

Gabriela Lena Frank

June 6, 2024

[APPLAUSE]

GABRIELA LENA FRANK: You look marvelous to me. Thank you so much for being here for this week of what I like to think of as dreaming and scheming and meeting new friends and reconnecting with old friends. I don't have an orchestra. And I'm going to be speaking to you in my capacity as a nomadic artistic spirit, a composer, that has the blessing to work with many orchestras. I actually just came from the World Opera Forum. and I was taking a look at the sessions that were being set up here over this coming week, and I can tell you that our colleagues over in the opera medium are all asking the same questions.

They have sessions set up about diversity. They're talking about sexual violence and hostility in the workforce. They're talking about utilizing an under resourced and underutilized constituency, that of our living and breathing storytellers, our composers. And I am in agreement. And we are all talking about these issues during these tumultuous times. So I hope that the few thoughts that I can offer to you over the next 20 minutes can be of use to you beyond this week, when you go back to your stomping ground, and you're putting into action the inspirations you may glean over the next few days.

To begin with, I just want to tell you that 34 years ago, just a few miles away, I started my formal training as a music composition major at Rice University at the Shepherd School of Music. My freshman class, we were the first to use the brand-new building. Stude and Duncan recital halls were not even open. And I heard my first live orchestra piece a few weeks into the first semester. Pow!

[0:02:07.8]

I can tell you still what was on that program. A concerto competition winner from the previous year, her name was Katrina Buvar. Katrina, I don't know if you're out there, but you changed my life with your performance of the Brahms Violin Concerto, followed by, after intermission, the Lutoslawski Concerto for Orchestra, ostensibly a contemporary work. And what I heard in the Brahms and Lutoslawski, I heard the passing of the torch from one era of composer to another. It was as if a rock was being skipped across the pond. It was bouncing from Brahms to Lutoslawski to me.

520 8th Avenue, Suite 2005, New York, NY 10018

americanorchestras.org

And I wasn't the only one that fell hard for the orchestra medium. I was 17 years old. What did I know? In the early '90s, we were getting an influx of Eastern Europeans who had grown up behind the wall, and within the Iron Curtain bloc of countries. And so as they started coming out to other parts of the world, many of them landed in the US. They were highly trained, but they felt like they would have the freedom to express themselves more deeply. And there was one such schoolmate.

I remember he had been through such tremendous trauma. He was a little bit older than all of us. So he had this great air of mystery to him. He was missing a limb. He was of a deathly ill pallor, he was very sick. But he came to America to write orchestral music. And that left such an impression on me. He would talk about how there was a music stand by his night table. And the last thing he would see every night, and the first thing he would see every morning was a one sheet of manuscript paper, and across the top he had written "Symphony Number One." The composer that he could be was what it could have said.

So I want to take a moment now for those of us that caught the romance, caught the responsibility handed to us from Brahms to Lutoslawski to us. What the training was like. As I — as we talk about diversifying our repertoire, you're really going to be talking a lot about availing yourself of the talents of our living storytellers. I think it's important for our professional musical world to understand the constituency coming out of the music school. And this is because still in this moment, most of the composers waiting for orchestra are going to be coming out of music schools.

[0:04:51.1]

During this time, as I was discovering what my training entailed, I had real piano chops back then. And I played a lot of the great chamber works you will find with piano and strings. The Faure and Brahms and Mozart, Schubert and Schumann, all the quartets and quintets. And so I was hanging out with a lot of string players. And I started comparing the curricular investment that my school and typical of all schools were making in composers. And one of the things that I noticed was that the string player got a lot more than the composers.

So for instance, we all get our private lesson, that's what centered our life. We count down the hours with — sometimes with anticipation, sometimes with dread. That's uncommon. But imagine that the violinist goes into their lesson. And my roommate, my — put down her violin, and her teacher would put down his violin on the table. And for the next hour, they talk about the fingerings that they're going to have, you know? And they talk about shifting to the third position for a darker color on the A string, and they're going to do a nice portamento glissando, and they're going to catch it up on an up-bow so they can be in position for the next phase coming up. And they just talk. And about 58

520 8th Avenue, Suite 2005, New York, NY 10018

americanorchestras.org

minutes into the hour, the teacher says, “That sounds good. Just do it just like that and come back next week, and we’ll talk some more.”

[0:06:18.3]

That’s the composition lesson. We don’t hear anything come to life, my friends. So that’s a problem. Beyond that, the violin roommate that I’m thinking of, she would get orchestra three times a week. How envious I was. I wanted it to sit in orchestra. I want — composers want orchestra three times a week. But imagine if we had just one time a week, five minutes. But I had to wait eight to 10 bars of orchestra music and I heard it come to life. Better than any orchestration class, any instrumentation class.

She had chamber music, several groups, with coaching. Composers don’t have that. She had chamber music masterclass every week. She had a studio class. String-wide department class, concerto competition, string literature classes. Oh my goodness, this is what’s required for her degree. Composers, we have our aerial view lesson, looking at the score. So beyond the technical lack of training, is the focus then on the stories that we’re actually going to tell.

If you look at fiction programs at Iowa, Cornell, or Stanford, some of those that are very well known, they spend a lot of time on creative prompts, spend a lot of time watching movies, they spent a lot of time rewriting the great writers and — and spend a lot of time on quieting your brain and excavating your memory bank, and how you’re going to express that with the craft of wordsmith. How are you going to do this? It’s not really something that we do in compositional training programs.

[0:08:02.7]

So I made up for this with all the playing that I did. I was just — I played for the percussion ensemble that way when I got to Michigan, I continued playing in a lot of chamber groups. While I was at Michigan, for the stories that I wanted to tell, because I had already fallen in love with the music of Bela Bartok, who I think was a Latino and a previous life. I mean, he is el hombre. And I took his essays with me when I began traveling in Latin America for the first time, really for the first time in my life, and I met my very large family. My mom has 14 brothers and sisters. I have over 200 cousins, stationed in every part of the Andes and the Amazonas and Lacosta, where my mother’s really from. And the stories started to come to life, if you can imagine.

Now, nobody goes to Peru for classical music. They go to Paris, they go to Austria, they go to wine-rich Italy, opera-rich Italy. So I had reconciled myself to the idea that I wasn’t going to have a very [520 8th Avenue, Suite 2005, New York, NY 10018](https://www.americanorchestras.org)

[americanorchestras.org](https://www.americanorchestras.org)

large career. And I was okay with that. And I resigned myself that I wasn't going to write orchestral music. It was just there was no bridge to it. And instead, the opposite happened. I got a lucky break. I was signed on to a large publisher because of the advocacy. Some of you might remember Francis Richard from ASCAP, who was a major champion.

[APPLAUSE] Who was a major champion of composers, but she was a scout. She had the talent and the gift and the determination and the bandwidth to put her ear to the ground and take the temperature of what composers were doing. And she conveyed this information to the then vice president of G. Schirmer, Susan Feder, who is with us. I think I see Susan. Who heard just chamber works. And from that, she said, "This girl can write orchestra music."

[0:10:04.4]

I'm glad she didn't say that in a moment. But I learned quickly on the job. And I would do sneaky little things, like I would get an orchestra commission. I'm sweating bullets. Actually, the first orchestral piece I ever wrote is being played tomorrow by ROCO. And I haven't heard it in many years. So I mean, that's very moving to me, too. But there's a couple moments. I'm going to — if you listen to a couple moments that break a pattern. And I don't — I'm really being vulnerable here, revealing my cards.

And what I did when I booked the pattern was, I was setting myself up, like when you play pool, and you set up your next shot. Because there's some ideas that I had, I didn't know if it would work. If I got another orchestra piece. If I could just hear it, the sound. So I break the pattern, I add a bassoon. It's just a moment, it goes by and half a bar. But an astute conductor would notice that I was doing this in all my pieces, and say, "Why are you doing this?" I said, "Well, I've got to figure things out." I have an orchestra in front of me. Just don't pay too much attention to it. Just do it, just do it.

And then it might actually be the cell and build the next piece. So as I was getting my career going in the early 2000s, and building my creative intellect, getting together the stories that I would tell, my own sense of how important this work was began to grow. I began to see myself as a cultural witness. As somebody that was capturing the stories of our time, just like Beethoven did in his time, just like Brahms did. I began to think about what legacy we are leaving to our descendants.

[0:11:46.9]

Then in 2016, I'm in my early to mid-forties by this point. If you throw your mind back, we are in another election. Like many of you, it was shocking how divided we were becoming. And on a cross-

country trip over to a gig in New Mexico, my husband and I took our car. In the middle of the trip, I stopped at a truck stop, and I was getting water and some chocolate. It was really hot, so my husband stayed with the dogs. And I went inside, and I was collecting stuff to buy, junk food. And from behind, somebody knocked me over. I was accosted. And I fell. And I looked up, and there was a scary man, a scary white man that was standing over me. And he was laughing, and he showed me his gun that he was carrying on his hip.

I have never — had never gone to something like this before. All the awards, all the accolades, they met nothing in that moment. And I realized that I wasn't doing enough. It was great that I had landed in a place where I had a robust and vital international career, telling stories, but that's when I founded my academy. And at my academy, I became even braver. And I was telling my composers, they need to go farther than me in all the mediums, including orchestra, the holy grail, and opera, one of the other holy grails. And that we should have reverence for our ancestors. But I think we should have more reverence for the future.

That we are ancestors too. How strange it will be for our descendants to look back on the stories that we preserve from this era and see less, as if we think our stories are not as important as Beethoven's stories. The orchestra world is a gleaming jewel of a repository of our culture, of our testimonies. There is a responsibility here to gift to our descendants our testimonies, and our stories.

[0:14:19.0]

Now, we made some progress, instigated by trauma, which is troubling to me. So Me Too brought conversation, awareness of women, great. Very — I'm very behind that. The murder of George Floyd brought together conversations about championing our Black artists. Great. Maybe it's time for us to level up in how we talk about programming and our responsibility, to gift our descendants with stories of our time. What would that look like? Could it be something that's not reactive, and be more proactive?

When something's instigated by trauma, it begs the question, what's horrific enough to capture our attention? In the early days of the pandemic, do you remember the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes? The videos, how horrific that was. I did not see a commensurate rise in programming of Asian and Asian American composers. At the border, however you feel about this issue, the vision of those Central American children in cages, that didn't kill some of you humanity, if that did not rise to the level of programming.

520 8th Avenue, Suite 2005, New York, NY 10018

americanorchestras.org

So reactive is imperfect. It can be a start. And that's why I would like us to level up. Now what would that look like? Well, I've just described to you the training of a composer. So maybe we could begin there. If we were to begin there, what could a professional orchestra, your orchestra, for those of you that are affiliated with an institution, what could you do? I would begin with looking around at the music school. Can you simply invite the composers in training at your local music school to just come to your rehearsals? Involve the compositional professor. Get them to scores.

[0:16:21.1]

Ideally, they would talk to the conductors. And rehearsals are more valuable for us than the final concert, honestly. And being able to talk with musicians, that would be one thing you could do. Maybe then you could level up from there, and you could start a little inexpensive — at first, inexpensive training program. Inexpensive training program. All you have to do is find the musicians. You have to know your musicians. You're going to have to matchmake. They might be recent hires; they might be the ones with the funky side gigs in new music.

But a training program in which orchestra musicians would receive solo pieces and collaborate with the composers. Maybe duels. Maybe a flutist is married to the bassoonist. I mean, what's more heartwarming than that, a family coming and premiering a work by a local composer? A young person, who looks like somebody you just heard at the top of this— this opening session. You could level up from there, make it a digital premiere. Level up from there. Maybe we will start each and every one of your concerts over a season, announcing with joy to your community your investment in deepening the bench of talent that we have.

And you have a four-minute world premiere for your flutist and bassoonist couple by a local composer. I would pay lots of money for a ticket for that. I think it's a good way to cultivate an audience. But these are, you know, some — some ideas. You could talk with ACO, American Composers Orchestra, about earshot. I mean, you really can go to the level, and to start opening your orchestra. To avail yourself of the talent and the stories of living voices.

[0:18:06.6]

I also would suggest you think about education. Now, the vast majority of us are not well educated in the music after 1950. This was me. How about the rest of you? Very little exposure. By playing, by listening, music history, music theory. So the training we received was inadequate to the task of actually understanding our stories. It's hard to admit, but it's not sacrilege, I promise you. Otherwise, we composers, lightning would have been striking us all our life. Start educating yourself and your

520 8th Avenue, Suite 2005, New York, NY 10018

americanorchestras.org

staff, try to involve your conductor, try to involve orchestra musicians. What could this look like? I don't know. It depends on the culture of your house.

Can you institute a bagel and cream cheese listening club once a month? Build — build culture. Talk to your composers, have them — you know, do a playlist, discussion groups. This is what I'm thinking. But there is a commensurate level of work that has to be done here. Lean on your publishers. If you have a relationship with people whose job it is to know what's going on, you have a relationship with composers, now you know me. But other composers can — can talk with you as well.

I would set a lofty goal. Before I die, my friends, I would love every orchestra in this country to program one living piece on every single concept on your season, or a piece by a recently deceased composer. And not just one movement, but the whole breadth of all of the movements. Count the minutes. Not just on special events or kiddie concerts.

[0:19:49.1]

This would be a wonderful goal. And then you have the resource, the rehearsal time. I don't know how many of you are into the Olympics, but I'm fascinated by swimming, and the drama that is between the gold medalist and the silver medalists. And they're racing, and there is point oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-one second of a difference between them. And they're both amazing, but nobody can tell the difference. Well, moving your orchestra with the 30 minutes of rehearsal time that you don't know how to plug in to play that Beethoven and symphony from the percentile 98 to the percentile 98.5, when those 30 minutes could actually be put into the new music piece. The difference is astronomical.

I would resource your rehearsal time differently. If you're introducing new music, play more than one work of the composer over the season. Two seasons. Start with something small. Find a little money to ask a composer to do blogs or a promo or, you know, to become a personality. Arrange a lunch. Sometimes when I work with an orchestra, and at the break all the musicians are avoiding me. I'm like, "Is it something I said, or I wrote? I mean, what's —?"

But arrange a lunch with a couple of other musicians. And you all know your house, you'll know which ones are going to be more amenable. Celebrate it. Don't hide it. When you have a composer in your midst and your promotional materials. There was one time — so in this very hall seven years ago, when I was composing for the Houston Symphony, they commissioned a very large work, a requiem for full huge orchestra, full symphony, choir, requiem size, two soloists, called the Conquest Requiem.

520 8th Avenue, Suite 2005, New York, NY 10018

americanorchestras.org

One of the best experiences of my life. Thank you, Houston. It just changed my life to be able to do that.

[0:21:52.7]

Now I was about to finally get started on opera. So it's this big, dramatic story behind it. And it's been performed, thankfully. And there was another major orchestra, and I love this orchestra, I love the conductor, but they're going to remain unnamed, although they might figure it out. And they programmed, when they did it with the Beethoven Pastoral Symphony, and the promotional materials, big blocky letters on flyers, on posters, everything, was Beethoven Pastoral Symphony, and the so and so symphonic chorus.

There's a problem with this. People were writing in, saying there's a choral part in the Beethoven Pastoral Symphony? Is this an arrangement? Is this a new score? No, it was because my name was scary. But they had to give proper billing. And so it was just very strange. But it doesn't have to be strange to have as much reverence, if not more, for the future than we have for the past. I think a lot about my schoolmate. He experienced a lot of trauma when he was growing up in the iron curtain, and he came here to write orchestra music. And he had that music stand by his night table. The last thing he would see at night and the first thing in the morning.

[0:23:43.1]

What would be on your music stand? The orchestra that we could be. We are ancestors too. Reverence for the past. More for the future. Awesomeness. We're supposed to dream big, that's the directive that has been given to us. We composers are here. We're your cultural witnesses. The stories we tell are your stories. Let's gift our descendants. The times are so tumultuous. The time is now to do this. Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

END OF TRANSCRIPT