

Hearing Her Voice



Sarah McCullough, Portland Symphony Orchestra

At the Portland Symphony Orchestra in Maine, composer Robin Holcomb discusses her new score, *No Thing Lives to Itself*, commissioned by the Women Composers Readings and Commissions Program, with Music Director Eckart Preu prior to the work's world premiere by the Portland Symphony in January 2020.

Works by women composers, long underrepresented in orchestra programming, are being commissioned and performed in greater numbers—and the Women Composers Readings and Commissions Program, an initiative of the League of American Orchestras in partnership with American Composers Orchestra, is making an impact.

by Janaya Greene

At a Colorado Springs schools visit, composer Wang Jie was enthralled with a group of student string players she met while working on a commission for the Colorado Springs Philharmonic. The students were captivated by how changing one note could transform an entire composition, and Wang Jie was proud to be able to share her insights as a composer with them. After opening the floor for students to ask questions, to

her surprise the first question Wang Jie received, from a young girl, was: “I heard it’s really hard to be a female composer. Is your life really hard?”

“I wasn’t angry immediately because I wanted to help her at the moment, but later after I wrapped this up and I was by myself, I had to really think about negligence in music education,” Wang Jie says. “I was so angry. How did this happen? It’s so wrong.”



Composer Courtney Bryan, whose Toulmin-commissioned work, *Rejoice*, was given its world premiere by the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra and Music Director Carlos Miguel Prieto in November 2019.

The student's question is not ill-informed. In the 2020-21 season, according to a study by the Women's Philharmonic Advocacy, 20 percent of composers programmed for 21 major ensembles in the United States are women—a 1 percent increase from the previous season. U.S. orchestras still largely rely on the works of deceased composers, who are usually white men. All the same, living composers who are women have been training and creating—and shifting the musical culture that has limited works by women for so long.

The Women Composers Readings and Commissions Program is working to present more opportunities to women, in an effort to address the gender imbalance for composers in classical music. An initiative of the League of American Orchestras in partnership with the American Composers Orchestra (ACO), since its inception in 2014 the program has increased the number of new works by women composers at orchestras: sixteen composers have received commissions; eight commissioned scores have been given their world

premieres by orchestras; and 40 composers have had the rare chance to develop their compositions with professional orchestras, through ACO'S EarShot Readings. The Women Composers Readings and Commissions program is supported by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation. In the program's first couple of years, two composers were each awarded a \$15,000 orchestral commission; since then, three composers a year have received commissions of the same amount to support their work.

"We have this weird backlog of all the composers that we're taught in school and all the composers that pop culture talks about when it comes to classical music: they're all white dudes," says Aiden Kim Feltcamp of the American Composers Orchestra. "There are very few women and there are very few people of color who are part of that canon because they weren't allowed into those spaces to train, so [as a society] we're kind of making up for all of that now and trying to correct it." Since

"Programs like the Toulmin Commissions are very important because when things are imbalanced, you have to find a way to address it." —Courtney Bryan

joining ACO as Emerging Composers and Diversity Director in 2018, Feltcamp has facilitated the application and readings component of the program through the ACO. The organization identifies and develops talent, performs established and lesser-known composers, and works to increase awareness of the infinite variety of American orchestral music.

Louisiana native Courtney Bryan learned about the Women Composers Readings and Commissions program after participating in ACO's EarShot Readings program. She had been part of ACO's mentoring program, so applying for the Toulmin grant fell in line with the already-established relationship. "What's interesting to me is, in the classical world, I primarily would notice the imbalance of race. So when the imbalance of gender was brought to my attention, I was like, 'Oh, that is interesting.' You don't usually see three female-identifying composers and



Composer Wang Jie, whose Toulmin-commissioned piece, *The Winter That United Us*, was scheduled to be given its world premiere by the Buffalo Philharmonic this September. The premiere has been postponed to the Buffalo Philharmonic's September 2021 season opening due to the pandemic.

one male-identifying composer without it being a statement," says Bryan, referring to specific events, like Women's History month, for example. "I think that programs like the Toulmin Commissions are very important because when things are imbalanced, you have to find a way to address it."

The Women Composers Readings and Commissions Program is an initiative of the League of American Orchestras, in partnership with American Composers Orchestra (ACO) and supported by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation. Since the Women Composers Readings and Commissions Program's inception in 2014:

- Forty women composers benefitted from career development via EarShot Readings
- Sixteen composers have received commissions
- Eight world premieres have taken place: works by Julia Adolphe, Courtney Bryan, Melody Eötvös, Robin Holcomb, Chen-Hui Jen, Hannah Lash, Andreia Pinto Correia, and Andrea Reinkemeyer

Learn more at <http://bit.ly/leaguewomencomposers>.



Artis-Naples

Composer Hannah Lash greets the audience at the November 2019 world premiere of her Double Concerto for piano, harp, and orchestra, commissioned by the Women Composers Readings and Commissions Program and performed by Florida's Naples Philharmonic and conductor Arvo Volmer.



For the 2019 Women Composers Readings and Commissions Program, Niloufar Iravani, Leanna Primiani, and Hilary Purrington (from left) will each receive orchestral commissions of \$15,000. Due to the pandemic, the dates for their premieres are on hold and will be announced. Niloufar Iravani's work will be premiered by the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra and Music Director Delta David Gier. Leanna Primiani's work will be premiered by ROCO (River Oaks Chamber Orchestra) in Houston. Hilary Purrington's *Words for Departure* is slated to be premiered by the Philadelphia Orchestra, conductor Stéphane Denève, the Westminster Symphonic Choir, and director Joe Miller in February 2021.

Bryan was selected for a Toulmin commission grant in 2018. Growing up in New Orleans, she was passionate about jazz, and her "first communication" was via the piano, which she's been playing since she was five years old. After enrolling in the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, Bryan's love for classical music began to blossom and hasn't stopped since. Composing is what she calls her "new" communication. "I love it. When I started writing for orchestra, I had that same kind of excitement that I had when I first got into piano. Orchestra is my favorite instrument," Bryan says.

The Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra premiered

One commissioned piece can be the start of a fruitful career in composing.

her Toulmin-commissioned work, *Rejoice*, which continues to explore the sacred themes in most of her compositions, in 2019. Since the work's premiere, Bryan has had a budding relationship with her home state's orchestra, a path that is common for composers after having their work played by an orchestra for the first time.

Building a Career

The composing career of 2017 Toulmin commission recipient Robin Holcomb gained traction after she participated in the ACO's 2015 Jazz Composers Orchestra Institute. "To get into the Jazz Composers Orchestra Institute, you had to write one minute of a piece for orchestra to the best of your ability," Holcomb says. "Probably about 50 people were chosen to participate in this week-long intensive



Composer Chen-Hui Jen (center) met with Indiana Chamber Orchestra Concertmaster Tarn Travers and Music Director Matthew Kraemer for the January 2018 world premiere of her *in eternal dusk* in Indianapolis. The work was commissioned by the Women Composers Readings and Commissions Program.

Melody Eötvös at the world premiere of her *Red Dirt | Silver Rain* by the American Composers Orchestra and ACO Music Director and Conductor George Manahan at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall, October 2015. The Women Composers Readings and Commissions Program commissioned the score.

with some established orchestral composers who had jazz backgrounds. Then we were all invited to write a nine-minute piece and submit that to be read by an orchestra. For me, that was the Naples Philharmonic in Florida. That piece led me to be one of several women composers who were invited to submit pieces for the Toulmin Fellowship.”

Holcomb's composition, *No Thing Lives to Itself*, premiered at the Portland Symphony Orchestra in January 2020. Her next work was supposed to be given its premiere by the Philadelphia Orchestra this fall, but the premiere—like so many other plans—has been postponed indefinitely due to the coronavirus pandemic.

One commissioned piece can be the start of a fruitful career for a composer: having a composition played by an orchestra can lead thousands of ears to an art-



Marin Chalifour

2014 Women Composers commission recipient Julia Adolphe. Her *Unearth, Release* (Concerto for Viola and Orchestra) was premiered on November 17, 2016 by the New York Philharmonic, conductor Jaap van Zweden, and Principal Viola Cynthia Phelps.



Eileen Kong

2015 Women Composers commission recipient Xi Wang, whose work will be premiered by the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra and Music Director Joseph Young at a date to be announced.



Dana Linnane

2017 Women Composers commission recipient Andrea Reinkemeyer, whose *Water Sings Fire* was premiered by the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra and Music Director Carlos Miguel Prieto on January 10, 2019.



SnoStudios Photography

2017 Women Composers commission recipient Stacy Garrop's *Goddess Triptych* had been slated for a September 2020 world premiere by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra and Music Director Stéphane Denève.



Tiago Miranda/Expresso

2015 Women Composers commissions recipient Andreia Pinto Correia. Her *Ciprés* received its premiere by the Columbus Symphony Orchestra on April 6, 2018.



Cindy Cox

2018 Women Composers commission recipient Cindy Cox. The world premiere of her work by the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra and conductor Pekka Kuusisto was postponed due to the pandemic; a new date will be announced.



Yi Sun

2018 Women Composers commission recipient Fang Man, whose work is slated to be premiered by the San Francisco Symphony and Music Director Esa-Pekka Salonen on March 11, 12, and 13, 2021.

ists' work. This jumping point is crucial in launching composers' careers. With only 1.8 percent of pieces at the 22 largest American symphonies being composed by women in the 2014-15 season, according to a report by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, it is clear that composers who are women are not given the same opportunities as men composers. For 2016 Toulmin grant recipient Wang Jie, the statistics only push her harder to fulfill her calling. "What I want the world to know is that the fact that I can be successful in these small ways right now is because something—even if it's a very trivial something—in the system in the infrastructure

is beginning to work," she says. "I want to be the voice to say, 'Look at the positive things that are happening.' The system remains broken, but that's not the entirety of the system."

Wang Jie's Symphony No. 1 has been broadcast to over 200 stations around the country, and her Symphony No. 2 is on the bill for the Buffalo Philharmonic. Her Toulmin-commissioned piece, *The Winter That United Us*, was scheduled to premiere this September, but it's been pushed back to the Buffalo Philharmonic's September 2021 season opening due to the pandemic. Her work volunteering as a music educator at Minnesota's Shakopee Correctional

Facility showed her how a little support can go a long way in impacting the lives and careers of women. In the music field, Wang Jie thinks that conscious curation could make a world of difference in getting more composers who are women their first readings—in addition to providing more visible examples of women in a range of roles in orchestras. "Let's say 30 percent of the people who are in curatorial power would be a little more gender-conscious, or pay attention to some of neglected composers in a meaningful way," she says. "What if 30 percent of them do this? Do you think we're still going to be looking at 2.3 percent programming for female composers? I doubt that."

Conscious Curation

Much like the question Wang Jie received from the string student in Colorado, Courtney Bryan believes that school could have been an impactful way for her to learn about more composers from marginalized backgrounds early in her career.

Wang Jie believes that conscious curation could make a world of difference in getting more composers who are women their first readings.

"People in teaching roles should make an effort to make sure that what they share with young musicians is as diverse as can be. You always make choices when you're teaching. If you're going to choose a piece, think about some of the women composers that you would like to introduce to your students," Bryan says.

Leanna Primiani is one of the 2019 Women Composers Commissions recipients and she's eager for her composition to premiere with ROCO in Houston (the other 2019 composers are Niloufar Iravani and Hilary Purrington). Primiani loosely describes her work as reflecting what's happening in the world right now, sometimes re-envisioning past works through a modern lens. Though her premiere date isn't yet set, she knows she will draw inspiration from what's happening in the world at the time she composes. "We have to do something that's a little different and write music that means something and is a reflection

of what's happening, without being preachy or making people feel guilty," she says.

As a composer for film and orchestra, Primiani sees a common need for the film and orchestra worlds to put the work of composers who are women in front of the

Participants in the Women Composers Readings and Commissions Program are expanding the already vast number of stories that women composers have to tell.

people with decision-making power, in addition to having more women in those decision-making positions. "Just to get someone to listen to the music is really difficult. A lot of times artistic administrators are so overwhelmed with the amount of music that comes to them on a daily basis, simply having a good piece just doesn't cut it," she says. "I think the people who are getting premieres, they're getting help from someone who nine times out of ten is a man."

The 2019 Women Composers Readings

and Commissions composers are expanding the already vast number of stories that composers—who are women have to tell. With more opportunities for more women, these composers could spend more time looking inward and improving their compositions than they do figuring out how to get their music in front of the right ears.

"If I love something, I love something. I don't get to choose what I love. I am this instrument that's already kind of pre-wired to make this particular sound that comes out of me as these instruments," Wang Jie says. "My job becomes very easy now that I accept the instrument that I am. Every morning I get up and all I need to do is to tune myself to be the best instrument I can be for that day, and to be mindful of when I'm out of tune." **S**

JANAYA GREENE is a Chicago-based writer covering film, literature, music, and the African diaspora. She finds overlooked stories that are of interest to millennials and marginalized communities, and amplifies them through reporting, writing, visual storytelling, and social media strategies. Greene is a freelance writer and social media coordinator at the *Chicago Reader*.

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