



HPR INTERVIEW

Joan Tower

With Carol Clements

Joan Tower has composed some of the most strongly evocative instrumental music being written in the last part of this century. She is recognized as an outspoken music panelist and forceful advocate of music by living composers, having served on committees of organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Council on the Arts.

Tower is a musician's composer. She has formed close ties with the performers she writes for, from her early work at the Greenwich Music House in New York, to her long and fruitful collaboration with the Da Capo Chamber Players, to her more recent work as Composer-in-Residence with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

A self-described "choreographer of sound," she displays a rare sensitivity to the subtleties of the dance between composer, audience and performer.

HPR: What activities have been occupying your working hours recently?

Tower: I just became chairman of the music department here at Bard College — and that's been occupying a lot of my time because I'm new to the job. I've been teaching here for 20 years and I became chairman this year because I wanted to see if I could make an exciting department happen. Before that, I was composing most of the time.

HPR: Most composers these days work in academic settings. How do you think that has affected the propagation of new music?

Tower: I don't think it's a good influence, actually. I do a lot of lecturing around the country and I've seen how composers function inside the university. I notice that a lot of composers are not actually composing, or if they are, it's very minimal. They're probably doing a lot of other things, like writing articles or being chairman of the department or organizing curriculum or something like that. I notice, though, there's no composing. It's not a good situation, as far as I'm concerned. I like to see composers and a department making music. In other words, there's a lot of playing going on, a lot of activity between the composer and the performers, rather than just a book-learning situation, where you're talking *about* music all the time.

I think that in the universities, (where I think the composers are going to be for a while, unless we find some other way), if the curricular structures could try to integrate the composers and the performers better, so that the performers were composing and the composers performing and playing each other's pieces, I think we'd have a much healthier situation. Because the more you separate those two groups, the worse it gets for both of them. Not just for the composers, but for the performers.

HPR: They need each other.

Tower: Yes. Because the performers stop being creative — they need creative challenges. So that if you ask them to compose a piece, you are challenging their creativity on a fundamental level. And then they bring that knowledge to bear on their playing. I'm a very strong believer in that. Although I'm not a requirement person, I think that in the conservatories, the performers should be required to compose.

HPR: Can you speak more about the essence of the relationship between composer and performer?

Tower: Any music making other than electronic music making requires the utmost interaction between the composer and the performer because if they don't understand each other's activities, what you're going to get is kind of a forced situation where the performer is playing the piece because he has to. I think that's been one of the biggest difficulties in this century. In the 19th century, often the composer and the performer were the same person, which is true in the pop world today. I think the classical music world has to get back to that kind of closeness of activity, either by having the performer compose and the composer perform, or by having these two people working closely together in some structured educational way. That's the first linkage that has to be very strong because if a performer is playing a piece he doesn't like, he's obviously going to have some trouble projecting to the audience.

HPR: So many composers write for electronic instruments, but your compositions are for acoustic instruments. Why is that?

Tower: I guess that's because I've been a player for a long time. I've been an active pianist, and working with players has biased me in that direction. When I did my time in the electronic studio at Columbia Uni-

versity many years ago, I kept plugging the wrong plug into the wrong outlet and blowing up the speakers. I'm not mechanically minded at all. But I think it's basically because I've been a performer working with traditional acoustic instruments all my life. There's a story related to that — I have two synthesizers and a piano in my studio, and one synthesizer, a Polykorg 800, I bought simply to travel with me. I figured that if I could take a lightweight instrument and hook it up in the hotel that I could do some composing in the hotel and it would make life a lot easier. And that machine actually turned out to be a real godsend because I was frequently in places where I didn't have a piano. The other machine I have is an Ensonic EPS, a very fancy sampler performance unit which costs a lot more than the other one.

With this one, the first day, it took me five hours to figure out one note...not the keyboard, but *one note* on the keyboard (laughs). I am not good with manuals because I have an innate resistance to being told what to do in print. So I like to figure these machines out intuitively. The Polykorg was fairly easy to figure out but the Ensonic was a lot more complicated. So that machine has been sitting in my studio for two years, practically unused. I also have a Masters Track Pro, a thing that hooks up to a computer where you can compose very fancy pieces — I haven't even begun to use that, because that has three manuals. I will probably never get to that one.

The piano to me is an infinitely more beautiful instrument, compared to these other two instruments — I keep going back to the piano to compose, because the whole acoustical situation with the piano is so just much more beautiful, I'm sorry to say. And, the fact that I am dealing with live orchestras all the time, that have real com-

plex acoustical situations, it makes the synthesizers pale in comparison — so, it's that I'm comparing sounds all the time. The synthesizer, right now, for me, is not a useful instrument except for traveling.

HPR: On the subject of programming contemporary music — would you say that it is still in what you have termed “the ghetto”?

Tower: Yes. It's better now than it was before, because of the composers in residence with orchestras. That has opened some doors — small doors, but some doors that are enabling the orchestras to try to confront the issue of playing composers above ground a little more often. The younger chamber ensembles around the country seem to be more interested in commissioning a composer and playing a composer on their programs. The big-time soloists — there are cracks opening up there, too. That's because they've met the composers live and in the flesh through their travels, and that has initiated some exciting commissions. That's still small, however, but it's there, and it will create some interesting developments in the future for composers.

HPR: What were some of the musically formative events in your life?

Tower: Playing the Mendelssohn Piano Concerto when I was 21, with a school orchestra, in Town Hall in New York City. Hearing *Black Topaz* premiered in 1976 in New York. It was a breakaway from my previous pieces — trying to step into my own voice. It was played on this concert series where a lot of abstract music was programmed. I remember that event very clearly. They all thought I had jumped out the window and gone overboard, musically. The premiere of *Sequoia*, my first orchestra piece in New York by the American Composers Orchestra — that was an absolutely mind-boggling experience to hear an orchestra play this piece. All I could think of was wanting to

be in Australia or somewhere else — anywhere but in Alice Tully Hall in New York. I was very scared of that piece. I wasn't sure about it — I had a lot of problems with it. But that work has turned out to be one of my most successful ones.

HPR: How has your compositional style evolved?

so gutsy! He writes such simple, out there kind of music!” The same thing happened with George Crumb's *Eleven Echoes of Autumn*, which at that time was considered unbelievably simple music. And I started thinking it was beautiful music. Of course, I didn't tell anybody that at the time. The stronger I got, the



Tower: When I was starting out in composing, I was in the midst of the 12-tone thing in the '60s — playing it a lot and analyzing and studying it. Just starting out as a composer. I immediately fell into that, because that was the sound world around me at the time. Then I remember going out and hearing Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, and I remember sitting there thinking, “This man is

more I started moving into my own music, trying to carve out my own personality in the music. That took awhile. I wasted a lot of time in the '60s with that 12-tone music. I can't stand it now.

HPR: You grew up in South America. How did that affect your music?

Tower: In two ways. In Bolivia, when I was growing up, the Indians celebrated the Saints' days about

every other day. They had ongoing festivals all the time. My nurse was one of these Indians and she took me to all the festivals. I did a lot of dancing and played a lot of percussion. I think those two things affected my music in a fairly big way. I think of myself actually as a choreographer of sound, and I think that comes from my dancing background in South America, and my music often has a lot of percussion. I love percussion. But I don't think that anyone listening to my music would say, "Oh, she obviously has some Latin influences there." It's not an obvious thing. It's not on the surface of the piece.

HPR: What forms or mediums have you been experimenting with?

Tower: I don't think I experiment with mediums. I'm asked to write pieces for certain instruments, and now I can pick and choose what I respond to, but I don't think I experiment with the actual medium itself. I write for pretty traditional setups: orchestras, chamber groups, solo things. Oh, but I *will* be writing a ballet, and that's going to be something very new for me. That'll be an experiment.

HPR: You were with the Da Capo Chamber Players from 1969 to 1984. What reflections do you have on your association with them?

Tower: I view the Da Capo Chamber players as the best education in making music as a composer that I've had, because being a part of that group, we could play a lot of different kinds of music by other composers, and I became very familiar with my generation and earlier generations and newer generations of composers through learning their musics. As a composer writing for people in this ensemble, I had a natural creative environment to work in, where I could call them up at three o'clock in the morning and ask, "Could you play an A-flat softly up in the high register there?" They

could tell me "no," and they could interact with me and we could make this piece together, and that was extraordinarily important for shaping my musical identity. One of the best things I ever did was to create that group.

HPR: Are you currently collaborating with anyone?

Tower: I'm writing a violin concerto for Elmar Oliveira. I met with him this summer, and [we met] in October again to start working on the piece, which is going to be premiered in April by the Utah Symphony with Joseph Silverstein conducting.

HPR: What about commercial recordings of your works?

Tower: There are three complete CDs out. One is orchestral on Nonesuch, and that's by the St. Louis Symphony. And then one is chamber music, which is on Composers Recordings Inc. Recently, an all-clarinets CD came out on Summit Records by Robert Spring. There are individual pieces around. *Island Rhythms* just came out on Louisville First Edition recordings — I just got it yesterday, in fact. It's a really good recording. And the Dorian Quintet has a piece on Summit Records, called *Island Prelude*. My first *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman* is on RCA with St. Louis. There are some early recordings which I think must be out of print now.

HPR: In programming music for my radio program, I struggle with the issue of how to effectively highlight works by women composers while still keeping them in the mainstream and out of the ghetto. Do you see it as essential to stress specific contributions women have made to music in order to rectify past neglect?

Tower: Oh yes, definitely. I'm taking a course now here on women and music by an authority on the subject — her name is Nancy Reich — and it's been the biggest eye-opener for me. I can't really tell you how the whole history of this thing keeps hit-

ting me over the head every time she opens her mouth. The research for women on music is a most recent thing — within the last 10 years. That's why all the big history books on music don't mention women. Did you know that the Grout *History of Western Music* makes maybe two mentions of women...in the entire history of music! So there's an awful lot of work that has to be done here.

HPR: I know. I was just reading a music dictionary the other day that said Clara Schumann wrote some "charming piano pieces," but that otherwise she devoted her life to Robert Schumann.

Tower: Right. They forgot to mention that she was one of the most famous pianists of her time and played a lot of composer's music. By the way, the one who wrote the definitive Clara Schumann biography is Nancy Reich, the person I am taking that course from. The real active and serious music making in the history of music was in the convent and the home, both places controlled by women.

HPR: Like Hildegard of Bingen.

Tower: Yes, and Fanny Mendelssohn — she was only allowed to make music in the home. I think it was sort of a class thing with her — that a woman of her class didn't do such things publicly.

HPR: Among the conductors and performers coming up in the musical world, who embodies some of your hopes for the future of music? Who excites you?

Tower: Leonard Slatkin. Yo-Yo Ma. These are people who are trying to deal with composers in a real kind of way, not in a phony kind of way. David Zinman. Peter Serkin. The Juilliard Quartet. Elmar Oliveira. Carol Wincenc. Ursula Oppens. Gerard Schwartz. I think that John Duffy, who runs Meet the Composer, is probably the most significant person creating changes in our live composer structure. □