







THE Q+A

BY  
BRIAN  
WISE

# Nokuthula Ngwenyama

The probing composer and violist tackles scientific phenomena and big questions about human existence.



SCIENCE AND RELIGION are topics that find a complementary home in the music of Nokuthula Ngwenyama (Viola '96). Her *Primal Message*, which has been performed by several leading orchestras, was inspired by the "Arecibo" message, a historic radio signal that was beamed into outer space in 1974 and carried basic information about humanity. *Sonoran Storm*, for solo viola, evokes the propulsive waves of a desert rainstorm. And her solo violin piece, *Miasma*, is based on the spike protein that formed the basis for the COVID-19 vaccines.

Ms. Ngwenyama says that she is drawn to the patterns that underpin all human existence, something that she cultivated while earning a master's degree in theological studies from the Harvard Divinity School. The daughter of a Zimbabwean father and a Japanese mother, Ms. Ngwenyama grew up in Southern California and now makes her home in Arizona, where she is the composer in residence at the Phoenix Chamber Music Society. For all her varied interests, Ms. Ngwenyama says she appreciates the camaraderie that the Curtis alumni network has brought her.

**Your latest work, *Flow*, is being toured by the Takács Quartet this summer. It deals with nothing less than the dawn of the universe, starting with the lead-up to the Big Bang. How does a string quartet address something so vast?**

The string quartet invites that kind of innovation. It almost begs for it. I thought, 'What if this is the only string quartet that I write? If this is it, like with Ravel or Debussy, it needs to be a big statement. You've got to explore whatever sound ideas might come to mind, or to heart. Treating it that seriously allowed me to go to the most serious, most basic, part of our existence: We are caught in this inescapable flow that was started at the initial moment of our universe, and we are just a byproduct of that initial energy outburst. Everything that I kept studying went back to that. It was system upon system, cause and effect through time and evolution. That is about as natural as I could be: to portray this flow that we are all inescapably a part of.

**How do you reconcile your interest in scientific exploration with your studies of religion?**

I think that they can exist in the same space. I've always been interested in science, and I've also been interested in religion and in theology and why certain systems make sense from the inside out. Science can provide us with patterns, just like religious texts can provide patterns. I'm interested in how things work, and why they're working. I'm asking the 'why,' both theologically but also scientifically. So, I think that the patterns that emerge are very interesting to translate into music. I'm not doing anything new here: Composers have been taking patterns from time in memoriam and putting them into sound. So, science is just another place where we can find patterns.

**Your piece *Miasma*, written in 2021 for Bella Hristova (Violin '08), draws its themes from a specific pattern: the genetic material of the COVID-19 virus.**

The protein sequence of the RNA for SARS-COV2 gave me a pattern for A, C, B, and U. The U's were used as 'wild.' Then, I used [the notes] A-C-B in the patterns in A minor. So, it was easy to jump around and give the virus a voice, based off its own patterns. That, in turn, allowed me to hear how playful this pattern was. It was kind of freaky when Bella first played it, and seeing how it came into itself.

**Along with Ms. Hristova, you've worked with the Dover Quartet, Curtis's Penelope P. Watkins Ensemble in Residence, premiering the original quartet version of *Primal Message*. Were either of these collaborations built on your alumni connections?**

It's always great when I get to work with people whom I know have gone through similar training, and we all have that connection to the same institution, to the same type of training, to similar memories, even if we were decades apart. There is that commonality, and it comes through when we work together. It just happens, and it's not a surprise when we all have a Curtis connection.

**I understand you began composing as a teenager. But while studying at Curtis you seemed to be very much on a soloist trajectory and placed in major competitions. Was there a turning point in which you returned to composing?**

I feel like composing just found me again in 2014 when I got a call from Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church, the largest Black church in Phoenix, to write a processional for their bishop's 35th anniversary with the congregation. That was my first official processional

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commission. Being a mom and having two kids, it's hard to perform and be on the road while they're at school. But it's easier to be able to compose, record, and teach at home than it is to travel. One can still grow artistically even if not performing all the time on the road.

### As a violist, does having the instrument's sound in your head shape your musical aesthetic?

Yes, I always have the viola in my head. I tend to write from the inside out because it's about the texture and the voicing and

balance from the midrange. It's like in yoga or Pilates: It takes a strong core. It can be harmonic or totally dissonant, but whatever the effect, it must be coming from the core. Then outer ranges are the filigree that gives emphasis or more detail to what's happening in the core. I'm always aware of that core sound, even if it's a sound that doesn't have a core.

### You've re-arranged many of your scores for different groups. Is versatility a key part of success in 2024?

I think that there's a demand for it. For example, people kept asking, 'Do you have

anything orchestral?' I didn't, but *Primal Message* would be good orchestrally, and I could have fun with some textures. Composing in 2024 means being flexible and writing into what we have. What I can recommend or wish for is that composers not just have a machine to write into [such as AI], but to collaborate with artists they respect and enjoy working with. That's the extra sauce that pushes composers to do better, and to do more than they could do on their own with a machine. It is my great honor to be writing for people.

Interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.

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Galimir was an enormous influence—"the greatest chamber music mind I've encountered in my life." When Mr. Tenenbom joined the faculty in 1996 and took over the strings chamber music program, he made sure that all the students were involved in chamber music. "We'd have a chamber music sightreading party early in the year, like in summer camp, so students young and old could get to know each other and form groups," he says. Today, all instrumentalists, except for organists and percussionists, are required to be a part of an active, registered chamber music group each semester, with access to the wide range of Curtis faculty.

Faculty member Amy Yang sees chamber music training as more than a career path. "The students begin to sharpen their sensibility for symbiotic relationships to their partners," she says, adding that chamber music makes students more alert to the give and take of artistic leadership. "They learn ways to modulate their own voices to yield the greatest artistic flourish for all."

## RESIDENCIES ANCHOR CAREERS

Curtis graduates have been flowing into the chamber music field for decades. One recent notable example is the Dover Quartet, founded at Curtis in 2008, which swept the prizes at the 2013 Banff

Competition and has enjoyed a meteoric rise. In 2020, the Dover was appointed to the Curtis faculty as the Penelope P. Watkins Ensemble in Residence, carrying on the teaching tradition of their own mentors in the Guarneri; their name is a nod to Barber's *Dover Beach*, and a link to their illustrious quartet predecessor of a century ago.

In 2021, Imani Winds became the first-ever wind quintet appointed to the faculty to teach chamber music. Formed in 1997, the renowned ensemble, which is devoted to expanding the wind quintet repertoire, has demonstrated that wind players can also make a living playing chamber music.

Toyin Spellman-Diaz, the Imani's founding oboist, says that the Imani's mission at Curtis is expansion in many areas. "We coach wind quintets, but we also have a chamber music studio class where students play for each other and brainstorm ideas—like how to put together a concert—to open neural pathways they had not thought about before.

"We're getting student composers to write for wind quintets; we coach contemporary music; we teach a mini entrepreneurship class that's open to everybody. We're also bringing students our knowledge of composers outside the classical realm; how important it is to have different voices—of color, jazz, music from around the world—come into

chamber music."

A major part of Imani's mission at Curtis is to prepare students for a professional landscape that has changed once again, offering space for musical careers that combine many kinds of activities as well as unconventionally structured groups.

Students are looking for ways to take charge of their careers now," Ms. Spellman-Diaz says. "People are coming up with new ensemble ideas, new programs, new places to perform, new audiences to reach. The money is shrinking, but it's still out there, and musicians are figuring out how to tap into it and use their creative potential. Presenters are looking for flexible ensembles who will work with their communities and do more than just mainstage concerts."

Ms. Spellman-Diaz adds, "We are not looking to make a cadre of chamber musicians. We are trying to open up their ideas of what they do in their lives, to realize there is music—and there are ways of playing—outside the traditional orchestra. If they incorporate that into their playing, we've done our job."

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*Heidi Waleson is the opera critic of the Wall Street Journal and the author of Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America (Metropolitan/Picador).*