

Interview with Composer Cindy Cox

2018 Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation Orchestral Commission recipient Cindy Cox discusses her work with host Anthony Joseph Lanman

ANTHONY JOSEPH LANMAN: I'm your host, Anthony Joseph Lanman, from the 1 Track podcast. This conversation with Cindy Cox is part of the League of American Orchestras Virginia B. Toulmin Orchestral Commissions Program made possible by the generous support of the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation. I am here with composer, Cindy Cox. Thank you so much for doing this, Cindy. It's great to see you, and it's great to meet you.

CINDY COX: Well, it's great to be here.

ANTHONY: Yeah, thank you so much. And I just wanted to start the whole thing off just at the very beginning, and ask you what your musical background is, and how you got into music.

CINDY: Okay, well that's an interesting story actually. I trained as a pianist, and I was a really serious pianist. And I went to study with Lili Kraus in Fort Worth at Texas Christian University where they have the Van Cliburn competition. And I was fortunate, she accepted me as a student. And she was a really, really major influence on my life and my music really.

But her — there was no contemporary music there. I mean, her specialty was Mozart and Schubert, and so I ended up feeling like I learned how to play the piano. I loved the piano, I still love the piano. But I came to feel that I didn't — that there wasn't any real creative possibility to pursue a path in sort of traditional piano concert music. I love that music, but I felt like I was living in a museum in that sense.

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And I really wanted to feel like I was living in the now, and contributing something to contemporary culture. And so, you know, as a young person that was a really difficult place

for me. Because coming out of Texas, and as a woman in Texas, and — you know, in the early 1980's. It — there were no composers that I knew, you know? It didn't occur to me actually. So I went off to — I got accepted to go to graduate school in Indiana, which is where I think your — you did your work as well, so we have that in common.

ANTHONY: Yeah, I'm still in Bloomington.

CINDY: Yeah. And when I got there I was actually a music theory — I was going to do a degree in music theory. And I know — I had strong skills in trying to figure out how music works, and that's really — I still think that's so important for anyone, to sort of really think about, you know, how does music really work? How do you do analysis, how do you look at music?

But I came to a similar kind of conclusion, but it just didn't give me a sort of creative outlet and it really wasn't something that was working for me. And as I started that program, I thought, well — I saw a sort of advertisement for the New Music Ensemble, you know? Which I think you're also familiar with, right?

ANTHONY: Yeah.

CINDY: And they needed people to play in it. So I went to Harvey Sollberger's office, who was on the faculty and was conducting. Harvey is fantastic, he was a fantastic composer, and also a fantastic conductor of new music. One of the really great, great musical minds in that way. And I went to talk to him, and he sat me down and played me a piece by Roger Reynolds called "Mistral", which was for amplified harpsichord, brass, and strings.

ANTHONY: Oh, cool.

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CINDY: And he wanted someone to play the harpsichord part. And I, being the stupid young person, not really understanding that, yeah, I can play the piano, but you know, I really couldn't play the harpsichord. But I jumped in and I did it, and it was — I think that that sort of

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meeting in Harvey's office was a real epiphany for me. Because I realized talking to him, and listening to this music, I'd never heard anything like this.

And I felt like, wow that's interesting. I want to do that. I want to do that kind of thing, you know? So I started playing the New Music Ensemble, I started playing as much new music as possible. I played all of the music of my friends, and got — I started taking composition lessons with — I mean, Harvey was my main teacher, and Don Erb was my first teacher, who was a wonderful, wonderful composer too. And you know, I started at the beginning, and that was — for me, graduate school was actually — I really went there to learn how to be a composer, and I think that that happened there for me. Yeah.

ANTHONY: Wow, that's — I mean, that must have been really jarring. I mean, going from a teacher that was obviously a great musician but specialized in Mozart and Schubert.

CINDY: Yeah, no, and it was such a backwater in Texas at that time. There really was not — really very little contemporary music, and it was a big fight to get anything done there. I just had no exposure at that time to it. I just didn't know it, you know? I didn't have a very good education in it. And once I got to places where I could hear things and see things and be involved in things, oh gosh, that was so exciting.

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And it was so exciting to be playing, like I played all — one of the ways I ended up supporting myself was instead of taking piano lessons, I became an accompanist for everybody, and I sat in some of the — sat in lessons with some of the great musicians. And Indiana has amazing, amazing faculty. I mean, they had like Josef Gingold was there at that time.

And so I learned — I sat in lessons, and that was a real education for me, about instrumentation, you know? Understanding how to write for instruments. So yeah, that was my path. It's a little unconventional. Most people start a little earlier, you know?

ANTHONY: Well, sure, yeah. But going back to IU must have been like a different world from Texas.

CINDY: Yeah, yeah.

ANTHONY: Are you originally from Texas?

CINDY: Yes, I'm from Houston.

ANTHONY: I'm from Houston.

CINDY: Oh really?

ANTHONY: Yeah.

CINDY: What part of Houston?

ANTHONY: Spring.

CINDY: Spring. Oh, okay. I'm from the southwest part in — near Bel Air. Westbury, that — yeah.

ANTHONY: Oh yeah.

CINDY: Yeah, I went to Westbury High School.

ANTHONY: Nice, nice. Awesome. Yeah, that's so cool. And yeah, that's what it was like for me too. Yeah, going — but I mean, I think when I went to school here in Texas in like the late '90s, it was a lot different. There was a lot of new music going on at that time.

CINDY: Yeah, I think it really changed, because in times that I visited since, I mean it's — the landscape is completely different.

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ANTHONY: Yeah. You know, so you have this piece that — we're actually going to listen to part of a piece that you sent. It's called "Patagon for string quartet." And I wanted to ask you about the sort of topic of tradition. You have this orchestral commission, right? And the piece that we're going to listen to is string quartet. Both these things have such immense history and baggage, you know? How do you deal with that? I mean, do you feel any anxiety towards that, or you just kind of don't care? How do you deal with that?

CINDY: Well, I'm probably naive in that I don't — I haven't felt a lot of anxiety about that. But I think that the European composers I know suffer much more from the weight of historical expectations on them. And maybe as I get older I feel a little bit more reticent and uneasy about tackling big things that have long histories.

But those mediums, especially string quartet, I'd say I feel really close to this medium because I play — I also played the cello as a kid. And I love the cello, it's one of my — maybe my favorite instrument. And it comes — I like writing for instruments and groups that I feel a real kind of physical connection to. I mean, it's easy for me to feel what I'm writing, you know?

ANTHONY: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, did you — when did you start playing cello, like how young?

CINDY: I was in middle school at the time. And because I think I had a lot of training as a pianist, I progressed really quickly. And I became the principal of the All-City Orchestra in Houston at the time, and I went to all-state, all that kind of stuff. I ended up dropping my study of cello when I was an undergraduate just because I didn't have enough time to really pursue it as much. But it definitely came back later when I started studying composition, yeah.

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ANTHONY: Yeah, definitely. I mean, this early kind of experience with cello, I mean, did you play string quartets when you were a teenager?

CINDY: I don't remember playing string quartets. I played a lot of piano trio kind of things.

ANTHONY: Oh, nice.

CINDY: You know, I think when you're young those are more accessible. They're easier. Most piano trio repertoires is a little easier. I played a lot of chamber music though, more as a pianist than a cellist. Most of my work with cello was more playing in the orchestra. So that also helped me in writing for orchestra, having the kind of sense — as a pianist you have a kind of sense of the score. You know, intuitive sense of the score.

But as an orchestra member, you sit there and you rehearse, and you're involved in it. And playing for years in that really — even as a kid, really gave me a kind of a intuitive sense of that I think. It was very useful. Most pianists have difficulty playing in large ensembles, and it is a challenging thing.

ANTHONY: Right. I mean, that just brings up a question. Because you're a pianist, such an accomplished pianist, like for instance when you were writing this commission, "Dreams A World's Edge." "Dream A World's Edge."

CINDY: "Dreaming A World's Edge."

ANTHONY: Dreaming. I can't read my own handwriting. "Dreaming A World's Edge."

CINDY: That's all right.

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ANTHONY: Do you — how do you approach it? I mean, do you write on piano and sketch out, you know, on sort of a grand staves or something first? Or do you just go right to orchestrating? Or how do you handle that?

CINDY: I do a variety of things. I don't write at the piano. I check a lot of things. I have perfect pitch so I don't really — most of the time I kind of know where I'm coming from, pitch wise. And so I will check things. But in the last decade or so, I tend to write straight to the computer with a lot of aids of manuscript paper and maybe working out things and stuff like that.

But I — and I tend to work on full score. Although you know, this — it's not simple. I mean, I think one uses kind of whatever's at hand, and it can be a mixture of paper and computer and going back and forth and that kind of thing. It works for me.

ANTHONY: Yeah, nice. And getting to this piece that we're going to listen to, "Patagon." Am I saying that right?

CINDY: "Patagón."

ANTHONY: "Patagón," okay.

CINDY: Yeah, it's an archaic word. It's Spanish I guess. Archaic for Patagonia.

ANTHONY: Oh okay, gotcha. So I mean, can you kind of, I don't know, introduce us to this piece and what it's about?

CINDY: Oh, sure. So back in 2011, I took a sabbatical year and went to South America. And we lived in Buenos Aires for the year, and we took a trip to the Valdez Peninsula, which is on the eastern side, the Atlantic side, in Patagonia. And it's a nature preserve. It's a huge nature preserve, and — and at that time — well, there were two places that we visited.

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One was the peninsula itself, and there was — you know, there were the southern white whales and they were giving birth to their babies at that time. So they were coming close to shore, and you could — we went out on a boat, you know? And you could — you're right beside them. It was fantastic.

ANTHONY: That's crazy.

CINDY: And then we went to Punta Tombo, which is the largest — the place with the largest colony of Magellanic penguins, which my eleven year old daughter really loved. I mean, these little guys, they were really fun. And I think what inspired me, and what I think is a real connection in this work and in — in the orchestra commission is the interest in ecology and in landscape, especially fragile landscapes.

So in this place, you have this area, it looks kind of like West Texas, you know? It's a lot of gravel, really dry. At that time — I mean, it's really extremes of temperature. So we went in November, which since South America down there is the opposite of here, is going into summer, right? It was pretty hot, you know? It was like, I don't know, 80 — more than 80 degrees.

And winters are just really fierce there though. And so it's this really kind of extreme environment. And you're here, you're walking around, you're seeing all these animals and things. And like with the penguins, there would be the hawks would be circling around, looking for the — the penguins were having their babies as well. And they were looking —

ANTHONY: Oh man.

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CINDY: Oh, it was just — they're making these holes in the gravel where they have their eggs, you know? And hatching chicks. And the — the hawks are circling around, trying to find them. And it's just — it was just really, really striking. Really striking. And I think I really — I loved that sort of — you know, like going that far south from where I am, I'm in the Bay

Area, it was like going to the other side of the world. It was like going out of the world in a way, you know?

It was — it was as far away as I could kind of conceive of at that time. And musically I really wanted something that would capture that sense of kind of fragility, but deep kind of, you know, connectedness and — yeah.

ANTHONY: And is that why you chose Argentina, because it was far away? I mean, you had this sabbatical coming up and —

CINDY: That was one — that was one appealing aspect I guess. But I mean, there were a lot of things. I knew people in Buenos Aires at the time. I ended up curating a couple of concerts actually at the Biblioteca Nacional, which is the great — the greatest library they have really down in South America. It was, you know — Borges I think was one of the directors of that way before this time. But I knew people there.

It was also we wanted our daughter to learn Spanish. I think that was an important value. My husband speaks fluent Spanish. He spent — he spent a lot of time in Mexico and Spain. But we didn't know — we wanted to go to a place where the two of us didn't know — and ended up — it ended up being really cool actually. Very good [UNINTEL].

[OVERTALK]

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ANTHONY: Yeah, well it sounds like an amazing experience.

CINDY: Yes, it was.

ANTHONY: And in turn inspired this piece. And yeah, we'll listen to a couple excerpts. This first one is — I just chose a couple excerpts that I particularly liked. And this one is about two

minutes and 40 seconds in. I think it's just part of the first movement. But yeah, why don't we listen to it, and then maybe we can talk about it when we come back.

CINDY: Okay.

ANTHONY: Okay. So this is our first excerpt from "Patagón".

[MUSIC PLAYS]

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Okay, that's our first excerpt. That part really got me. Just how you created that tapestry behind the melody, and then how you harmonize that melody is just so cool. Did that have any direct influence from your trip, or was this just like something typical of your music?

CINDY: I think it's more typical of my music. It's a language I've developed over a lot of time. I feel like I have my own kind of harmonic and like timbral language. The title of that movement though is "Las Aguas Del Sur," the waters of the south. And it does — a lot of my music has — have these kind of wavelike structures, that they — that it works on. And I'm attracted to those images.

And I'm attracted to the combinations of using really kind of noisy but fragile kinds of sounds, like harmonics in this case, which is the background you're talking about. You know, the cello and viola are playing these — these harmonics, these natural harmonics, which have all sorts of grain and variation to them. Against — and that sort of kind of moody melody that the violins are playing.

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So I'm — my language tends to be rooted in the kind of physical overtone series. But usually with some kind of conflicting thing that butts up against it, you know? Like in that case,

you're — I really will sit and map out the natural harmonic kind of thing of all of the strings, and that's kind of like you say, in the background of it.

But — and then put against that something, in this case, it's G sonorities, and the — like, you know, with the B-natural and then a B-flat, it's going to push against that. So often some very simple things can — if they're underpinned by really interesting timbres, I think can really take you there.

ANTHONY: Absolutely. Yeah, it just works. I mean, it's like these two totally disparate things that just work so incredibly well together. That's what's really struck me about it.

CINDY: Oh, thank you.;

ANTHONY: Yeah, just really cool. And I wanted to continue to listen to this section, just maybe like a minute or so more. So we're basically just going to pick up right where we left off. And I don't know, is there anything you want to say about where this goes, or just let it roll again?

CINDY: Well, I think one of the guiding things I would say is, well timbre of course, you know? But I like to use things like canon extensively, and they kind of end up being almost medieval in their scope. So I love these sort of archaic techniques that are combined with very advanced sort of instrumental demands that you make in terms of making sounds.

I love sound. You know, I love timbre, I love sound, I love the possibility and — when I was young, and studying composition, they were called extended techniques, and now they're just — they're just part of the landscape of what we expect musicians to do, you know? It's all just sound, and it's great.

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ANTHONY: Yeah, it's interesting you say about you like this archaic, because that's — one thing that brought to my mind, almost like Pérotin or something. But you're not using the

same interval that he would have used. But that sort of parallel — these parallel lines like that over something else. Yeah, even though it sounds nothing like Perotin.

CINDY: I think that — those — the techniques that those composers used are still very fresh and interesting. You know, you can't — I don't think you can really easily write things called a fugue anymore. But you can write — I mean, imitation in canon are just sort of fundamental to how we can organize our music, and it's been a useful technique for me.

ANTHONY: Oh yeah. Okay, well let's check out this next minute or so from "Patagón".

[MUSIC PLAYS]

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Okay, that was our second part. Was this inspired by anything from Argentina?

CINDY: What we just heard?

ANTHONY: Yeah.

CINDY: Well, you know, I want to say generally that my music is — it's not programmatic in the sense of a blow by blow kind of thing. You know, it's like you're not hearing events happening blow by blow. But it's more of a general poetic image that I'm really after. And you know, I realized — I thought a lot about this image and these inspirations of the place, but I can't say I was directly trying to transcribe anything.

ANTHONY: Yeah, that sound of those plucked strings like that, it did kind of evoke for me some of those South American plucked string instruments.

CINDY: Oh, interesting.

ANTHONY: How they sound, yeah.

CINDY: Yeah. Oh, that's interesting.

ANTHONY: I don't know, yeah. But it is — it's so striking to go from that previous section into that, because again, it feels natural when you're hearing it, but it's something like — again, you're just totally not seeing — you don't see that coming. Yeah, is that something you try to do in your music?

CINDY: Oh, sure. Yes. I mean, that's the ultimate successful transition in a way, you know? Is that you're able to do something really interesting, and go into something else that feels entirely natural but fresh, you know?

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ANTHONY: Yeah, that's really hard.

CINDY: It's really hard, yeah.

ANTHONY: Yeah, I mean, it's really hard. It takes a lot of skill to be able to take these things that juxtapose — well, it's just like the previous section in itself, where you juxtaposed two things that were seemingly totally different but that worked so well — ended up working so well together. Yeah, you're just good at that I guess.

CINDY: Yeah, I tend to be — I tend to make form by juxtaposition, you know? And more the vein of maybe Stravinsky than Schoenberg if we take our roots way back. I like things that juxtapose, and I like things that layer. I'm much less of a sort of German type oriented composer where it's a — it's more of an unfolding sort of, you know, kind of contrapuntal form. You know, it's just I like to make form by things hitting up against each other and alternating.

And it's in the alternation that the wonder happens. Because something about the absence, and something about negative space is the thing that transforms the reappearance of something. So that's — yeah, an entirely intuitive process. I mean, it's intuitive and then I work on it, and — kind of consciously, and then, you know, it's — it's a challenging kind of thing to do, but it's important. It's my way of working, and I've — it took a long time to arrive at it.

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ANTHONY: Oh yeah. It's so cool. Now your piece for this Toulmin commission, "Dreaming A World's Edge," can you tell us a little bit about that? Like what — is there anything, any techniques or anything that we just heard, is there any similarities in this piece?

CINDY: Oh yeah, absolutely. And the piece is — its inspirations are related I think to "Patagón." I saw a photography show at the Los Angeles County Art Museum before I started this piece, and there was a photographer, his name is Thomas Joshua Cooper, who I got really fascinated by. This guy would take an antique 19th century camera, and organize these expeditions to go to some of the most remote places in the world. Antarctica, the Arctic, all the far, far reaches, islands, you know? And he would — he would set up his camera and take one picture.

ANTHONY: Wow.

CINDY: You know, and that would be it. And then they'd go, you know, sail on to the next place. And it's — the combination of the, gosh, you know, that's bold, man, to be a photographer and take one photo after you've spent, I don't know how many hundreds of thousands of dollars it takes to do these things, to — and he's going to some of the places that, you know, with climate change those places are going to be — a lot of these places are going to be gone.

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So it's like this fleeting glimpse at these — and these pictures, you should look it up, these pictures are luminous. They are just gorgeous. There's something about this kind of camera,
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these — I guess a long exposure process, that gives you these gorgeous, gorgeous photos. And I was really struck by this work on a lot of levels. I mean, just, you know, the — and that's often what I want.

I want things that appeal to you on the surface that are deeply moving, but if you probe a little behind them, they also have deep meaning. The deep meaning of seeing these places that will be gone, the boldness to do one fleeting image, glimpse of a place, you know? That will — there is just something about that that really got me. And so “Dreaming A World's Edge” is really about sailing off to these most remote places, and living in those spaces. Living in those spaces for — you know, for a time.

ANTHONY: And I mean, did you have these photos in front of you for reference, or just the sort of memory of seeing them, or — ?

CINDY: Well, I bought the book.

ANTHONY: Oh, you did. Okay, yeah.

CINDY: Yeah, they sold a large art book of the work, and I absolutely wanted to get — I got that. And so yes, I did have those for reference to look at. The piece is not on any one particular photo, although there were a number of them that I just really felt very, very captured by. But it's not on a particular photo. It's not like that.

ANTHONY: Yeah, and I heard this piece was a victim of COVID.

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CINDY: Oh yeah. God, what a year it's been. It's just been so bad.

ANTHONY: I know, I know.

CINDY: Yeah, the premiere was supposed to be last May, and yeah, sadly we lost it. Yeah.
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ANTHONY: So has it been rescheduled?

CINDY: We haven't gotten a date yet, but I know that they will. They will get to it. I'm trusting them, yeah.

ANTHONY: Well, sure, yeah. Oh, well I hope — I really hope I get to hear this piece, especially after hearing that explanation. That is fantastic. And if anyone out there would like to learn more about you, where can they go to do that?

CINDY: Well, my website is CACox.com. I'm on Soundcloud if you look me up. I'm on YouTube, you can look me up. Those are probably the best places to find my work. I've had a lot of — we used to release CDs and that kind of thing and they're out there. But I don't think anybody — nobody plays those anymore, right?

ANTHONY: Yeah, that's tough. That's a tough thing, the whole physical media thing.

CINDY: Yeah.

ANTHONY: I mean, like some years ago, it's funny, I came — I released an album on CD and vinyl, and the vinyl sold far more.

CINDY: Ah, because people love the collector's item thing.

ANTHONY: Yeah. But yeah, anyway, well hopefully we'll get to hear this very soon, and thank you so much for coming on and talking to me today.

CINDY: Well, thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

ANTHONY: If you would like to learn more about the League of American Orchestras, their commissioning programs, or the composers, head over to AmericanOrchestras.org.

