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Music by Women Festival

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Jennifer Higdon Research Paper

Dr. Jennifer Higdon is a composer born December 31, 1962. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 2010 and three Grammy Awards for Best Contemporary Classical Composition in 2010, 2018, and 2020.⁵ She has been writing as a commission-based composer since 1992.¹ Her popularity as a composer skyrocketed, and her status with it, after her first professional achievement winning the Pulitzer Prize in 2010. Why now, in 2020, is her name being forgotten as an imperative composer in our generation? As a career, many might see composition as an extremely competitive field. Music careers in general are usually depicted as such. However, there is another way to look at a career in the music industry that is presented by Jennifer Higdon herself. Instead of musicians perceiving each other as candidates in a competition of who can be better than the other, Jennifer Higdon sees all of the many musicians as a family.² When you're passionate about what you do, the awards and world-wide performances aren't your goal or purpose, but simply an additional bonus. Musicians such as Jennifer Higdon say that they composed, or practiced, every single day for decades after graduating with a bachelor's, master's, and even a doctorate's degree. So, even after these musicians became official doctors in the field of music, they still did not gain instant fame. A musician may expose their

¹ #11 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rKLA_g4aJA

² #14 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lvpgJrawvs>

music to many people, but as the saying goes, it's not how many people you know, but who you know. As a composer, it takes many colleagues and connections to get your music into the world. This being said, simply because we have never heard of a said composer's music when we are exposed to it, does that mean we, as an audience, should dismiss them altogether? The many years of hard work put into the music that they have written is unbeknownst to us, and this is all the more reason that they deserve to be recognized. Jennifer Higdon understands this concept as she stated in an interview, "Even if you're a great composer, it may take more years to be recognized or have your work performed."³ Her unique perspective on music and composition is exactly why she should be a composer that is not forgotten. Especially in a generation like today where musicians are constantly reminded to conform to a certain stereotype. It may be hard to be a musician in the 21st century, as there are many who pursue it, but that does not mean that it is an unattainable career field, and Jennifer Higdon is an excellent example of this fact. Jennifer Higdon's perseverance despite her unusual career path, her remarkable advocacy for American and Classical music, and the expressive qualities she demonstrates in her compositions are all additional reasons why she deserves more recognition in the 21st century.

One of the reasons why Jennifer Higdon deserves more recognition in the 21st century is because of her perseverance as a composer despite her unusual career path. Jennifer Higdon was a late beginner in the domain of music, but that didn't stop her

³ #5 Online Interview by Hannah Heaton

from finding her passion in it as a career. At the age of 15, Jennifer taught herself to play the flute, but she didn't actually begin formal music studies until she was 18. The year she began experimenting with composition was during her freshman year of college at the age of 21 at Bowling Green State University. Her flute instructor, Judy Bentley, had asked her to compose a short piece and she says that it was then and there that she became "fascinated with the process of creating music."³ It was there at Bowling Green State University that she also joined marching band under the instruction of Mark Kelley.⁴ Dr. Higdon says that the emotion that went into marching band was the very thing that made her want to pursue music in the first place. She called it an "inspiring experience" in a YouTube interview with Jerry Junkin.⁴ She graduated with a bachelor's in flute performance from Bowling Green State University and continued to play the flute professionally until around 2010 or 2011 when she decided to focus on her composition career.⁵ Later, she received an Artist Diploma from The Curtis Institute of Music, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Composition from the University of Pennsylvania.⁵ Jennifer Higdon claims that she values her ability to be educated in many different schools that encouraged diverse ways of thinking of and approaching concepts in learning.⁴ The knowledge that she acquired and applied to herself throughout the years of study at these different schools granted Dr. Higdon the many opportunities to further her career as a composer. Cultivating a composition career with no experience prior to college was an endearing concept to Jennifer Higdon's onlookers, and she was

⁴ #13 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=joZwAa7IVwI>

⁵ #15 jenniferhigdon.com/index.html.

told that she would never be able to catch up to her peers.³ However, despite a late start at composition, she persevered and flourished under the instruction of her mentors and support from her colleagues. Jennifer Higdon had been composing consistently for ten years after studying in college before her music became known in the orchestra world. She says in an online interview that it wasn't until her *Concerto for Orchestra* was performed in front of thousands of orchestra managers in 2002 that this came to pass.³ Additionally, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 2010 for her *Violin Concerto* was also an impactful time in Jennifer Higdon's career. Dr. Higdon calls it "one of the biggest honors in classical music."³ She went on to win a Grammy Award for Best Contemporary Classical Composition in the same year of 2010. It was almost as if winning these prestigious prizes was a jumpstart for her profession. Winning both of these awards in the same year acted alternatively as publicity for the launching of her career and also for her growing publicity in the future. Dr. Higdon had commissioners for new pieces almost constantly after winning the Pulitzer prize and the first Grammy Award in 2010. She says that she writes between six to twelve pieces a year, and she sometimes has to unfortunately turn down commissioners due to her lack of time.¹ Some of her most well-known commissioners are The Philadelphia Orchestra, The Chicago Symphony, baritone singer Thomas Hampson, pianist Yuja Wang, violinist Hilary Hahn, and even The President's Own Marine Band.⁵ She continued to win a Grammy Award for Best Contemporary Classical Composition in 2018 and 2020. Jennifer Higdon endured in following her composition career despite the odds defined by her unusual upbringing in music. Not only was she successful in writing an

abundance of music, she has her music being played all over the world. With the winning of the Pulitzer Prize in 2010, Jennifer Higdon did reach an acclaimed status of fame. However, it is evident that Dr. Higdon deserves to be remembered as one who never gave up and proceeded to become a practiced composer even today in the 21st century as well.

Another reason why Jennifer Higdon deserves more recognition in the 21st century is because she is an advocate for American and Classical music. In other words, her music proves to have great examples or representations of Classical forms, and it embodies the American style as well. In the history of music in general, the Italian style of music has been predominant and well known as the origin surrounding all other styles of music from other countries. But countries such as the United States, have not had much recognition for its own musical style. Aside from older composers who represented American music such as Gershwin, Joplin, and a few others, there isn't much global awareness for American music until the 50's or 60's when pop music began to come about. In fact, Jennifer Higdon's first opera, *Cold Mountain*, won the prestigious International Opera Award for Best World Premiere in 2016. It was also the first American opera to do so in the award's history.⁵ All the *Cold Mountain* premieres sold out making it the third highest selling American opera in Opera Philadelphia's history.⁵ Dr. Higdon producing music as an American herself proves to be an advocate for American music history. The same can be said for her advocacy for Classical music. She says that growing up, she did not listen to classical music at all, but rather the American sensations, bluegrass, rock and roll (etc).¹ However, Jennifer Higdon says that

even though she had an awkward musical upbringing, the way she grew up, with no classical music background at all, is exactly how the average person today is. She didn't know anything about Classical music until she went to college and became a music major. Despite this fact, she embraced Classical music and found its depth to be intriguing. In her compositions, she enhances the classical forms and tonal qualities in order to create a unique style to intrigue her audience. Her works form a wide range of Classical genres, from orchestral to chamber, wind ensemble, vocal, choral and even opera as well. In a YouTube interview for her orchestral piece, *Peach Tree Suite*, Higdon states that any music we listen to on a daily basis can be inspiration for the music we write. She says it "becomes a part of your sound world."² What if we were to use this statement and apply it to Jennifer Higdon's own music? Perhaps the influence of American pop gave her the tasteful "American" style that she has developed, while her knowledge gained about Classical music in college added to her distinct approach in her music. Her promotion of the American and Classical styles in her music gives her a strong aura as a composer because she is representing a deeper knowledge rather than simply writing on the surface of a notion. This being said, though these two areas of music in of themselves are not as well known, Dr. Higdon does a remarkable job at being an advocate for American and Classical music just by making her own music approachable enough to her audience without denying the quality of it.

Lastly, one of the most important reasons that Jennifer Higdon deserves more recognition in the 21st century is because of the expressive qualities in her music. Many composers will use their music as an outlet to express their own emotions. Jennifer

Higdon even clearly states in an interview that “emotion is important to me.”² In all of Jennifer Higdon’s music there is an expressive quality that defines her as a person and her own musical language. Because she had such a late start to being exposed to classical music, Dr. Higdon embodies a mixture of both modern and classical genres in her music. One can hear that there is a sort of functionality in her pieces, but at the same time, it has no precise formula. She does a wonderful job at surprising the listener with different approaches in her melodies. A good example of this would be in *Legacy*, her flute solo with piano. It has soft, graceful tendencies in the beginning consisting of primarily of the flute’s sweeping melody with single note accompaniment by the piano. It remains all of these attributes while still engaging the audience with its beautiful and precise quality. The piano then brings the audience to a high point in the middle of the piece using an *accelerando* as a short interlude. It then went gradually back to the original *a tempo* with more movement in both the flute and piano than the beginning while still favoring the listener with delicate yet bracing harmonies. It ends with such a light and invigorating melody from the flute while the piano stays in the higher registers. Music is something one can consider to be a way of interaction with the living. It brings forward the reason why creative writing in music is one of the hardest vocations. Speaking to your audience through your music is a very crucial duty as a composer according to Jennifer Higdon. She says to think of composing as “communicating” with your audience.⁴ This notion could be said to be produced by the common thoughts that may be in the corners of any composer’s mind. What if nobody enjoys it? What if this piece is a failure? There may not be a point in writing new music

if you cannot share it others, and if your audience is disinterested in what you have to share, it can cause a lot of anxiety for the composer themselves. However, to keep these negative reflections at bay, Dr. Higdon says that taking it one step at a time, or musically speaking, one note at a time, is her way to follow through with a piece.⁶ While taking it one note at a time, she also asks herself if there is anything that she can do to make the piece more fascinating or captivating as well.⁶ Jennifer Higdon is a composer who takes her career seriously, and she says that this is something she ponders constantly for her audience.² This may not be a brand-new perspective on composition in general, but it is definitely a fresh concept regarding the vocation. One of the most positive and impactful quotes Dr. Higdon stated about expressing her music to the audience is as follows: “Even if this is someone’s first classical concert, the music should speak to you. You don’t need a P.H.D. to understand it.”² So why is expression in music important to think about as a composer? To start, when there is no depiction of you as a person in your music, it becomes an empty shell of something meant to have a depth at its core. What makes the shell unique to all other shells? Isn’t it what lies inside the shell? Dr. Higdon understands this as her music is a perfect depiction of the expression of the heart. At the same time, there really is no way to create an exact formula for expression, which is why it is such a special aspect in a composer’s music. It is an amusing thought that people who are most true to composing music with their own unique approach of expression, usually have no idea how they do it. They just write

⁶ #12 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5dpEIXpPT4>

from their hearts. Jennifer Higdon was asked a similar question about how she believes to achieve the aspect of speaking to her audience through her music; to which she replied with, "I really don't know and leave it to the musicologists to analyze and determine."³ In an online interview, Dr. Higdon reveals that one of her works that holds the most emotional meaning for her is named *Blue Cathedral* and was written in memory of her brother.³ *Blue Cathedral* is still one of the most played contemporary orchestral pieces today, holding over 700 performances from all around the world.³ Compositions like these, where a composer may write to mostly just express an emotion they feel, are almost always the ones that are most loved by others. One can feel that there is something deeper than notes written in the score when this is the case. So, it can be determined that there is no perfect blueprint for being expressive in one's composing, but it is also exactly why Jennifer Higdon's music is so special. She refers to it as "making your own statement in the world."² Jennifer Higdon deserves to be recognized in the 21st century for her distinct expressive qualities that resound in every page of the music that she writes.

Overall, one can conclude with the answer to one question about Jennifer Higdon. Why, if she is so successful in the music world, is Jennifer Higdon still not well known in this generation? The answer is simple. Though Dr. Higdon's works are being performed worldwide still to this day, it is all in a professional prospect. In the academic world, or for an average musician, her name is not being brought forth. But why? Because Dr. Higdon's works are mostly, though not always, performed by

professional musicians all over the world, those who do not have access to professional concert halls or colleagues, also do not have access to her works. It is a sad concept to try to comprehend that someone is denied the ability to share their music with more people simply because their circles do not cross with another's. Dr. Higdon even said this statement in an interview with Jerry Junkin after a comment on yet another award she won. "I try not to look at that stuff. I just go back to writing."⁴ This is refreshing to know because it says something about Jennifer Higdon's perspective. Though she is in the circle of professionals, she still sees music as approachable by all. She wants to share her music to anyone who will listen to and enjoy it. She is humble about her achievements and only proceeds to continue to be the best composer that she can be. The best characteristic about Jennifer Higdon as a composer is that she is supremely dedicated to and has an inspiring love for her career in composition. She says in another online interview, ". . . composing has to be a passion and something that you really can't live without doing because it can be a long road."³ Dr. Higdon understands that she may not be recognized by the whole world now, but she is willing to embrace her journey that she has right now. Despite all her awards that she has won, she still sees music as a personal experience for people instead of a competition. A memorable quote by Jennifer Higdon in an interview stated, ". . .there's still nothing more satisfying than watching an audience enjoying a work of mine."³ These honorable qualities are just another motive for one to share Jennifer Higdon's name and music to all who will listen. Because Jennifer Higdon had determination to compose as a career despite uncertain beginnings, she was not afraid to be an advocate for American and Classical

music in modern times, and because she consistently conveys her own expressive qualities in her works are all reasons why she merits recognition in today's generation. Together we can accomplish this feat by being a patron in spreading awareness of the great composer, Jennifer Higdon, in both the professional and amateur circles of the 21st century.