

Cleveland Composers Guild: A conversation with Collegiate Competition Winner Gracelyn Jack

by Sicily Xiao



Gracelyn Jack, born in 2002, won the 2024 Cleveland Composers Guild Collegiate competition with her chamber work *Less Than Ten Days*, which will have its public premiere in a concert presented by the Cleveland Composers Guild on Sunday, January 21, at 3:00 p.m. at Fairmont Presbyterian Church.

The program will also include works by Guild members Ty Alan Emerson, Karen Griebing, Inna Onofrei, Matthew C. Saunders, Ryan Charles Ramer, and Chris Neiner.

I recently met up with Jack on Zoom to learn more about her and her work.

Sicily Xiao: How did you first become interested in composition?

Gracelyn Jack: I played the clarinet in the symphonic band all through middle and high school and am still in the symphonic band in college. I loved how band pieces fit together and how they worked. I thought that it would be cool to write some of my own stuff. As I got more into writing music, I began to infuse my own emotions and discovered that I love communicating my personal experiences through music.

SX: You are a clarinetist, but your award-winning piece is for violin and piano. What do you think is the difference between writing for wind instruments and string instruments?

GJ: This was the first piece I've written for violin and piano. Writing for violin was a cool experience — I am used to the band world and it was interesting to like see how different string writing is. I got to learn some interesting new techniques. It's a very different approach. The timbres are so different and with wind instruments you have to think about breath support. Strings can play for long periods of time but you have to think

about harmonics and string fingerings. It was challenging to think which combinations of notes work and which don't, especially for double stops. Strings can play two or three notes at once but generally, a wind player can only play one note at a time.

SX: When you're just starting to compose, do you work independently or with the performers?

GJ: I wrote the score first, and then it was read by a violinist and a pianist. They gave me feedback on what can be improved about the technique, specifically from a string and piano standpoint. That was useful.

SX: How do you feel when you hear the performers performing your music, especially for this concert with violinist Barton Samuel Rotberg and pianist Sungeun Kim?

GJ: I love their interpretation. The first time I heard them play it, it was both very similar and very different from how I was envisioning it. There are some points where I feel it is exactly how I pictured it sounding. There were some parts I didn't hear because they were so aleatoric that my software didn't play them accurately.

Also, there was one place where I made a typo — it was supposed to be pianissimo but he played it fortissimo because I put the sign too late. However, I enjoyed that a lot better. It was like something I left up for interpretation that improved the piece. I enjoy working with performers, they often have really good ideas.

SX: How do you describe Less Than Ten Days? How is it different from your previous works? How is it connected to the source of your inspiration for this piece, the fleeting nature of luna moths and the timelessness of this creature's existence?

GJ: My previous work is very neo-romantic. But this time I wanted to try something more raw and contemplative. This was my first foray into atonality. The piece utilizes a tone row which is very different from my previous work. Then there is a lot of playing with major sevenths and minor seconds. It gives a kind of an ethereal and at the same time a fleeting sound.

SX: Do you have any goals for your future compositions? Are you working on other pieces now?

GJ: I want to focus more on the contemporary. When I was writing this piece I didn't exactly know how it would turn out or if I even liked it at first. But I really enjoyed the process and writing more contemporary stuff. Currently I'm working on a band piece. I'm also working on writing my first choral piece. It is exciting but scary because it is also a

different medium than I've ever written in. This part of the palette is just seeing what works — I'm looking forward to doing more with that.

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