



Jessie Montgomery

Curtis' 2025–26 composer in residence is a voice of our time.

→ **WHEN CHUCK D** of Public Enemy famously called hip-hop “the Black CNN,” he was touching on a larger idea that goes beyond genre: Music and current events have always been closely connected. The composer Jessie Montgomery recognizes this. She has frequently used her work to engage with contemporary issues, including global unrest (*Divided*), New York City street life (*L.E.S. Characters*), the speeches of prominent activists (*I Have Something to Say*), and the ideals behind the U.S. national anthem (*Banner*).

But Ms. Montgomery isn’t easily pigeonholed, and her interests range farther afield—from the cosmos in *Starburst* and nature’s infinite patterns in *Rounds* to the chemical reactions in *Chemiluminescence*, which the New York Philharmonic premiered last April. This April, Curtis New Music Ensemble will present her *Concerto Grosso* and *Musings* for two violins, each inspired by earlier historical eras and composers.

A Manhattan native with degrees from the Juilliard School and New York University, Ms. Montgomery wrote some of her earliest works for the PUBLIQuartet and the Catalyst Quartet, two intrepid string quartets in which she played the violin. More recently, her performance outlets include the eclectic Everything Band and a violin-double bass duo called big dog little dog.

Overtones spoke with Ms. Montgomery on a video call from her home in Chicago, where she recently finished a three-year residency with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. We began by discussing her role as Curtis’ composer in residence for the 2025–26 season.

You’ll be at Curtis in April to lead a master class and participate in a concert featuring your music. What do you focus on when teaching college-level composers? And what is foremost on students’ minds?

At a school like Curtis where the students come in well-honed, there may be holes and things that have to be fine-tuned, but I find that I get the opportunity to discuss more artistic desires. So, the master classes tend to center around who the student is and what their interests are: ‘What are the things that catch your attention in music? That’s the well from which you’re going to be pulling out your creative ideas.’ Especially when I come in as a guest, they’ve been working regularly on technique and specific things, so this is a time to not throw those out the window but prioritize their own personal visions.

Speaking of inspiration, one of your most popular recent works is *Hymn for Everyone* (2021), which followed a six-month bout of writer’s block. I understand its theme came to you during a hike. Is there a lesson here about creativity?

Definitely. We shouldn’t fear writer’s block. Writer’s block means that there’s something brewing, and you got to get

down to the center of it. It doesn’t mean that you suddenly can’t write music, or you’re stuck forever. It’s a natural part of the process, and usually something simple breaks the shell. Sometimes it’s taking a walk. Sometimes it’s going on a weekend trip to visit a friend. I often find that a lot of good ideas come away from the desk.

You’ve composed several works that explore the diversity and richness of American life, including *I Have Something to Say* and *Banner*. But some see diversity as a negative these days. That said, should music hold up a mirror to society, or should it serve more as an escape for listeners?

I feel like we’ve been teetering on this constantly. Even now, it’s an amplification of where we started this conversation back in 2020. The purpose for me personally hasn’t changed. My purpose for writing and creating work is to communicate. It’s sharing. Being a Black American person and really, any American person, I have to speak on these issues. I speak about my personal experience. But I think everyone can take from those stories and say, ‘What is my role in history and in the current times? What do I have to offer and what is my



point of view?" I also love music as a balm. I have all the different feelings. I would say if there's anything I take a hard stance on, it's that everyone should have access to music.

Do you find orchestras or presenters are becoming more cautious in the current environment, and less eager to play up diverse perspectives?

I haven't yet experienced it among the orchestras themselves. I've heard audience members experiencing issues, and that's challenging. But for the time being, my work has been well received in the infrastructure of orchestras themselves. If they don't like me, I don't know about it [laughs]. Not to say it isn't probably an issue in some organizations. Even in organizations that don't really want to wear the hat of making any real statement, they still seem to be programming with diverse composers in mind.

Some of your most-performed orchestral pieces are also quite brief and pithy: *Starburst* and *Strum* each last under 10 minutes. This is a common feature of contemporary orchestral music today. What do you make of this and the general priorities of orchestras?

I've been getting asked to do longer, bigger works, mainly in the form of concertos, which is wonderful. Then, I get to work directly with a soloist, explore orchestration, and conceive of the work in a collaborative way. My heart is in chamber music. I spent 18 years of the first part of my career in a chamber group of some kind. So, when I think about writing longer works, I think about smaller forces. Even with all good intents and purposes, in the orchestra setting, collaboration is particularly challenging because there are so many people involved. [In contrast], the feeling of the back-and-forth rapport that you can create in a smaller ensemble

is something I'm starting to gear a lot more of my attention toward.

In 2024, you composed *Procession*, a concerto for Cynthia Yeh, the principal percussionist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. What other concertos are on your plate?

Right now, I'm working on a concerto with [South African cellist] Abel Selaocoe.

He's known for doing all these unusual vocalizations and improvisations. Will you highlight these talents?

Yes, a bit of that, and his own unique colors and things he brings out in the cello. The premiere is in Germany in March. He's an artist in residence at the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin. Then it will come to Lincoln Center in the summer.

After Juilliard, you earned a master's degree in music for film and multimedia at New York University. How much is film music a part of your career today?

I did a feature documentary called *Loudmouth* [about the life and battles of Reverend Al Sharpton] in 2022. [Film music] is definitely a different beast. But I would say it gave me profound respect for film composers. Also, it reinforced the idea of how music conjures memory and feeling. Coming up with a concept or a narrated progression—and then underscoring that—is where the ideas come the quickest. I still write with theater in mind.

You're a native New Yorker. How are you finding Chicago?

It's great, actually. There are aspects of it that feel like New York, 20 to 30 years ago. I'm really enjoying it. The pace is a little slower. Of course, there's a great community of musicians here.

Interview has been condensed and edited for length.