

A former band kid who grew up in east Tennessee, just so happens to have a Pulitzer and a handful of Grammys. Her name? Jennifer Higdon. I'm Colleen Phelps, and this is Classically Speaking.

She may describe herself as a late starter, but composer Jennifer Higdon has always been forward-thinking. One of the first orchestral composers to self-publish her music, she boasts a varied catalog with choral music, band music for all ages and ability levels, an opera, and a variety of takes on the concerto. She has written concerti for the usual soloists – her violin concerto won the Pulitzer prize in 2010.

But she's not afraid to bring in an instrument or set of instruments that doesn't usually get to sit in the front of the orchestra. And to hear her describe the creation of her Low Brass Concerto, it's the musical equivalent of couture fashion.

Riccardo Muti said, you will come to Chicago and you will meet with the players. So that was what I did.

Those players were the famed Chicago Symphony Orchestra low brass. Part of a larger whole, the group is known for its rich powerful brilliance – known as "The Chicago Sound."

I have to admit, it was actually scary writing for this instrument because it was there were no other low brass concertos that I could look at to see how people do this.

So she met with the Chicago symphony section. And the Philadelphia Orchestra's section in her adopted hometown. And the Baltimore Symphony's section as well. And it turns out that the three sets of low brass players had a pretty similar wish list. And the first thing that all of these groups wanted her to know was that to them, this concerto was no joke.

They kept saying, we don't want to be the dancing hippo music. And I was like, I totally understand what you're saying.

You probably have a good handle on what a concerto is, but just in case, here's a refresher. It's a piece of music for instruments in two groups. It might be an orchestra with a soloist, like Higdon's violin concerto here. It might be a mini orchestra with a full size orchestra like in JS Bach's Brandenburg concerto here. There's a set of usual suspects to act as soloists, like violin and piano. But by taking the low brass out of the big orchestra, a concerto gives this small group the chance to show off what kind of virtuosity or beauty is really possible for those instruments.

They all said, don't write circus music for us. We want something serious. We want something of substance. And they were very clear about that. And I knew exactly what they referring to. So I made sure that everything I put in there was a melody that was interesting, listen to it. But it has real depth.

Low brass players are always playing in orchestra pieces. They're like loud blasting at the climax, you know, the providing rhythm. But the first thing they said was they wanted some quiet, soft, slow moving music to show off that aspect of their playing because no one ever gets to hear that. But they all do it really well.

These people are looking for serious music. I am now running a double percussion concerto and the two soloist. The first thing they said was, you know, we really want music of beauty and depth like a violin concerto has. They said, can you just try to make sure you're doing it? And I think that's actually a really, really important quality. And I think there are a lot of instruments that don't have a lot of can charity. So it's really worth thinking about that as a person who's putting the notes on the page, how to make that

happen for these players, because they're really good. They're very serious about what they do. They want people to be moved. And you want to also be able to show off the beauty of that instrument.

You can't have the low brass players playing all the time. I remember talking to a tuba player and she told me, look, you got to give us breaks. But I also never really thought about until I started writing this that the low brass actually were they are the ones in the orchestra that really give you the greatest sense of harmony because they have real power and they're at the bottom. It's the three trombones and a tuba. So they carried that responsibility. But because I knew they weren't gonna be able to play all the time it meant I had to figure out who in the orchestra could play low parts and be able to balance for low brass soloists. So what I did was the second clarinet is a second clarinet. It's actually a bass clarinet. The second bassoon isn't a second bassoon. It's actually a contra bassoon. So where the winds could go extra low. I use those instruments and I had to really think about the power because so much of the sound does come from the low brass. And I never realized that until I started writing for it.

Do you get frustrated when you find constraints, are you like, oh, OK, now it's a puzzle?

Yeah, that's it. It's the puzzle because a composer makes probably about nine hundred ninety nine thousand decisions when writing a piece. So when someone says it's got to be 18 minutes and you need to do this and that, you're like, oh, that's three less decisions I have to make. So it doesn't stifle me creatively in the least, that actually makes it a little bit easier. And you want something that fits. It's like creating a suit of clothes. You want to make sure it fits the individual.

Well, the concerto in a purely acoustical setting is really, really important that you keep the orchestra out of the way when you want the audience to really hear the soloists and you only pull out the stops with the orchestra when the solos are going full blast. Had they been like four kazoos, it would have been even harder because there's not as much sound. But when you have four brass players, there's a little bit of volume there. But because the players had actually asked for some quiet music, it meant that basically there were places where I had to remove all of the orchestra, all have one or two instruments playing to allow the soloist to play soft chorales.

I want to write something that I think would be interesting to listen to. And I think about the audience and that's important. But I also think about the players because they spend a lot of time with this music. I mean, to be a performer, to learn a new work takes an extraordinary amount of, you know, our skill, basically. But you're also spending a lot of time with that. It isn't repertoire that they've played, you know, a dozen times, two dozen times like, say, a Beethoven symphony. This is something brand new. So it means it's going to take work not only for the solos, but the orchestra itself. So I think about that. I'm like, well, what would be fun to play and what would be fun to listen to? What might move people? So to me, that's the more important thing. Is it interesting to listen to? And that's like the only ruler that I use to figure this out.

You've written a fair amount of vocal music. Did you find some parallels between writing for a four part choir and this quartet of brass? You mentioned moments where it's like a chorale.

Absolutely. I was thinking exactly like it was a choir because it opens with a chorale and it has a lot of lines that are like vocal lines. It's just that they are spaced a little lower because it's like a male choir as opposed to a the women's choir

His piece just premiered two years ago, and it's amazing how many orchestras have already done it. Like the low brass players have been very excited

Jennifer Higdon's music is the reason a lot of middle schoolers have had their pencil ready during band rehearsal. Find out why, after the break.

Not a lot of composers will go back and forth between multiple ability levels in their pieces. In fact some composers will write for young ensembles under a pseudonym because of the risk of no longer being taken seriously by professionals. But not Jennifer Higdon. She owned it. And, you may be surprised which one she said was easier to write for.

Is there a paradigm shift when you can pose for a young band and something like Rhythm Stand or. And then something like this low brass concerto where you have you it was premiered by the brass section.

I know. I know there is it's you know, it's the harder one is actually the junior high band. It sounds funny, but because they have such restrictions, they're just learning, you know. So I remember when I was talking to the junior high band, I wrote Rhythm Stand for, they're like, well, look, their range is only a fifth. Don't go over eight notes, don't make it too fast. And so you have to think about things in a different manner. And, you know, I asked the band director because I like talking to the people who are going to play it, what are the kids studying? And rhythm was a big thing. But one of her problems that I've witnessed this myself so many times where the band director says, does everyone have a pencil? I'm going to tell you something to write down and have the kids don't have a pencil. So when I made rhythm stand, I actually made pencils a part of the piece. So the kids all have pens and have that pencils there. They play, they hit their stands or music stands. So they're playing their instruments also. But having them tap out rhythms on the stand kind of solve two problems. It was the rhythm problem. And do you have a pencil problem?

It's hard writing for Junior High Band because the thing is, you want to challenge them, but you don't want to write something that's too hard. And, you know, those are both things you have to really pay attention to.

You refer to your early musical experiences through the lens of your parent's love of rock and roll. Where could someone find that in your music itself?

I think the big the piece that shows that the most is part of the percussion concerto because the cadenza coming out of the cadenza when the entire percussion section is rocking along with the slits. It is very much like a rock concert and much to my surprise when I've been sitting in the audience for that piece. It's incredible to watch the whole audience bobbing its head along like they're at a rock concert is totally amazing. I'm always worried, too. I think about the people, the front row. So I sometimes I go along the front row and say, this is liable to be loud, so feel free to put your fingers in your ears. But they're all sitting there really like getting into it. Sometimes they burst into spontaneous applause at the end of that cadenza. Is is that rocking and rolling.

Who are some of your favorite influences from that time in your life?

Oh, the Beatles would be by far number one. That's a really good question. I remember listening to a lot of 60s folk, Peter, Paul and Mary, but I also kind of keep up with this is going to sound like the country music scene. I love. I love Alison Krauss. Oh, my gosh. Her stuff is amazing. Both her lyrical lines, her

melodies, but just the way she put songs together and the beauty of the colors. When you hear everything from her playing the violin to the mandolin player, I mean, it's so I listen to a lot of everything because I feel like I pull influences. But I would have to say the Beatles were probably the biggest influence, specially from a very young age.

In 2004, you did an interview with Bruce Duffy and you were having a truly awesome decade, which was a big subject of the interview. And he asked if things were moving too fast for you. And you said, ask me again in 10 years to plus, did I say that?

So it's 20/20. It's been more than 10 years.

So, yeah, it hasn't slowed. I thought it would cause usually these things go in waves. They totally go in waves. But it has not. It is continue to kind of accelerate. So I feel like I'm hanging onto a surfboard that is riding the world's biggest wave. And I'm constantly amazed. I really I just buy the good fortune of working with really good musicians and to be able to make recordings. It's I it's incredible. It's a privilege, but it's also a privilege that I don't take for granted ever. And every day I wake up, I think I literally think I'm gonna get to make music today. So, yeah, I'd forgotten I'd said that.

I'd kick myself if I didn't say go out here and talk about Blue Cathedral.

Yeah. That's such a special piece to so many musicians. I know for a lot of us. It was the first thing in orchestra that we played that was written by woman.

Yeah. Oh, that's right.

I hadn't thought about that, especially coming through school. I was going through school. And while you did that interview and that that was when we played Blue Cathedral.

Oh, I'm honored. It is amazing to me, how many people come up to me and say, your piece was the first contemporary piece I had. I hadn't thought about the fact that woman composer. Yeah. I think we're up to seven hundred performances of Blue Cathedral and the president's own marine band two weeks ago just premiered a band version of it. It just moved into a new genre that peace means so much because it was written in honor of my brothers. So there's just something about it that's touching. But I'm also really deeply moved by the number of people who mentioned that they've done it. Sometimes people have done it like with three or four or five orchestras. I think there's a clearness who's done it with six different orchestras. It's one thing to share. I you know, it's funny. I don't feel like that's my piece anymore I like it belongs to the world and it does belong to the world.

That that was something I was wondering about it. Is there a point where it feels like like what is the halflife on it belonging to you versus belonging to the world?

I think it's mostly the world. I think it really is. For me, I wrote it, but it does belong to the world. To be quite honest, it really, really does. So many musicians have played it. It's been played so much on orchestra. And I get letters from people really. They have their own personal stories connected to it. It's extremely moving. It's such an honor to have you and gotten a chance to write that piece. And I hear it now. And I think I wrote that. I can't believe I wrote that. But it does belong to the world.

I really had to kind of way that in the first year after his death. And I thought to myself, it should be about living. That's what Andy would have wanted. But it's I don't think you can turn that off. And, you

know. We all go through those experiences and it's an important experience and you don't want to deny it. But it's also kind of nice to be able to share a voice in that experience.

How long did you live with that feeling before you put it on in music?

Well, I started the piece. It was about a year after he passed away. So it was it was still very close. I was still very much in a very heavy grieving sort of feel. And I remember not I remember I wasn't thinking clearly, which is not surprising. I think it took me two years to kind of come out of that fog. But it is funny. People hear other pieces of mind from that time period in that two year time period, and they literally ask me what was happening in your life. I mean, they just have some sort of visceral sense. But I don't know what it is they're picking up on. I don't know what the thing is because you can't. I don't think you can consciously put that in the music. It just kind of happens. I actually thought of it as I'm kind of like weeping through the music. That's what it felt like.

I think it's important to respect that grieving and also to respect the fact that the grieving goes on longer than just the news cycle. It does. I mean, there's always going to be a part of that loss, that change in your heart that doesn't go away. So respecting that, what other people may be going through that you cannot see, but they may be expressing in some other form. That's really important. And it's amazing to me how many people come up after Blue Cathedral performances. And sometimes they take my hand and they can't speak. But I know.

Jennifer the flutist here, represented in music with Andy, her brother, a clarinetist, who had died of cancer. It's beauty mixed with strains of dissonance is an incredible reminder that grieving, musically or not, is an act of love.

In your music making, do you ever feel like you have a general thesis for the world that a big statement or you find yourself constantly making?

I think this is going to sound like a Beatles song, but I think it's love.

That's beautiful.

I think all you need is love.

What does Jennifer Higdon suggest young composers listen to? And what wild commission did she turn down? Those extras can be found on our website, 91Classical.org.

As the classical world navigates an unprecedented time, keep up with the music being made by subscribing to Classically Speaking, a production of Nashville Public Radio's 91Classical. Anita Bugg is the editor and Carl Pedersen is the engineer. I'm Colleen Phelps. You can find a playlist of all the music from this episode on 91Classical's Spotify, with the exception of Jennifer Higdon's Low Brass Concerto – that was a live performance by the Nashville Symphony.