

TIME SIGNATURES

Composers have never shied from difficult subject matter or recent tragedies, but the period that began in March 2020 has been particularly challenging. There's the pandemic itself, plus a surge of wildfires, floods, and other environmental disasters. The murders of Black Americans including George Floyd and too many others caused deep pain—and generated artistic responses. We asked five composers to share their experiences of how they are documenting, reflecting, and responding to this time with new orchestral works.

By Hannah Edgar

What is it like to create an orchestral work that responds to the multiple traumas we've lived through in the last two years—while they're ongoing, no less?

For me, the idea of creating an orchestral work responding to these traumas is a bit like making an oil painting of one's living room going up in flames, in real time. Of course, composers have frequently taken on difficult and timely subjects, writing and processing in the moment; take Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 ("Leningrad"), which was written and first performed when the city's residents, including musicians, were starving. John Adams's *On the Transmigration of Souls* (2002), commissioned by the New York Philharmonic and Lincoln Center's Great Performers shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, sets, among other sources, text from missing-person posters near Ground Zero. But by any historical standard, our current period is a dark one.

None of this has stopped composers from writing orchestral works that either directly or circumstantially reflect the events of 2020. The theme of loss is central to many new works: in March 2021, the Chicago Sinfonietta and

cellist Ifetayo Ali-Landing premiered Joel Thompson's *breathe/burn*, a cello concerto written in remembrance of Breonna Taylor, who was killed by Louisville police in her home in March 2020. This past October saw the world premiere of Jorge Martín's *El Paso Requiem* by the El Paso Symphony, El Paso Opera, and El Paso Pro-Musica; the cantata was written in tribute to victims of the 2019 mass shooting at a Walmart in that city.

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Many composers have responded to climate change by creating new works: to cite just one example, in March 2022, Maine's Bangor Symphony Orchestra will perform the pandemic-delayed in-person premiere of *The Warming Sea*, composed by Lucas Richman, the orchestra's music director. The work is being performed in conjunction with the Maine

Science Festival, with talks by climate researchers and filmed interviews that Richman conducted with Maine scientists and researchers.

Here, we profile five composers who have created new works in response to recent tragedies, with results that will echo in concert halls in seasons to come: Gabriela Lena Frank and her *Contested Eden* for orchestra and dancers, written in response to the wildfires that ravaged California—again—last year; Iman Habibi and his *Jeder Baum spricht* (*Every tree speaks*), which was originally scheduled to premiere the day of the Philadelphia Orchestra's pandemic shutdown in March 2020; Adolphus Hailstork and his cantata *A Knee on the Neck* in memory of George Floyd; Missy Mazzoli and her "apocalyptic triptych" exploring pandemic themes; and bass-baritone Davóne Tines and his collaboratively composed *Vigil* for Breonna Taylor, created with music producer/photographer/composer Igee Dieudonné.

As these creators attest, the process was never painless, nor was it necessarily cathartic. But for these artists, *not* using their platform to say something was inconceivable.

GABRIELA LENA FRANK

Frank's *Contested Eden*, a reflection on the California wildfires and climate crisis, premiered virtually at the Cabrillo Festival this past summer and is available to stream on YouTube and at Cabrillo's website. In June, the Oregon Symphony will perform the West Coast premiere of Frank's *Pachamama Meets an Ode*, which was co-commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra and is set to original text by the composer that imagines a meeting between Beethoven and his Peruvian contemporaries from the Cusco School of Painters, with implications for the current environmental crisis.

Since I started working on Latin American themes, I had been mindful of exploiting subjects. That's my family; I don't want it to feel like I'm traveling in as an observer in some weird way. I had the same mindset about fire: We're not a direct victim of it, though my family has evacuated, and we know people who lost their homes. I also didn't want to trivialize it with action music about firefighters or tornado watchers. So, [in *Contested Eden*], I needed to approach something deeper that also wasn't overly specific to California. There's this string line in "in extremis," the second movement, that's going on while nothing is making sense. *That's* what it's like to live through COVID and all these disasters that are not normal: Somehow, you just go on and aim for hope.

All the Cabrillo Festival Orchestra players recorded their individual parts remotely. The guy who put it together spent a lot of time lining everything up. I was blown away—my prediction that orchestra rehearsals were going to really suffer due to not being able to

convene [during extreme weather events] underwent a 180-degree shift. We're still going to do something, even if we can't get people in the room the way we want. And if this is what we can come up with within the first year, give us a few years.

As people are feeling wary of continuing on Zoom, I think we need to imagine Zoom as 20 percent of our lives, not 100 percent. Start off with that—just 20 percent—then you see the benefits. Instead of flying in to accept an opera commission, maybe you could just have this wonderful Zoom session. Then, the next step is changing cultural values: The principal of your orchestra can play that Sibelius concerto, and you have amazing composers that live nearby that can be a composer-in-residence.

Not only are we facing a future where people will boycott a concert for having soloists fly in, but heat waves will cancel summer festivals. Fires have already done that; floods have done that. Pandemics are not alone in causing that kind of havoc.



Mariah Tanger

Writing a piece about California's wildfires, GABRIELA LENA FRANK says she didn't want to "trivialize it with action music about firefighters or tornado watchers. I needed to approach something deeper. Heat waves will cancel summer festivals. Fires have done that; floods have done that. Pandemics are not alone in causing havoc."



Crystal Birns



Above: Gabriela Lena Frank, left, with Music Director Andrés Orozco-Estrada at the Houston Symphony's May 2017 premiere of her *Conquest Requiem*. In recent years, Frank has focused on climate change; during the pandemic, she added online lectures and readings on the subject and hosted fundraising concerts for fire victims and the local fire department in Boonville, California, the home of her Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music.

Left: The Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music performed the world premiere of Gabriela Lena Frank's *Contested Eden* in 2021. The work, reflecting on California wildfires and climate crisis, is presented as a dance video, with choreography by Molly Katzman, filmed on location at previous wildfire sites in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Cabrillo Festival Orchestra musicians recorded the music remotely.

IMAN HABIBI

Habibi's *Jeder Baum spricht* premiered virtually by the Philadelphia Orchestra the same week as the pandemic shutdowns in March 2020, and the work opened the orchestra's in-person season in fall 2021. Coming up for the composer, in June the Toronto Symphony Orchestra will give the world premiere of a new work by Habibi, one of five Toronto-based composers commissioned to write "Celebration Preludes" for the TSO in spring 2022. Habibi's new song cycle on the works of Judeo-Persian poet Shahin Shirazi will be premiered by Canada's Orchestre Métropolitain on October 20, 2022.



John Adams, Iman Habibi, and the Philadelphia Orchestra rehearse Habibi's *Jeder Baum spricht*, which had its pandemic-delayed in-person world premiere in 2021.

I wasn't expecting the response to *Jeder Baum spricht* at all. The Philadelphia Orchestra had sold 8,000 tickets for that weekend's premiere; when I learned they were going to live-stream it instead, I thought, "Oh, we'll get, like, a couple hundred people." We saw the performance live, which was magnificent—the hall was empty, so the orchestra was resonating—and then came back to the hotel and saw that it already had 350,000 hits on Facebook. They hadn't even put it on YouTube yet. I was completely in disbelief. I was very, very lucky that was how my pandemic started, because a lot of people became interested in my music.

Jeder Baum spricht kind of foreshadowed the pandemic. This is a piece about climate change, but the two are also related: Scientists are telling us

we're going to get more pandemics because of climate-forced migration, and the melting permafrost is releasing all kinds of bacteria and viruses that have been dormant for millions of years.

I spent a lot of the pandemic taking a directed study course on climate change called "Composing Earth" with nine other composers through the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music. We've been learning from a scientist and reading about how to connect climate action with our music-making. For example, in classical music, you have progressions; you have point A and point B. It's all transitions. But how relevant is it to write music with a gradual development process in a time when we're constantly talking about the unprecedented? Even with *Jeder Baum spricht*, you hear very sudden shifts.



"*Jeder Baum spricht* kind of foreshadowed the pandemic," says IMAN HABIBI. "This is a piece about climate change, but the two are related. I spent a lot of the pandemic taking a course on climate change called 'Composing Earth' with other composers through the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music."

That partially comes from the surprise of climate events hitting you when you don't expect them.

I can tell you that this couple of years studying climate change has transformed me to the point where—until I have some clarity about what the future is going to look like, and whether it's going to be livable—I would say every piece I write is going to embody climate justice in some way. That much I know.

ADOLPHUS HAILSTORK

Hailstork's Symphony No. 4 ("Survive") will be premiered by the Louisville Orchestra in February. A *Knee on the Neck*, a cantata composed in response to the 2020 police murder of George Floyd, premieres this March with the National Philharmonic, National Philharmonic Chorale, members of the Washington Chorus, and vocal soloists.



Adolphus Hailstork says he didn't know about the 1921 Tulsa Massacre until the Harlem Chamber Players asked him to write a piece commemorating the 100th anniversary of the event. Hailstork's *Tulsa June 1921 (Pity These Ashes, Pity This Dust)* premiered virtually in June 2021.

This has been my busiest year by far. I'm working on about 13 pieces right now. It's like, "Oh, he's retired, let's sock it to him!" [Hailstork taught at Old Dominion University in Virginia from 2000 until the end of 2020.] I am appreciative to the pandemic for a lot of it; I have so much more time to write. I was able to finish my Fourth Symphony. It's a nice problem to have.

I first met Herb [Dr. Herbert Martin, Hailstork's frequent librettist] through the Dayton Opera Company in the early '90s. They wanted to have a celebration of Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Herb is a scholar of his work. He also did the texts for [my scores] *Crispus Attucks*, *Nobody Know*, *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Common Ground*, *Tulsa 1921 (Pity These Ashes, Pity This Dust)*, and now *A Knee on the Neck*.

[The week George Floyd was murdered], there was no talking. Within a week, there landed on my computer screen a complete text of something Herb called a requiem. It was obvious in his text that he was angry, and his anger tied in directly with mine. I could not

believe my eyes [watching the George Floyd video]. How many of us have actually witnessed a murder in slow motion before?

I threw myself into it immediately. You know, composers sometimes write out of joy, and sometimes they write out of anger. We were working on jet fuel in terms of anger. But something had to be said. I was the same age as Emmett Till, and I lived through the Civil Rights era. The Tulsa piece was the same way: I didn't know about the Tulsa massacre all my life until the Harlem Chamber Players asked me to write a piece about it.

For the past 10 years or more, I've been more interested in expressing social concerns of mine. I wrote a piece for piano solo called *Wounded Children* as a tribute to those children held in cages—cages!—in the southwestern part of this nation. Then, the shooting of Black men by police over the past 10 years or more.... Some people think artists can or should be indifferent to this; to me, it's an opportunity to speak out through their art.



The U.K.-based Chineke! Orchestra in a December 2020 streamed performance of Adolphus Hailstork's work *Epitaph for a Man Who Dreamed* at London's Royal Festival Hall, led by Kalena Bovell. The work, about Martin Luther King Jr., was first performed in 1980 by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.



"I threw myself into it immediately," says ADOLPHUS HAILSTORK about *A Knee on the Neck*, his new cantata composed after George Floyd was killed. "Something had to be said." The National Philharmonic will perform the cantata's world premiere in March 2022.

MISSY MAZZOLI

Mazzoli's new violin concerto will be premiered by Jennifer Koh and the National Symphony Orchestra this February, with performances by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in March. The Norwegian National Opera will premiere her opera *The Listeners* in September 2022. During the pandemic she also wrote *Millennium Canticles* for Third Coast Percussion and *Year of Our Burning* for Denmark's Mogens Dahl Chamber Choir.



Caroline Tompkins

"I didn't start out envisioning the works I wrote during the pandemic as a triptych," says MISSY MAZZOLI. "I'm not done with the third piece yet [a violin concerto for Jennifer Koh], but I composed that while staying at Ingmar Bergman's house on Fårö Island, where people used to hide out to avoid the plague."

The next couple months are like four seasons on top of each other for me, because so much stuff that was postponed is now happening. You're catching me two days after a big premiere [the European premiere of her 2016 opera *Breaking the Waves*], when the feedback loop finally closed—after such a long time, I was able to receive the energy from an audience. For someone who makes work to feel less alone and help provide a common language for difficult things, performing in front of people is essential. I'm still waiting for that to happen for everything I wrote last year—like my fourth opera, *The Listeners*, which I finished over lockdown.

I didn't start out envisioning the works I wrote during the pandemic as a triptych. But by the time I finished the second piece—*Millennium Canticles*, for Third Coast Percussion—I was like, "Oh, there is a theme." It started with a piece called *Year of Our Burning* that I wrote for the Mogens Dahl Chamber Choir in Copenhagen, which is obliquely about human relationships during the pandemic. It's the first time I've played around with writing basic choreography into the score; in the first movement ["Darkness"], one by one, [the singers]

all turn around so they're singing with their back to the audience; in the second one, the "Blame" movement, the choir splits in half to face each other; and in "Alone," everyone is spread all over the stage. Then, for *Millennium Canticles*, I imagined a band of survivors trying to recreate human rituals after the rest of the world has either totally changed or been destroyed.

I'm not done with the third piece yet [an unnamed violin concerto for Jennifer Koh], but I composed that while staying at Ingmar Bergman's house on Fårö Island, where people used to hide out to avoid the plague. Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* was really important to me; it takes place during the plague, and it's very much about how people react to illness. So, that concerto is also about ritual, but specifically ritual in response to mysterious illness. The second movement is called "St. Vitus," which is a reference to St. Vitus's Dance, the neurological condition; the fourth is called "Bone to Bone, Blood to Blood," which was a medieval spell people would say if they broke a bone on the road. All three pieces are in five movements, actually, with the last being the reverse of the first—like the stages of grief.



Civic Orchestra of Chicago musicians perform Missy Mazzoli's *Still Life With Avalanche* in February 2021 on a program of contemporary works that reflect on the pandemic. Other composers on the program included Jeff Scott, Nicole Mitchell, Justina Repečkaitė, and Lisa Atkinson.



Todd Rosenberg

Former Chicago Symphony Orchestra Composer in Residence Missy Mazzoli acknowledges the audience following the CSO's first performances of her work *These Worlds In Us*, led by Music Director Riccardo Muti in fall 2021.

DAVÓNE TINES

Tines's collaborative work *Vigil* has been performed by the Louisville Orchestra, at Lincoln Center in New York, and elsewhere; Tines's *Concerto No. 1: Sermon* includes the orchestrated version of *Vigil* and was premiered by the Philadelphia Orchestra in May 2021. While Tines is best known as a bass-baritone, in recent years he has co-created a number of musical works together with composers and other artistic collaborators.



Chris Kendig

Bass-baritone Davóne Tines and Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin perform *Concerto No. 1: Sermon* with the Philadelphia Orchestra, November 2021. *Sermon* includes the orchestrated version of Tines's collaboratively composed work *Vigil*.

JIN GRAYSON III / TEE WOODSON / DARRIE HORTON / MICHELLE CUSSEAU / JACK JACQUEZ / JASON HARRIS / DAVID LATHAM / MARIA GODINEZ / VICTOR WHITE III / TIM SMITH / IAN SHERROD / MARIO A. JORDAN / DARNELL SKARI ROBERTS / DAVID ANDRE SCOTT / JANISHA FONVILLE / J. GILBERT / DANIEL ROW / AURA ROSSER / DONTÉ SOW / OMARI ALSTON / MICHAEL WILLIS JR. / RICKY DEANGEL / OSHAD MCINTOSH / ADAM ARDETT MADISON / HASHIM IMA TAYLOR / TRAVIS FAISON / LEONARDO MARQUETTE LITTELL / EL JOHNSON / KALDRICK DONALD / EUGENE N. TURNER / ODNEY WALKER / REBECCA LYNN OLIVER / KAVONDA EAMOND / AMOND ARQUI ELMORE / CALVIN PETERS / BRANDON JOHNSON / ZALE THOMPSON / DAVID ELLIS / ZIKARIOUS JAQUAN FLEMING / A JEFFERSON / AHMAUD ARBERY / EMERSON CLAYTON J. ANDERSON / GREGORY TOWNS / ANESSON JOSEPH / DUSTIN RANDON TATE-BROWN / MARKELL ATKINS / ALPHONSE EIGHT SR. / XAVIER MCDONALD / NAIM OWENS / HENRY J. GREGORY MARCUS GRAY / ICARUS RANDOLPH / MONIQUE MINA / CEDRICK LAMONT BISHOP / JOE HUFF / CHRISTOPHER / BRIANT PAULA / JUAN MAY / CHARLES LEON JOHNSON / RICKS / CHRISTOPHER BERNARD DOSS / LONNIE DAVIS JR. / DARRELL "HUBBARD" GATEWOOD / DARIUS COLE-GAR

A screenshot from Davóne Tines's September 2020 virtual Lincoln Center premiere of *Vigil* for voice and piano, composed in memory of Breonna Taylor. The following month, the Louisville Orchestra performed the live-streamed orchestral world premiere.

I was in the Netherlands five or six years ago for Kaija Saariaho's *Only the Sound Remains*, directed by Peter Sellars. Whereas most operas rehearse for three to six weeks, he uniquely requires a two-month rehearsal period, which gives you time to form relationships with people in different places. I was introduced to Igee [Dieudonné] by a colleague, and we hit it off. His whole world is this mix between rock, James Blake, and French Impressionism. Those were aesthetics I was interested in, too—I've always identified a certain soulfulness in French impressionism that I connect to R&B and gospel.

The next long trip I had to Amsterdam, [Igee and I] improvised together. It was kind of a game: We would pick an aesthetic and a composer to imitate, then set time limits. So, in a minute and a half you'd have to improvise something that fit "Benjamin Britten" and "fast," then go directly into "Charles Ives" and "slow" without stopping. What is *Vigil* came from the prompt "Fauré" and "gospel," and it's very literally what Igee played and I sang the first time—the text just came. We were like, "Wow, that was something."

I went through last summer trying to figure out how to do some work in the world. At first, *Vigil* was more internal-facing—something that was cathartic and useful for a Black community. I showed it to my family, and they really appreciated it. But then I started thinking about what to share with Lincoln Center and the broader world, and how to make sure it's *doing* something, not just creating a cathartic space. Instead of showing imagery of people mourning, we decided to provide steps at the end—essentially leading audiences through meditation, then action.

The program I did with the Louisville Orchestra [in October 2020] was the first time I felt welcome to be in a more curatorial position. Orchestrating *Vigil* was a great opportunity to commission one of my closest friends and collaborators, Matt Aucoin, and I sang that version alongside Barber's *Dover Beach* and the Black national anthem, as opposed to the American national anthem. Given the death of Breonna Taylor in Louisville and everything connected to that, I thought it would be a really strong statement. **S**



"At first, *Vigil* was more internal-facing—something that was cathartic and useful for a Black community," says DAVÓNE TINES. "Then I started thinking about what to share with Lincoln Center and the broader world, and how to make sure it's doing something."

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