

## Interview with Composer Leanna Primiani

**2018 Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation Orchestral Commission recipient Leanna Primiani discusses her work with host Anthony Joseph Lanman**

ANTHONY JOSEPH LANMAN: I'm your host, Anthony Joseph Lanman, from the One Track podcast. This conversation with Leanna Primiani is part of the League of American Orchestras Women Composers, Readings, and Commissions Program, made possible by the generous support of the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation.

LEANNA PRIMIANI: I didn't actually know about it until, I think, maybe about four or five years after I participated in the Earshot, and I was like, oh my God, I didn't know this. So I applied, and I think they had 300 or 400 applications, and they narrowed it down to I think about ten, and then—I'm guessing at numbers—maybe 12, something like that. It was up to the participating orchestras to decide who was interested in what composer. And then, with my fabulous luck, ROCO chose me. So I was totally thrilled.

ANTHONY: That's awesome. What an opportunity. That's amazing. ROCO is the chamber orchestra in Houston, right?

LEANNA: Yes.

ANTHONY: Okay, that's what I thought.

LEANNA: Alicia Lawyer, who's the artistic director, she's a rockstar. Oh my God. Wow. They commission a lot of new work, they're really great about American composers. She's really made—and the ensemble, really the orchestra, depending on what they do, they've really done a lot for American music, for sure.

ANTHONY: I'm sure the performance will be amazing. You probably feel like—I don't know if you feel like this or not—but you probably feel like maybe you can write whatever you want, and not worry about it.

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[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

LEANNA: That's so funny. I actually, before I was a composer—I came to it late, I was in my 20s—I was a conductor. I was trained as a conductor, and I thought that was going to be my dream, and I started to pivot to composition. I was doing both, and I started to pivot after I got married because I was on the road a lot, and that was right before people cared about female composers, or conductors, rather. It was a hard slough for me. It was just so much more satisfying to compose. I conducted a lot of ballet and opera, and so I had very little time to put orchestras together. I had very little rehearsal time. Maybe I got one rehearsal, and then a dress, and then the performance, right, for like, Stravinsky. That's the gig. Opera's kind of the same thing. Both of those, both ballet and opera, it's so, you know, you really have to be on top of it, because how does the singer feel today? Did they take a big enough breath? Are they holding things a little longer because they feel great, or vice versa? Same with the dancer. Do they look like they're going to take one more spin? How are they feeling? Do they feel like they want things faster?

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That kind of thing. It's not like you can just beat three and ignore what's happening on stage. For me, it was never like that, because you're there as support. When I think about composing, I definitely write what I want to, but I also know how things are going to be put together. Orchestras of any size don't have a lot of time or spend a lot of time on new musics. I know the orchestra and the instruments well enough to know what's going to sound good in what register. I'm not guessing as to how things are going to sound. When it gets in front of an orchestra, I'm pretty sure things are going to be playable, put together. Even though it might sound complicated, I write it in a way that can be easily put together by a conductor. Especially when I write for electronics; I just make sure that that is rock solid, easy, nobody has to guess. A lot of orchestras, they just don't use it or they expect somebody to come with all this gear and then something goes wrong and it doesn't work right. Everyone's nervous about it, and I totally get that. Some spaces are built for it to sound great, and other spaces aren't, and they have to rent a lot of equipment. You have to be careful about how you write it and what kind of media you give to them, and make sure

that, no matter what hall or in what space they are, that everything works right, and it's easy to put together and it's never a problem.

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[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

ANTHONY: Your career trajectory is interesting in a lot of different ways, but a lot of composers who start out as composers really have to fight for that experience, that orchestral experience of working with orchestras. You had that already. That's really unusual for a composer, especially now.

LEANNA: Exactly. I think all my conductor friends, everyone thought I was crazy. Why don't you want to conduct? I was like, well, I do, I just don't want to do as much of it. I don't know, for me it was like, do we really need another Beethoven symphony? There's got to be more to this than another traviata. There has to be something else.

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I love new music, I love working on seeing what's out there, different things. For me, when I started writing, I was still conducting. I was composing something, then I would go to study a score and it would be like somebody took the curtain and pulled it back, and I'd be like, oh my God, I get it. That's why I can get the thing here, and the da da da, and this comes in here, and you put it here in the flutes instead of the oboe. Everything was clear, like somebody washed the window. It was so eye-opening. It really helped my creative process, and just how I conceived of things. I know that I'm unusual, especially in the Hollywood space. I orchestrate as I write. I think a lot of people maybe sit at the piano and compose something at the piano, and then, like in orchestration class, they go back and they assign. My mind doesn't work that way, just because I think of how I came up and my training. I sit at the piano and I certainly sketch, and I write things out.

ANTHONY: You mentioned your time in Hollywood. You're a real multifaceted 21st-century composer.

LEANNA: I am? Oh my God, thank you.

ANTHONY: When I was back in school as an undergrad, even in the '90s, I think there was still this stigma in concert music where you didn't sort of branch out. You didn't also write film music. And you certainly didn't go into popular music genres, too.

LEANNA: No. That's very true.

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ANTHONY: How did you break that mold? How do you juggle those things?

LEANNA: Well, for me—I don't know how other people do it. I feel like a lot of composers have classically trained, I think that's what we're talking about, composers that have said, "I'm going to write film music," and they've all but abandoned or maybe just put all of their eggs into a basket, maybe. I'm generalizing, I don't know, but that's just kind of what I've seen, and they don't write a lot of concert music. But for me, my path was, I enjoyed writing concert music and so I was writing it kind of sounding like one person, and then I was writing film music. I wouldn't call it the highest brow music I was writing in the beginning. Certainly that's not what I had the opportunity to do, as most composers starting out. Then I started writing. I was always into electronics, I was able to study that at USC, and I went to the [UNINTEL], the [UNINTEL] studio in Paris. I've done a lot of not EDM but musique concrete, that kind of thing. I was three different people feeling a little bit schizophrenic. I thought, you know, I know that I have—people talk about you need a voice—I know that I have a voice, so how can you combine these three things, these three facets of what you create, into one person and one voice? So with that, you have to ask yourself, okay, so what kind of music does this, what kind of projects does this kind of music that I feel that I love creating, what does that fall into?

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I don't write romantic comedies. There are certain things that I don't write a lot of. But my music falls into a certain genre, and I'm okay with that. When it comes to concert music, my music is not thorny. I'm not, I'm certainly not Howard Hanson, but certainly I'm not [UNINTEL], either.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

LEANNA: You just have to find my niche and then how electronics fits into that, because electronics don't fit into everything. And the same with the electronic piece of that—there's always some orchestral element in that that's been processed in some way. All these things, as I've gone through the past five years, have really come together and solidified, for better or for worse, a voice. And that's kind of how I came to it.

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But I think part of the problem is, when you talk to composers and people in film music, and they go to film school to learn how to write film music, you're really taught you're not a good composer if you can't do everything, so you have to be able to write comedy and write drama and write action, and those big drums, and then turn around and do some slapstick thing, and you write cartoon music, you name it. The genre is vast. You have to be able to write country and rap and rock n' roll and surf music and string quartet. I do not do that. I have no interest because there are people who do it a lot better than me, God bless them. I do my thing and I stay in my lane. So I find that that has been very helpful and very freeing.

ANTHONY: We've already talked about how your experience as a conductor has influenced your orchestration and all that stuff. But you do so much with electronics, and you do this other project called ANASIA.

LEANNA: ANASIA. It's Greek for "from the ashes." Like a phoenix.

ANTHONY: Nice. I was wondering how your experience with electronics has influenced how you orchestrate for orchestra. Or has it?

LEANNA: That's an interesting question. I've always been interested in electronics just because of the sound. It's really like a different instrument, a big instrument. You have to treat it as such. If you're going to, it's like anything else, if you're going to put it with any kind of ensemble, you have to think about register, you have to think about balance, and all those different kinds of things, at least I do.

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I know for me, when I was conducting, just changed the sound of what they're doing, just to create a larger palette—composers up until mid-20th century never even thought about changing that sound to create something different. I've always been attracted to that, and that's the way I orchestrate. I always treat it like another instrument. When I'm composing only for electronics it's the same thing. Creating a sound with what you've got.

ANTHONY: One of the first things in your bio, you describe yourself as kind of a musical storyteller, creating narratives. When you're writing your own concert music piece, or your own electronic piece, obviously you're creating your own narrative. That's kind of flipped on its head when you're doing a film, because you have the narrative already laid out for you. Are those two things really different? How do you handle those?

LEANNA: I don't think so. At least it hasn't been for me. Look, if you're lucky enough to write for a picture and you're lucky enough to get 30 pieces and you actually have a small chamber orchestra, maybe something larger, like 50 or 60, how you come up with your themes and motives and how they're developed—granted, they are somewhat, they are dictated by what's happening on screen, but you also have to have that training to be able to recognize what's happening and how the music can support the narrative.

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Just like even if you write a symphony. You have to be able to write the motivic material and the harmonic material to begin to develop it, so that it can be sustained for the 20 or 30 minutes that you've got it going. It's pretty much, in my opinion—again, maybe that's my training—but I treat it in the exact same way, and if I come up with an idea away from the

picture and just reading the script, can be very similar to just sitting down and finding motivic material that I want to develop for an orchestral work. For me, it's the same process.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

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ANTHONY: Getting back to your concert music career, what does winning this Toulmin commission, how does it feel and what do you think it means to you and your career?

LEANNA: Well, look, I can only guess. All I know is that—I don't know about other composers or you, but it's a very lonely business. When people play your music, nine times out of ten you don't hear about it, really. They'll buy the sheet music or whatever, or they'll say, "I'm going to program that piece!" And then you never heard about it, you don't hear a recording, you don't hear anything.

ANTHONY: Sure.

LEANNA: You're hopeful that maybe someone likes it, because they keep buying it, so maybe they like it. Maybe they'll put it up on YouTube, if you find it, if you're lucky. It's very lonely. When I did win this, I was shocked that somebody listened to the music, that it made it that far, and somebody wanted to work with me, have me write something specifically for them. We came up—with Alicia, who is amazing—we came up with an incredible story that we want to tell, because we both felt like it's just not enough to write a piece anymore, of just like, concert music, right? There has to be at least, I feel that way, I believe that she does, at least in this instance, it just has to be more now. I think it's what's happening in the world around us. It's just not 19—excuse me, it's just not 2015 anymore, right?

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ANTHONY: Absolutely, we have to do more.

LEANNA: Things are different, so the fact that—I believe that I won the Toulmin with a piece called “1001,” and it’s a piece based on Scheherazade, and the idea was to take motivic ideas from the Rivke Korsakoff original and to see it through a different lens. You know when you look at that story and it’s all about Scheherazade, she has to tell these stories to stay alive for 1001 nights, and then lo and behold, the Sultan falls in love with her and they live happily ever after. When was that, 1880? Okay. We’ve accepted that narrative now for over 100 years. If you look at it from today’s vantage point, and you say, well, let’s look at Scheherazade. She was an abused woman. She was telling stories to save her life. We know that that happens today. We’ve seen the pictures from all over the world, name the country, we’ve seen it. It happens. Women suffer in silence all the time. For her it was like, marrying this Sultan, which is fine, but she was actually marrying her abuser, so what’s the rest of her life going to be like? You think it’s automatically going to change?

ANTHONY: No.

LEANNA: Right? So I wanted to tell that story. In that same vein, I think Alicia really understood what I was trying to do and where my concert voice is lending itself, is to reinterpret these masterworks that will always be performed—and they should because, you know, they’re great pieces. But what does it mean now?

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We want to take a different tack and see these works for—not to not play them, but just to make audiences see something through a different light that will just make them notice something different. I think that’s the main takeaway that we want.

ANTHONY: Absolutely. It’s so necessary. It seems so obvious to say to an audience, or anybody, hey, you know, maybe we shouldn’t romanticize abuse.

LEANNA: Right. Exactly. Exactly. Right. It’s not 1956. We don’t have to do that anymore! There just has to be something different, now that all of these things are coming to light and we can talk about them, and bring them out in the open. Not that it’s necessarily going to solve anything in a day, but at least people will take a second look. At least that starts the conversation, which is the point.



ANTHONY: Absolutely. Wow, I hope I get to hear this piece.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

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LEANNA: Well, that piece, actually, is on YouTube, and it's on my website, so you can listen. But that's the piece that won, that I believe that Alicia and ROCO really identified with.

ANTHONY: Oh okay, I gotcha.

LEANNA: And so what we've come up with for our piece is going to be the same kind of thing based on, it's going to be performed on the same concert of pictures at an exhibition, and so my piece is going to be a complement to that. The one thing that we have, that we're going to do, there's an organization in Houston that deals with abused children, specifically trafficking children. You would be shocked as to how much trafficking goes on in the United States of America, especially with kids from the foster space.

ANTHONY: Oh, really?

LEANNA: It is breathtakingly bad, and it's overwhelming to just even know about it. I can't even go into details of some things, but when you hear these stories it's like, how's anybody supposed to even come back from that? When their dad sells them when they're ten years old for beer money. It's bad. It's bad. And it happens a lot. We wanted to bring attention to that, because the two places where the most trafficking happens is in LA and Houston, which is quite interesting. I think it's just the closeness to the border, to a border, among a lot of other things. Big cities, et cetera.

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There's an organization that has taken portraiture of survivors and tells their story, and people who also support children who have been trafficked. We're going to take the idea of pictures at an exhibition and rework it to tell the stories and then tell their stories of how they've been able to overcome these tragedies in their lives. There's an app that you can access during the concert that has information about the piece, so we're going to work all of these interactive elements into the work, just so people can learn more about it and realize that it's a thing that's happening, and we can all do something to help stop it.

ANTHONY: That's going to be really powerful and, again, really important. Wow. That's one of those things where I'm like, you feel obligated to know, but at the same time you're like, I kind of don't want to know.

LEANNA: Of course. Who wants to know that? I'm just gonna be the first one to say it. I don't. Right? And I think that—you know, we certainly don't want to make people uncomfortable in the concert. And yet, you can see that people, and children, if given just a little bit of help and hope to overcome it, and it doesn't necessarily take a lot, but obviously people can, just to be able to understand what's happening, I think, for me, that was the biggest step, because until I joined this charity, I didn't know.

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The problem is, it's not happening in Beverly Hills. It's not happening on Park Avenue. It's not happening on the Upper East Side. It's not happening in Winnetka. It happens in certain areas, and there's a reason for that. Then the whole thing of equity and fairness comes in. Well, that's one of the reasons.

ANTHONY: If people out there listening to this would want to know more about you, where could they go to do that?

LEANNA: I think the best place to go is my website, and that's [leannaprimiani.com](http://leannaprimiani.com). There you can find my electronic music, my concert music, and excerpts of my film music, and then also on my YouTube channel, which you can access there, and my socials from my website. That's the best place to go. Send me an email. Let me know what you think. I love

to hear from people. I'm sitting in my hole all alone in COVID, wanting to talk to another human being.

ANTHONY: Awesome. Well, Leanna, thank you for doing this. It was a real pleasure to talk to you, and really, best of luck with your piece.

LEANNA: Thank you. I love what you do and I'm thrilled for the opportunity. Any time we can do this again, I would love it. Thank you so much.

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](http://americanorchestras.org).