

Mary Motorhead is a 30-minute one-woman chamber opera by Emma O'Halloran about an Irish woman in Mountjoy Prison, serving 18 years for stabbing her husband in the head with a carving knife.

## About Mary Motorhead (the opera)

- Composer: **Emma** O'Halloran (Irish, Grammy-nominated for this double bill).
- Librettist: Emma O'Halloran, after play by Mark O'Halloran.
- Setting: A single prison cell in Dublin's Mountjoy Prison, where Mary delivers a fierce, funny and painful monologue about the "secret history" that led to her crime.
- Premise: Mary, jailed after driving a 12-inch knife into her husband's head, unpacks the disappointments, betrayals and small brutalities of her rural Irish life in an attempt to shed light on the darkness of her actions.

## Story, themes and tone

- Story focus: Mary revisits childhood slights, family tensions, loneliness, her turbulent relationship with Red, and the escalating jealousy and frustration that culminate in violence.
- Themes:
  - "History is invention": Mary questions how stories are told about women like her, contrasting official versions with her own raw account
  - Class, gender and rage: The opera explores how poverty, limited choices for women, and emotional neglect can warp a life, without excusing Mary's crime.
  - Search for self: Critics note that beneath Mary's gallows humour and bravado is a desperate attempt to understand who she is and whether she can find any road back to herself.
- Tone: A volatile mix of black comedy, confession and psychological unravelling; reviews describe it as "devastating and beautiful," "painful to watch" yet strangely compassionate.

## Roles and musical forces

### Emily Edmonds, mezzo soprano

- Principal role:
  - Mary Motorhead (mezzo-soprano or high mezzo): a "rebellious badass" from small-town Ireland, written as a virtuosic acting and vocal tour-de-force.
- Musical language: O'Halloran's score combines acoustic and electronic forces, fractured rhythms and sudden stylistic shifts (at times edging towards pop-like bass-driven passages) to mirror Mary's damaged psyche and the claustrophobia of the cell.

## **The Elaine Kelly / Greta Nash creative “dream team”**

### **Elaine Kelly – conductor**

- Irish conductor Elaine Kelly has emerged as one of the defining interpreters of Mary Motorhead, leading performances with Irish National Opera and on the internationally released recording of the double bill.
- Reviews highlight how Kelly “plumbs musical depths with directness and subtlety,” drawing an engaging pace and detailed colour from the chamber ensemble that keeps Mary’s monologue taut and propulsive.
- Under her direction, the score’s jagged outbursts, heavy-bass sections and eerie stillness cohere into a psychological portrait that tracks every swing in Mary’s self-justification, shame, humour and fury.

### **Greta Nash – director**

- Greta Nash, a multi-award winning Melbourne-based writer-director with a background in film and television, is known for intimate, character-driven stories and sharp observation of everyday emotional detail.
- Greta’s screen sensibility is well-suited to Mary Motorhead’s single-room monodrama, where meaning lives in close-ups: the way Mary prowls, slumps, jokes, or suddenly freezes can completely shift how we read her story.
- Nash’s interest in flawed, complex protagonists aligns closely with Mary, allowing a staging that neither sanitises her violence nor reduces her to a stereotype of the “mad” or “bad” woman.

### **Why they’re a “dream team” for Mary**

- Mary Motorhead demands absolute coordination between voice, orchestra and staging, because a single performer must hold the audience’s attention, shift time and memory, and make us believe every twist of her tale; Kelly’s precise musical shaping and Nash’s psychological, actor-focused direction attack that challenge from both sides.
- Both artists are committed to contemporary, socially engaged work. They treat Mary’s story not just as a crime story, but as a lens on class, gendered violence and how women’s narratives are heard or dismissed, giving the opera its visceral immediacy for today’s audiences.

### **Grammy-nominated digital recording is available for purchase:**

<https://signumrecords.com/product/trade-mary-motorhead-digital-only/SIGCD951/>