer, that his woman’s name was Liza Jane or Polly Ann—that Polly drove steel just like a man. But regardless of the details, John Henry, wielding a steel hammer, faced the onslaught of the industrial age as his super-human strength is challenged in a contest to out-dig an engine. I drew upon the extreme variations of the story, fragmenting and weaving the contradictory versions of the ballad that have circulated since the late 1800s into a new whole—at times meditating on single words or phrases—in order to tell “the story of the story” and to embody the simultaneous diverse paths it traveled. To tell the tale, the Bang on a Can All-Stars have added a slew of instruments—mountain dulcimer, wooden bones, banjo, harmonicas, and body percussion—to their usual line up, as well as a dynamic trio of three female voices. —Julia Wolfe

About Julia Wolfe

Julia Wolfe's music is distinguished by an intense physicality and a relentless power that pushes performers to extremes and demands attention from the audience. She draws inspiration from folk, classical, and rock genres, bringing a modern sensibility to each while simultaneously tearing down the walls between them.

Steel Hammer (premiered in 2009) is the first in a series of compositions Wolfe created about the American worker. Her 2015 Pulitzer Prize-winning work *Anthracite Fields*, is an oratorio (an extended musical composition with a dramatic text for solo voices, chorus, and orchestra) that draws on oral histories, interviews, speeches, and more to honor the people who persevered in the Pennsylvania Anthracite coal region. The oratorio, *Fire in my mouth* (2019), was inspired by the infamous [Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire](#), which claimed the lives of 146 New York City garment workers—most of whom were young immigrant women—in 1911, and the political unrest surrounding it.

Wolfe was a 2016 MacArthur Fellow, in 2015 received the 2015 Herb Alpert Award in Music, and was named Musical America's 2019 Composer of the Year. She is co-founder/co-artistic director of NYU Steinhardt Music Composition.



About Bang on a Can

Founded in 1987 by composers Michael Gordon, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe, Bang on a Can has been creating an international community dedicated to innovative music, wherever it is found, and has grown from a one-day New York-based marathon concert to a multi-faceted performing arts organization with a broad range of year-round international activities.

In addition to Bang on a Can's concert venue tours, recording projects and digital streaming platform (live.bangonacan.org), the company holds the Bang on a Can Summer Music Festival at MASS MoCA, a professional development program for young composers and performers led by today's pioneers of experimental music. Among other programs, Bang on a Can has partnered with the US State Department to create OneBeat, a revolutionary, post-political residency program that uses music to bridge the gulf between young American musicians and young musicians from developing countries.

Each new program has evolved to answer specific challenges faced by today's musicians, composers, and audiences, in order to make innovative music widely accessible and wildly received. Bang on a Can has also recently launched its new digital archive, CANLAND, an extensive archive of its recordings, videos, posters, program books and more. Discover it at: www.canland.org.



SONGS

Steel Hammer by Julia Wolfe

SOME SAY

Some say he's from
some say he
some say he's from
some say
some say he
say he
he

THE STATES

Georgia
Tennessee
Columbus, Ohio
Kentucky
Alabama
New Jersey
Yew Pine Mountains
Mississippi
Mountain
West Virginia
South Carolina

DESTINY

John Henry
was a little boy
sitting on his papa's knee
John Henry
was a little man
sitting on his mama's knee
a baby boy
sitting on his daddy's knee
John Henry
he said, "I'm gonna be a steel drivin' man."
He picked up his hammer and a little piece
of steel
He said, "This hammer's gonna be the death
of me."

MOUNTAIN

The mountain was so tall
John Henry was so small

CHARACTERISTICS

He was small
He was tall
He was black
He was white
He was true
He was false
He was two hundred pounds
He was two twenty-five
He's a worker
Convict
Singer
Thirty-five years
Twenty-two
Fifty
Cotton picker
Steel Driver (hammer, hammer, steel, steel)
He was true
He was false
He was six feet tall
He was five foot one
He was tall
He was small
He was small
He was tall

POLLY ANN

John Henry had a little woman
And her name was
Polly Ann, Mary Ann, Julie Ann, Sary Ann,
Sally Ann,
Martha Ann, Liza Ann, Lucy Ann,
Mary Magdalena, Magdalena
John Henry had a little woman
and she was all dressed in blue,
dressed in red,
red, blue, black
John Henry's woman said to him,
"My darling Johnny, I've been true."
true to you, true to you
John Henry had a little woman
and her name was Ida Red

and her name was Liza Jane
and her name was Maggadee,
Polly Ann, Mary Ann, Julie Ann, Sary Ann,
Sally Ann,
Martha Ann, Liza Ann, Lucy Ann,
Mary Magdalena, Magdalena
Ida Red, Maggadee, Liza Jane,
Polly
When John Henry he took sick to bed,
then Polly drove steel just like a man.

THE RACE

The captain told John Henry
“gonna bring that steam drill ‘round”
John Henry told the captain
“a man ain’t nothin’ but a man”
nothin’, nothin’, nothin’
but a man, but a man
John Henry on the right side
The steam drill’s on the left
right, left, right, left
“Before I let your steam drill beat me
down,

I’ll hammer my fool self to death.”
nine pound hammer
ten pound hammer
twelve pound hammer
twenty pound hammer
two nine pound hammers
two twenty pound hammers
sixteen pound hammer
hammer, hammer, hammer, hammer

WINNER

The man who invented the steam drill,
he thought he was mighty fine
John Henry sunk the steel fourteen feet,
while the steam drill only made nine,
Lord Lord,

LORD LORD

Lord Lord
This old hammer rings like silver
This old hammer shines like gold



Illuminating the Art: Repetition in Storytelling

Although Julia Wolfe was drawn to the John Henry story and the many ballads it inspired, originally she felt reluctant to compose her own John Henry piece as the legend had been covered many times before in songs, plays, and even movies. What could she say that hadn't been said? When she examined her interest more closely, however, she realized the appeal actually lay in the 200 versions of the ballad and how the story and its many contradictory elements had evolved. Why was the story so enduring? And how could she tell the story of this story?



Repetition in Steel Hammer

Wolfe describes her work as a “meditation” on the multiple versions of the tale, and as with meditation she cuts through the many distracting voices, and various directions into which the different versions veer. Instead, in *Steel Hammer* she distills the story down to resonant words and phrases, which the vocalists repeatedly sing, sometimes in unison, mostly in harmony.

Repeated sounds also create a background rhythm and help to bring to life elements of the story – the scraping sandpaper evokes train wheels, the ringing of metal against metal conjures John Henry's steel hammer at work. Even silence plays a role, repeatedly accenting moments after close harmonies, and helping to build a sense of tension.

Steel Hammer's filmmaker Jeremy Robins mirrors the repetition in the music by returning to the same visual images – train tracks, tunnels, men with horses, a landscape of mountains. As with the music, at times he includes variations on a repeated theme. For example, in the song Polly Ann, we see images of a variety of flowers as the vocalists sing, “And her name was...” before each name.

Repetition in Folk Tales

Folk and fairy tales often use repetition. In the story of Three Little Pigs, there is a simple repetitive structure. To keep out the wolf, each pig builds a house – one of straw, one of sticks, and one of bricks. The wolf arrives at each pig's house and they have the same exchange:

Wolf: “Little pig! Little pig! Let me in! Let me in!”

Pigs: “No! No! No! Not by the hairs on my chinny chin chin!”

Wolf: “Then, I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down!”

The rhythm of these repeated exchanges sets up the expectation that the same situation will happen each time. As the wolf destroys first one, then the other house, the tension and suspense rise until he's at the third pig's house. But here there's suddenly an unexpected plot twist – the repeated pattern is broken as the previously powerful wolf discovers he's no match for the clever third pig and his sturdy brick house.

Repetition in Poetry

Even if you haven't heard the Three Little Pigs story in a while, you probably still remember the wolf's repeated threat to huff, puff and blow the houses down. The rhymes and the rhythm of his statement give it the quality of an incantation. We see rhythm and rhyme creating patterns in poetry too, as recurring sounds, syllables, lines, and stanzas deepen a message, stress the importance of certain ideas, and make them more meaningful and resonant. Robert Frost's famous poem, *Stopping By Woods on A Snowy Evening* offers a good example:

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Great speakers also use the power of repetition to inspire and move audiences. Think of [Martin Luther King's I Have A Dream speech](#), which builds an urgent vision of a better world, or [Winston Churchill's We Shall Fight on the Beaches speech](#), which emboldened the British to keep fighting during WWII.

Repetition in Musical Motifs

In opera, then later in movies and TV shows, leitmotifs or short musical phrases associated with particular characters, places, ideas, or emotions are often used. (In German leitmotif means "leading motif" or "guiding motif". A musical motif is a short musical idea using melody, harmony, rhythm, and sometimes all three.) In *Star Wars*, for example, a particular motif is associated with The Force, and another with Darth Vader. Vader's theme triggers the dread and dislike we feel for the character before he even enters the room. And who can forget the two-note shark motif in *Jaws*? The filmmaker doesn't need to show us the shark – those two notes immediately cue our anxiety that a shark attack is imminent!

As you watch *Steel Hammer*, notice how repetition allows for the familiar tale of John Henry to be told in a whole new way. What ideas and emotions does the use of repetition in this performance bring up for you?

Engagement Activities

Engagement Activity #1 (Pre-performance) RETELLING: Distilling Story to its Elements

Overview

Time needed: 20-30 minutes (can be extended with layers of exploration).

Students will create their version of a popular story, distilling the story down to its main elements, and using repetition, sound, and melody.



Guiding Questions

What elements do stories with a common theme share, and how do they differ?

How do we edit a story down to its essence?

How does adding repetition, sounds, and music enhance a story's ideas and expressiveness?

Artistic Tool Box

Imagining. Comparing and Contrasting. Editing. Writing from multiple perspectives. Popular stories, folktales, or fables.

Supplies and Prep

- Writing materials (journal, paper, writing implements)
- Iphones, ipad or other device to record audio/video



Instructions

The legend of John Henry has been repeated in story and song hundreds of times because its themes (human versus machine, the appeal and the cost of progress, etc.) resonated with so many. Today, there are some stories that seem to get told over and over again. For example, every few years a new Spiderman movie gets made. The story of an ordinary young man coming to terms with his new superpowers and the changed identity and responsibilities these powers give him, appeals to many people going through life changes themselves.

Step 1 **Story Versions:** Think of a story that you may have read or seen different version of. For example, there are several versions of the *Freaky Friday* story, where a child and their parent, or a girl and a boy, swap bodies for a day. There are also a few movies about mistaken identity, like *The Princess Switch*, or *The Parent Trap*.

- Write down some examples of movies, TV shows or books that are basically versions of the same story.
- Choose one of these examples. Make two columns; in one column write all the things that are similar about these stories, in the other write all the things that are different.
- Volunteers can share some of the examples they came up with.

Step 2 **Character Qualities:**
Can you add any other characteristics that describe the protagonists in these stories? For example, in *Superman*, Clark Kent is portrayed as shy and a little awkward, but he's a confident hero when he changes into his superhero outfit. What are some qualities the main characters in these stories share, what are the qualities that differ?

Step 3 **Basic Elements of the Story:**

- Now look over your list again.

- Which qualities capture the character at their most basic level? Perhaps there are contradictory qualities, on your list. That's ok, characters (and real people) are complicated. Circle these core qualities, and the contradictory qualities that also seem important to the character.
- Choose/circle the key elements of the story that the different versions share. Note the main themes of the story.
- Write short one-sentence descriptions for the beginning, middle, then end of this story.

Step 4

Essential Words:

We're going to distill this story down to its bones even more.

- Are there some words you've written that are central to the story, that establish it in a place or time? Write or circle these. For example, in *The States*, a song in *Steel Hammer*, the vocalists repeat the names of several States, grounding the story in certain areas of America, and giving the sense of a railroad moving through these places.
- Which of the character's qualities are important to include? Choose these words. (One of the songs in *Steel Hammer* repeats "He was..." followed by different and often contradictory words to describe John Henry. However, this adds to the Tall Tale aspect of the legend – he is all of these things, none of the descriptions are necessarily true or false.)
- What are basic plot elements of the story, the beginning, middle, and end sections that you want to include? (For example, a short sentence to describe the beginning of *Spiderman* might be, "Bit by a radioactive spider, Peter Parker got superpowers.")



Step 5

Repetition:

Now that you've chosen your words and short phrases, which ones might you want to repeat to emphasize a theme or element of the story. In *Steel Hammer*, it makes sense that the word "hammer" is repeated. But also, in the first song, the phrase "Some Say", is sung again and again, illustrating how word of mouth elevated the John Henry story to its legendary status.

- Consider the order of your words and phrases.
 - What describes the beginning, middle and end of the story best?
 - Where do you want to place the words that emphasize important character qualities, story themes, or locations or time periods in which the story is set?
- Let's now edit our work through a poetic lens.
 - Are there certain word choices that might be more expressive, or descriptive?
 - Is there an order in which the words might flow better?
- How might you separate the beginning, middle, and end of your story into sections within your poem, or into different songs? (See *Steel Hammer's* song lyrics on pages 6 – 7 for examples.)
- Share your story poems/song lyrics with a partner to get their impressions and suggestions.

Step 6

Add Sound and Musical Elements:

We're now going to add some sound elements to our works. In *Steel Hammer*, in addition to playing musical instruments like the piano, clarinet, banjo, and harmonica, the musicians rub sandpaper surfaces together, play wooden bones (a percussive folk instrument that originally was made from animal bones), or even tap out rhythms on their bodies or with their feet.

- Look over your poem/song lyrics and consider:
- Are there certain sounds that would enhance certain words, phrases, or sections?
- Try experimenting with sounds. What does the rustle of crumpled paper add? How about the sound of scissors cutting the air, or rapping lightly on a book?
- Once you find sounds you like to accompany certain words, phrases, or sections, write these directions next to the words and phrases.
- Now, think about how you might sing some of your words and phrases. What simple melodies can you put to your lyrics? You can also choose to say some phrases and sing others, or to hum between phrases.
- If possible, record your melodies so you don't forget them.
- Go over your piece several times to revise and review your work.

Step 7

Get into groups of 4:

- Share your pieces with each other and discuss what you heard and noticed in your group members' works.
- Choose one of the pieces, and decide:
 - Who will read and who will sing parts, (if you can add harmony to your melodies – that's great!)
 - Who will create the sound rhythms with objects.
 - Who will add body percussion or other vocal sounds.
- Challenge yourselves to make your group piece more varied, more intense, more lyrical – experiment with it and don't be afraid to take risks.
- Once you've finalized your choices, rehearse the piece several times.
- Then, share each group's piece with the class.

Step 8

Reflect together:

- What was it like to create your pieces, both your individual piece and your group piece?
- What did you hear in the other groups' pieces? Were the stories familiar? What surprised you?

Engagement Activity #2 (Post-Performance)

REFLECTION: LISTENING AND OBSERVING

Overview

Time needed: 20-30 minutes (can be extended with layers of exploration.)

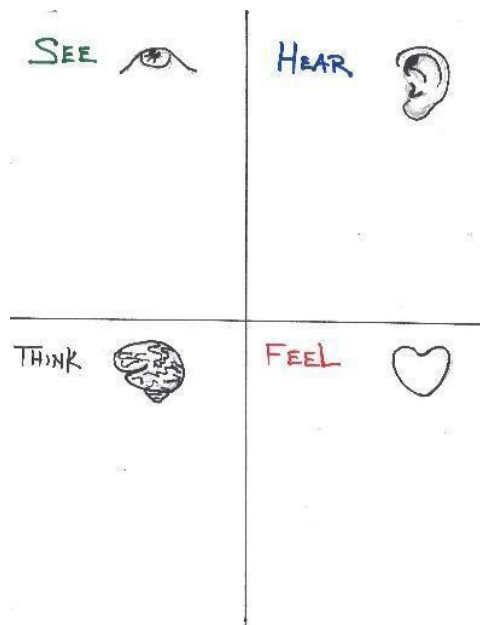
Students will reflect on the performance of Julia Wolfe and Bang on a Can's *Steel Hammer* through individual reflection and group discussion to understand how artists' choices influence our experience of a performance.

Guiding Questions

How does separating what our eyes and ears experience in a performance from our interpretations and feelings about that performance help us to see how artists' choices evoke a specific response?

How does *Steel Hammer* tell both the story of John Henry, and the story of the John Henry legend?

How do the vocalists, musicians, and images in the film all come together in *Steel Hammer*?



Artistic Literacy Tool Box

Attentive observing. Categorizing aural and visual information.

Listening and responding. Musical genres or styles.

Supplies and Prep

1. Writing materials for students (journal, paper, writing implements)

Instructions

Step 1 **Think back** to the performance of the *Steel Hammer* and jot or sketch some of your memories of the concert.

- What were melodies, and instruments you heard?
- What were the images you remember?
- How did the musicians and vocalists work together?
- What stood out, or was most memorable to you?

Step 2 **What did you See and Hear?**

In order to understand more about the composers' work, as well as the choices made by the musicians, vocalists, and filmmaker, it helps to understand the actual

elements of the performance, not what we may be interpreting or projecting that we heard or saw using our imaginations.

- Before you jump into sharing your impressions of the performance, try to remember what you actually saw in the film. (Not what was in your imagination or “mind’s eye”, but what visual information your eyes took in.)
- Share with others the images and elements you saw.
- Now, think back to what you actually heard. (Again, not the impression the music made on you, but the sounds your ears actually took in.)
- Share with others the sounds and music you heard in the performance.

Step 3

What did you Think and Feel?

Now let’s talk about how the choices of what music to include and what to show visually, brought up certain thoughts and feelings for you.

- What do you remember thinking during the performance?
- What did you wonder about? What other impressions or even stories came to mind when you were watching?
- And how did you feel as you watched the performance? What emotions came up as you heard the songs and saw the vocalists/musicians perform together? What did you think and feel about the visual images you saw?

Step 4

Discuss:

- Describe the relationships between the vocalists and musicians. How did each lead during some songs or sections, and support during others? How did they “cue” or prompt each other as they performed?
- What did you notice about your listening during the performance? Were there moments when you listened more attentively? If so, why?
- What surprised you about the performance? Did you have an expectation going into the show that changed as you experienced it?

Suggestion for Teachers: Share your screen and capture what your students saw, heard, thought, and felt.

You might consider seeking curricular connections in history, science, or literature. If you design a lesson that you’d like to share, please let us know! We’d like to include it on our blog or in future workshops for teachers...



Resources

Julia Wolfe website: <https://juliawolfemusic.com/about/>

Bang on a can website: <https://bangonacan.org/>

Videos of Bang on a Can performing songs by Julia Wolfe:

- Bang on a Can All-Stars: Reeling (Julia Wolfe)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd1xESSjJWI>
- Julia Wolfe: Believing, performed by Bang on a Can
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGIhLAEzMaE>



John Henry Ballad:

Classic Folk Song Explores Anxiety of Humans Vs. Technology: The Story of Folk Hero John Henry is Still Sung Today (includes various versions of the John Henry ballad)

<https://www.wpr.org/classic-folk-song-explores-anxiety-humans-vs-technology>

Artist Conversation with Julia Wolfe: <https://calperformances.org/related-events/artist-conversation-with-julia-wolfe/>

San Francisco Classical Voice Interview: Julia Wolfe: Embracing Creative Risk:

<https://calperformances.org/related-events/sfcv-interview-julia-wolfe-embracing-creative-risk/>

Children's Books

- *John Henry* by Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney
- *John Henry: An American Legend* by Ezra Jack Keats
- *Ain't Nothing but a Man: My Quest to Find the Real John Henry* by Scott Reynolds Nelson
- *John Henry, Hammerin' Hero: The Graphic Novel* by Stephanie True Peters and Nelson Evergreen



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For information on supporting our Education & Community Programs, contact Taun Miller Wright: twright@calperformances.org.