

Interview with Jennifer Higdon

On April 12, 2010, composer Jennifer Higdon was named the winner of the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Music. She was interviewed by Linda Rimel for this Web page on April 26.

“[P]ublishing my own music . . . was the smartest thing that I could have done.”—Pulitzer Prize winner Jennifer Higdon

IAWM: Jennifer, on behalf of the IAWM, which you serve as an advisor, congratulations on winning the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Music!

You had received a Grammy Award (in the category of Best Contemporary Classical Composition) only two months earlier for *Percussion Concerto*, and your compositions are being played a great deal these days in concerts and on the airwaves, so your career was already going places. How surprised were you that you won the Pulitzer for *Violin Concerto*?

JH: I was actually very surprised. I don't know if anyone can ever anticipate winning something so prestigious. Even after I was notified by the press, it still took me about two weeks to really comprehend what had happened.

IAWM: People who write about music often struggle for words to categorize it. In your words, what kind of music do you write? Have you taken exception to any of the labels that may have been applied to your work?

JH: I always find it so difficult to describe music with words (which is why I'd rather just write the music). I think my music is American sounding, but I'm even saying that because I've heard this label from so many journalists. It's safe to say that I love a sense of pulse, no matter how complex the rhythms are, or how many layers are going on at one time. I am always cognizant, as I'm composing, that the music needs to be clearly moving in a distinct direction. Most of my music (although not all) is tonal. Other than that, I can only say, take a listen and see what you think.

I haven't taken exception to any of the labels that have been applied to my music, because I often don't read what's written about it. I also figure everyone is entitled to their opinion, so I don't worry about it.

IAWM: What are your current projects?

JH: I've just finished a new concerto for the new music ensemble, 8th Blackbird, and orchestra. I'm about to write a band piece for a consortium of bands, headed by the Hart School, and then an orchestral piece for the Grand Tetons Music Festival and the National

Parks system. I've also recently added to my schedule a short work for Hilary Hahn (the violinist for whom the "Violin Concerto" was written). In the recording department, we've just finished the edits for the September release of the "Violin Concerto," and I've just finished the edits for my bluegrass/classical hybrid concerto, "Concerto 4-3."

IAWM: Music composition might seem to be a field in which men and women now compete on a level playing field. Has that been your experience?

JH: I actually do think it has been my experience (but I know for a fact, it is not everyone's experience). I remember in the first few years after I got out of school (in 1994), I sometimes had male colleagues making comments to me about the fact that my music sounded too aggressive to be written by a woman, to which I just rolled my eyes. But in general, I have had the good fortune to follow in the footsteps and through doors that were opened by my predecessors (and there have been many). Reflecting upon this question is interesting for me, because I don't have any room to complain about not getting performances or recognition, but I do know that there are many women out there who still encounter a less level playing field.

IAWM: Any advice for other women in music?

JH: Don't listen to the naysayers, ever. Always do, whatever it is you love doing, and do it with all of your heart and soul. Work hard to make the most profound statement that you can (whether it's on the podium, in manuscript, or at the front of the stage).

IAWM: I've read that you did not grow up in a family of musicians, and your first involvement in music was as a teenage flutist. You were in band. How did your band experience prepare you to become a composer?

JH: I think being in a group that spent hours every day in disciplined practice (we were a competitive marching band), and then weekends traveling to shows to perform in front of thousands of people, showed me the power of music, and taught me that music-making is about relationships, and being disciplined. I also think playing all of that marching band music created the need for a sense of pulse in music.

IAWM: You publish your own sheet music. How significant has that been to your success? Have you considered forming your own recording label?

JH: I am thankful that I stuck with publishing my own music. I have had half a dozen publishers ask me about signing on, but I haven't given in to that. But taking care of this myself (and now, with a full-time employee) has allowed me to get orders out quickly and without the serious expense that is usually associated with sheet music. It also means I can sell my orchestra scores (which frequently does not happen with the publishing houses) and accommodate special requests (such as arrangements). It was the smartest thing that I could have done.

I wouldn't think about starting my own label purely for the fact that the publishing and composing already take up a good number of hours in the day (most of the day really).

IAWM: Thank you very much for taking time to share your insights and experiences with us. Again, hearty congratulations on receiving the 2010 Pulitzer Prize.

JH: **You're quite welcome. It's my pleasure.**

[Linda Rimel is a writer/editor and public relations chair of the International Alliance for Women in Music.]