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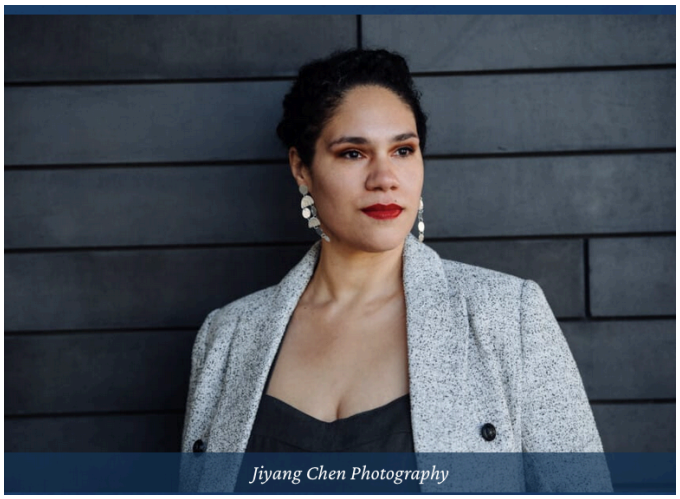
CIM Young Composers Program: a conversation with Jessie Montgomery

By Mike Telin



"I'm very excited to be part of the CIM summer community," Grammy Award-winning composer, violinist, and educator Jessie Montgomery said during a recent conversation.

From June 22 through 27, Montgomery will serve as the creative partner for CIM's Young Composers Program — a five-day intensive for emerging composers consisting of personalized lessons, masterclasses, and workshops with Montgomery, as well as with CIM faculty.

The 2025 program is open to composers ages 12-17 in the Young Innovators division, and ages 18-28 in the Next Gen division. Applications are being accepted now through March 24. Click here for more information.

A founding member of PUBLIQuartet and former member of the Catalyst Quartet, Montgomery has been the recipient of the Civitella Ranieri Fellowship, the Sphinx Medal of Excellence and Sphinx Virtuosi Composer-in-Residence, the Leonard Bernstein Award from the ASCAP Foundation, and was named *Musical America*'s 2023 Composer of the Year. She currently serves on the Composition and Music Technology faculty at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music.

I caught up with Jessie Montgomery on Zoom and began our conversation by asking her what she and the other faculty members have in store for the students.

Jessie Montgomery: The students will be composing a short chamber music piece that will be workshopped with the guest musicians.

I'll be working with them one-on-one, and in rehearsals they'll have a chance to work one-on-one with the musicians as well. So it will be a situation similar to that experienced by a professional composer.

There will also be career development seminars which will touch on printing and engraving issues as well as collaboration and commissioning topics. We will also talk about practical things — like how to read contracts.

Mike Telin: You have an interesting career as a performer/composer — a combination that appears to be in fashion again.

JM: It's interesting because I just had a big weekend in Detroit surrounded by a lot of colleagues, musicians, and supporters, but I still got the same question: Do you still play? In fact, I played a concert last week in Chicago with Sphinx Virtuosi, which was extremely fun, and posted it all over my social media.

I have colleagues, like Stuart Goodyear who performs his own works while playing Beethoven piano sonata cycles. And then there's Conrad Tao.

MT: Did you ever consider giving up the violin?

JM: I actually did try to quit the violin about eight years ago just to see if I was going to like only being a composer. Everyone kept asking, 'are you going to have time to play?' inferring that it was not possible to do both. Anyone who knows me knows that whenever somebody says that something is impossible I'm immediately thinking, challenge accepted!

But when I took the time off it felt terrible — I went into a state of disassociation. When I started playing again, I realized I'll have to figure out how to incorporate both playing and composing. And over the years I've found a nice, comfortable balance.

I'm still performing challenging music. I'm playing the Lou Harrison Violin Concerto with Third Coast Percussion and going on tour with them in April. So I gear myself up for these moments throughout the year.

MT: You mentioned being in Detroit and the Sphinx Organization: please say a few words of how you benefited from all that they were able to offer.

JM: They've provided a tremendous amount of support. I've met so many of my close friends and collaborators through Sphinx and that has been an immeasurable value to my life and my musical path.

And of course financial support. There have been moments along the way where their financial awards really helped get me through the hard career transitions. And their supporting projects helped me exercise my vision and actually become a composer — and support myself. They also commissioned some of my first major pieces that are now performed all over.

I spoke at their conference two months ago, and I remain a part of what we call 'La Familia.'

MT: It's wonderful to see people like yourself who are giving back.

JM: If there's anything I've learned it's that giving back is the key. I feel like things have gone tremendously well with my career and I'm excited to continue my work. But now I feel compelled to pass on what I know to younger generations.

I love teaching and I hold my teachers in high esteem, but I was not the best student in a classroom setting. In terms of one on one — the nurturing and guiding aspect was critical when I was a young person. I remember wanting to be in that role very much for those who are coming up.

MT: Ever since this interview was confirmed I've been dying to ask you: when you wrote Strum*, did you ever think it would become as popular as it has?*

JM: I had no idea. It was one of the first pieces I wrote that was like a real commission, so it was really my starter piece. I was at the beginning stages of trying to be a composer and I didn't have any specific aspirations. But when I wrote it I was about to go back to school for composition — I had taken a lot of time between my undergrad and my master's.

But I had an eager group of friends and colleagues who wanted to play the piece and they had a concert date so we just took it from there.

I was fortunate because what really did it was two things: There was the commission, which was essential to the process, and then my former quartet, the Catalyst Quartet, began to take it on tour. I mean we were playing at least 40, 50, 60 venues a year, so the piece got a lot of play. It's also become a summer camp piece.

MT: What advice do you give to young composers about choosing the right collaborators?

JM: It's a lot like when you decide to play chamber music with someone or anyone who's tried to start a band. You can usually tell after about an hour of being in the room with somebody if things are going to jive or not.

I do think finding collaborators requires opening up conversations with people, and as long as there's a shared enthusiasm you're going to come up with all kinds of ideas. It also helps if they're among your peer group. And as for the colleagues you're inspired by, just approach them and ask, 'would you be interested in this?'

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