Notes on the Program

1920 / 2019

Joan Tower

The World Premiere of Joan Tower’s 1920 / 2019 comes more than a year after originally scheduled, a delay forced by turbulent events that cancelled many performances in the fall of 2020 around the globe. However, Tower does not want audiences to lose sight of the other momentous years from which the work takes its palindrome-like title.

On August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution, granting women the right to vote, was ratified. The Amendment had been approved by Congress in 1919, a year from which the New York Philharmonic’s Project 19, of which this premiere is part, takes its inspiration. Tower is one of 19 women composers selected to create orchestral works in celebration of the 19th Amendment’s centennial.

Her title references the 1920 ratification year, and another a century forward. Tower began composing the piece in 2019, a time of particular triumph in a long and already much-honored career, when she received the League of American Orchestra’s Gold Baton award and Chamber Music America’s Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award, and she was named Musical America’s Composer of the Year for 2020.

At the same time, she had begun reflecting on the history attached to Project 19, drawing a direct line from the women’s suffrage movement to the current moment, as #MeToo stories flooded the news. “These two years, 1920 and 2019, are formidable years for the empowerment of women,” she says. “They changed the whole landscape.” Finally achieving the right to vote shifted women’s lives in profound ways, and the subsequent gains and losses of women’s rights came to fruition in 2019. “Because justice finally came through in a real way.”

Tower has long been recognized as a feminist voice in classical music, partly through the popularity of her Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman. It was dedicated to conductor Marin Alsop, specifically, and more generally to “women who take risks and who are adventurous.” The 1986 Fanfare grew into an open-ended project, encompassing five additional pieces under the same name by 2016. Fanfare No. 3, for double brass quintets, was premiered at the 1991 Carnegie Hall centennial celebration by musicians of the New York Philharmonic and the Empire Brass Quintet. (The Philharmonic will perform the original Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman, January 27–29.)

The collected Fanfares have been included in the Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry, just one of the many honors Tower has achieved. She was the first woman to win the Grawemeyer Award, for Silver Ladders in 1990, and the first composer, period, selected in 2005 for Ford Made in America, a commissioning consortium involving 65 orchestras. The Nashville Symphony’s recording of her Made in America received three Grammys in 2008, including Best Classical Contemporary Composition.

In Short

Born: September 6, 1938, in New Rochelle, New York

Resides: Red Hook, New York

Work composed: 2019, commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, dedicated “to Deborah Borda with admiration for her visionary Project 19”

World premiere: these performances

Duration: ca. 14 minutes
Prior to the widespread acclaim garnered by her first orchestral work, *Sequoia* (1981), Tower had focused on small ensemble and solo pieces, performing many of her own works as pianist with the DaCapo Chamber Players. She helped launch that group in 1969 and has often remarked upon how important it was as a burgeoning composer to understand the needs of musicians, and as a musician to understand the demands of a composer.

That attention to individual musicians in an orchestra can be seen in the solos, duets, and quartets for violin, cello, clarinet, trumpet, flute, piccolo, horns, and percussion contained within *1920 / 2019*. Musically, the piece does not attempt to narrate the story of its title. Tower prefers to immerse the listener in a sonic journey that developed organically as she composed. Hallmarks of her style can be found in the insistent rhythms and extensive complement of percussion instruments. Both are inspirations dating to her childhood in Bolivia, where her father worked as a mining engineer and the New York–born Tower absorbed local sounds and instrumentations alongside her studies of Beethoven at the piano.

In fact, Tower never strays far from thinking about historical influences. In classical music, she can trace other direct lines, from her study of early 20th-century ladies orchestras that were confined to “feminine” dress and repertoire, through to the amazing breadth of musical and personal styles represented by her fellow *Project 19* composers. While she might not say so herself, Tower’s own role in that progression has been formidable.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, woodblocks, maracas, bass drum, tenor drum, vibraphone, orchestra bells, temple blocks, suspended cymbals, bongos, timbales, sleigh bells, piano, and strings.

— Rebecca Winzenried, an arts writer, former program editor for the New York Philharmonic, and former editor in chief of Symphony Magazine

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**In the Composer’s Words**

1920 was the year of the ratification of the women’s vote and I am adding another significant year for women — 2019 — the height of the #MeToo movement, which raised the status of women to yet another level.

The 14-minute work features a steady repeated note / chord beat in various tempos and textures, alternating with runs (in scales and broken chords) that include first a cello solo and then a violin solo.

Later on, there is a section of solos, a duet, and two quartets — starting with the clarinet, then trumpet solos, and a unison piccolo / flute line followed by four horns, ending with a percussion group.

It is a piece largely about rhythm and texture (hopefully) set in a dramatic and organic narrative.

— Joan Tower