

Brainwashed - Diamanda Galás, "Defixiones, Will and Testament: Orders from the Dead"

Written by Jonathan Dean

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Like the agonizing lament of a bereaved widow at a Bedouin funeral, like the piercing shriek of a peasant woman as her village is burned to the ground in some terrible holocaust ignored by the world, like the confrontational screech of a decadent French poetess-provocateur, like the guttural schrei of a German expressionist diva, or a stricken plague victim coughing up her last mouthful of blood and lymph, Diamanda Galás' vocal ululations pierce straight to the heart, unearthing a swell of deadly inhumanity that bubbles up from our collective unconscious memory of the brutal atrocities of history.

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She is wise to realize that there is something painfully cathartic in exorcising these demons, voicing the cries of the dispossessed, palpably invoking their spirits. Diamanda Galás forges a blood pact between audience and performer, calling up sorrow and anger from her deepest emotional reserves and fearlessly exposing them. For her new solo operatic work *Defixiones: Will and Testament*

, Galás could not have chosen a subject more obscure or meaningless to Western listeners — the Armenian, Assyrian and Greek genocides carried out by Turkey between 1914 and 1923 — but the varied texts she has chosen, the haunting musical settings and, most importantly, her forceful and emotive delivery vividly evoke this forgotten moment in history. The double album is packaged with a hardcover book which contains the libretto, drawn from various texts by an impressive array of authors including Armenian poet Siamanto, French poet Henri Michaux, Syrian poet Adonis, Romantic poet Gerard de Nerval and Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini. This multilingual patchwork of texts, some dealing specifically with the Turkish bloodshed and some only suggesting the same outrage, sadness and psychological terror, forms a compelling narrative flow from the hysterical anguish of the 13-minute opener "The Dance" to the painful resignation of the concluding "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean." Diamanda's stunning four-octave instrument attacks this material with amazing technical and emotional virtuosity, transforming from a quavering falsetto to a throaty growl in a matter of seconds, enforcing the primacy of her moving drama, effortlessly referencing Greek liturgical music, American blues and Middle Eastern vocalizations. Upon listening to the first track, I was completely transfixed and listened to the entire two hours plus of

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Defixiones

in one sitting. Her seductive performance creates a violent historical shadowplay for the mind that feels all too relevant to our times; the sentiments so universal that she could just as well be singing about the horrors of the Civil War, the ethnic cleansing of the Third Reich, the bombing of Hiroshima or the rape of Nanking. Diamanda Gal?' electrifying work is entirely without peer in the contemporary scene. Her avant-garde exorcisms of plagues, madness and despair sound simultaneously ancient and modern, allegorical yet viscerally direct, elusive and immediate, and

Defixiones: Will and Testament

should be required listening for anyone who has ever felt the pull of human history's dark chambers beckon.

[samples:](#)

- [The Desert \(Part One\)](#)
- [Artemis](#)
- [See That My Grave Is Kept Clean](#)