

## Contemporary Youth Orchestra says happy 80th birthday to Joan Tower

by Mike Telin



On September 6 of 2018, [Joan Tower](#) celebrated her 80th birthday. On Saturday, March 9 at 7:00 pm, in Cuyahoga Community College's Metro Auditorium, the Contemporary Youth Orchestra, under the direction of Liza Grossman, will honor that occasion with a concert dedicated to the eminent composer's music. The program will include the Ohio premieres of *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman No. 6*, *Stroke*, and *In Memory* (For String Orchestra), as well as *Tambor*. Tickets are available [online](#).

Among her numerous accolades — Tower has just been named the recipient of the League of American Orchestra's 2019 Gold Baton Award — she was the first woman to win the [Grawemeyer Award for Music](#) in 1990. *The New Yorker* called her “one of the most successful woman composers of all time,” and she has served as a source of inspiration to Grossman dating back to CYO's fourth season in 1998. “I was researching women composers and Joan was one of the first to come up,” Grossman said during a telephone conversation.

The conductor said that she quickly became “fascinated” with Tower's music and history. “The way she was carving a path for women composers and inspiring them to write really was inspirational to me.” Still, it was not until August of 2000 that Grossman decided that the orchestra was ready to play one of Tower's works.

“I got ahold of her number and I called and left a message — and she called me back. I couldn't believe that I was talking to her. In March of 2001 we did an entire concert of her music, which included the Ohio premiere of *Tambor*, and she came in for it.” Grossman recalled that experience as being both exciting and terrifying. “She's direct,

demanding, and is very specific about what she wants. She has high expectations, and because of that, she made me a better conductor. We've maintained a relationship since then, and I can't wait to have her back."

Having a conversation with Joan Tower is like reconnecting to a friend you haven't seen in years — but in this case, she and I had never met. From the moment she answered the phone she was extremely friendly — we talked about our colds and the up-and-down temperatures. And she's a great storyteller with a wonderful sense of humor.

to Laurie Flax  
**Wings**  
for Solo B♭ Clarinet\*  
Joan Tower

♩ = 40-44  
ppp p ppp poco ppp ppp  
mp ppp poco cresc. mp sub. pp ff sub. ppp  
♩ = 80-88  
ppp molto legato  
Meno mosso ♩ = ca. 66  
ppp delicate and clear (grace notes should not be too fast)

She also has a practical approach to creating a career as a composer. I told her that I had just heard her *Wings* (1981) for solo clarinet performed on a student's senior recital. "That piece changed my life," she said. "At the premiere five or six clarinetists came up and asked how they could get ahold of it, and it took off like wildfire. I tell my students that if you can write one piece that has a life, you're in good shape. Flutists are good people to have in your camp because there are so many of them, and they commission more music than anybody else."

Tower said that she didn't enter Bennington College with aspirations of becoming a composer. "My freshman year they asked me to write a piece. I had never written anything before — I was involved in music as a pianist — but that's when I started at 18."

Although Tower said the piece wasn't very good, she continued to compose and found that her music was being well received. "It was speaking to people, and my pieces started getting played all over the place. That was incredibly encouraging because it meant they had a life."

Like *Wings*, Tower's first orchestral work *Sequoia*, written for the American Composers Orchestra, also dates from 1981. "They were one of the few orchestras

commissioning living composers at the time,” Tower said. “Francis Thorne, the guy who ran it, knew me and said that he thought I should write a piece for them, and I said no, I’m not ready. He insisted and said yes, you are ready. He pushed me, and I finally gave in.”



It was *Sequoia* that led to Tower’s three-year appointment as composer in residence with the St. Louis Symphony. As she recalled, Joseph Schwantner, St. Louis’ composer in residence at the time, gave a tape (“remember those?” she said, laughing) of the performance to the orchestra’s artistic director, Leonard Slatkin, who wrote to Tower telling her that he wanted to take the piece on tour and record it. He also invited her to become composer in residence.

“I wrote back and said that I was honored and flattered at the invitation, but I have to tell you that I only have that one piece. And, I don’t think I’m ready, I don’t think you should take this risk with me. He wrote back and said that he *would*

take the risk. Slatkin is a conductor who is willing to take risks. He knows composers, he knows who’s out there, and he has strong opinions about what he does and doesn’t like.”

Moving on to the CYO program, Tower said that Grossman has chosen some challenging pieces.

*Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman No. 6* is part of a series of fanfares which playfully riff on the name of Aaron Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man* and are dedicated to noteworthy women. No. 6 is dedicated to conductor Marin Alsop, who premiered the piece with the Baltimore Symphony.

*Stroke* is dedicated to Tower’s brother, who suffered from a debilitating stroke in 2008. I asked if it was difficult or therapeutic for her to write? “Both,” she said. “What made life a little easier is that the piece has two ideas: one is the heartbeat, which is

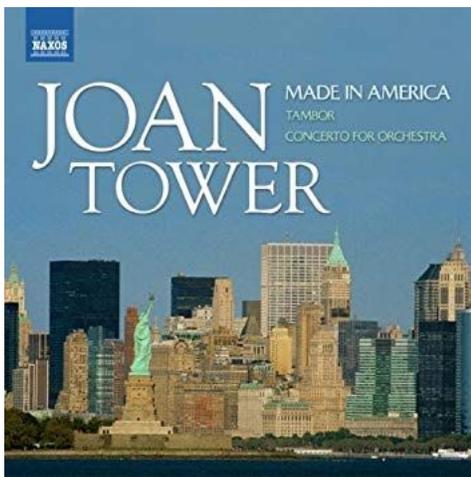
shown by regularity and repetition that take on different speeds — very slow or very fast. To break that up, there are five fluid, more peaceful solos in the horn, bassoon, violin, clarinet, and trumpet. I like the structure of the piece — I think it works pretty well, and I don't say that very often.”

*In Memory* (For String Orchestra) was first written as a string quartet and dedicated to the memory of a friend, but it turned into something larger after the 9/11 attacks. “The piece is about grief and loss, and it all became a little overwhelming,” Tower said.

*Tambor* is a single-movement, 15-minute work that features the percussion section. Like most of Tower's music, it's grounded in rhythm and full of meter changes.

Tower's affinity for rhythm has been with her from an early age. She said that she's always been a very physical person who played tournament tennis, was a good dancer, and also played percussion.

But when it came to composing, it took her time to “gain her footing” when it came to rhythm, not just within a measure but also within the structure of a piece. “Figuring out how much time to spend on something is one of the hardest things to get right. Then how to sculpt that rhythm in a cohesive way and how to create a narrative, which is something I learned from Beethoven. He had a terrific sense of time. Tennis players know how to time things — action and reaction. It's all the same idea in a way.”



One thing Tower has enjoyed about attending performances of her works is taking part in outreach activities. “When I wrote *Made in America*, which was played by 65 orchestras in 50 states, I went to 20 performances and conducted 8. I also went into the communities and met the most interesting people — senior citizens, a Bishop, a guy who was just out of prison — so many interesting people.” She admitted that kindergarteners can be a tough group to crack. “I love doing things like that. Now that I'm 80 the energy is still there, but I'm not sure I can handle that kind of travel anymore.”

Our conversation then turned to labels — is it demeaning to refer to someone as a “woman composer?” I told her that I've always shied away from that term. “I think it's a personal thing, but I am proud that I am a woman composer. I announce that,

and I don't back away from it at all because I am. I know women composers who don't want the label because they do feel that it's demeaning. I do not feel that way."

I pointed out that over the past couple of years everyone, including me, is rethinking how we talk about gender. "It's being talked about big-time," she said.



Tower, who has taught at Bard College since 1972, said that her students are now part of the generation that is "totally rethinking" how we talk about gender. "Do you know about *they*?" she asked, referring to the gender-neutral pronoun. I told her that I do. "That's what I mean, I'm learning so much from these kids about this whole new concept of gender identity, which is so interesting to me, and I think it's a great thing that's going on. Because if you

identify as a woman or a man, there's all kinds of baggage associated with that. It's complex, but it's so interesting."

Has Tower ever felt discriminated against because she is a woman? "I get asked that question a lot. But you see, I never thought of myself as having any problems because of being a woman. Actually I was naïve," she said with a laugh.

Tower didn't think about any of this until women's consciousness-raising began in the '60s. "I started reading books by feminist authors, and that's when I began to be a little more educated about the history of women."

Then, when the late musicologist Nancy Reich came to Bard, Tower said that her life changed. "She was a feminist pioneer who wrote the bio of Clara Schumann. Nancy — and the other people who wrote biographies about all the women who had never been noticed before — started changing the landscape going all the way back to the Middle Ages. She started educating me about the history of women in music. I was never interested in the boring history books that I had to read at Columbia. First of all there were no women in them! But learning about the history of women was so fascinating to me."

Tower quickly began to ask herself, where are the women composers? "I started to realize that I was in a rarefied place that I didn't know I was in until I started looking around," she said. "That's when I became an advocate. Nancy and I did three festivals

together — at that time there were a lot of ‘women in music’ festivals — which I went to eagerly because I wanted to learn. There was so much to learn.”

Turning to the subject of criticism, Tower said that the “most interesting” course she took at Columbia was the Philosophy of History. “It was basically about how to read books critically. It was amazing because I had always read books passively, and I thought wow, I can actually criticize this book.”

Tower incorporates music criticism into her classes. “I have students go to concerts of new music and review them. It expands their ears and makes them think more closely about what they are hearing because they have to articulate some kind of reaction on the page.”

We ended our hour-long conversation talking about tennis. Tower is still a fan, and wishes she had more time to follow the tournaments. Her favorite players: Argentina’s Juan Martín del Potro, and the United States’ Serena Williams.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 4, 2019.*

*Click here for a printable copy of this article*

[Return to the Front Page.](#)