

“Fanfares for the Uncommon Woman”--Colorado Symphony Orchestra, Marin Alsop, conductor; Joan Tower, composer (1999)

Added to the National Registry: 2014

Essay by Ellen K. Grolman (guest post)*



Joan Tower

Over the course of almost six decades, American composer Joan Tower (b. 1938) has produced a compelling and uncompromisingly well-crafted body of work that includes compositions for orchestra, chamber ensembles, solo instruments, ballet, and symphonic bands. After the risky decision in the mid 1970s to abandon the restrictive bonds of serial music, Tower was guided by a more organic, intuitive approach, one in which each idea develops from the one that precedes it; simpler, less dissonant, and somewhat Impressionistic. Her unique musical voice is shaped in part by her childhood and adolescence in South America, an experience she credits for establishing her life-long affinity for the muscular, vital rhythms which characterize the majority of her compositions. Having crafted a career among mostly male colleagues in the post-WWII era, she has been hailed as a pioneering, empowering force for women composers.

“Fanfares for the Uncommon Woman,” of which there are six, were composed between 1987 and 2014, the last one coming 22 years after the penultimate “Fanfare.” Sometimes viewed as a sort of feminist counterpoint to Aaron Copland’s “Fanfare for the Common Man,” Tower’s “Fanfares” are inspired by and pay tribute to the elder composer while making their own vibrant musical statements.

Identical in instrumentation to and containing musical quotes from Copland’s “Fanfare,” and written in 1986, “Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman No. 1” is for “women who take risks and are adventurous” (Joan Tower, liner notes to Schirmer edition). It was immediately embraced as a “historic feminist statement in music” (Tamara Bernstein, Liner notes to “Fanfares for the Uncommon Woman,” Koch International Classics, 3-7469-2, 1999). Dedicated to conductor Marin Alsop, the work features the full complement of brass (three trumpets, four French horns, three trombones, tuba) and percussion required by Copland with the addition of marimba, chimes, glockenspiel and drums. The dramatic percussion opening portends something significant; the work, at just under three minutes in duration, is heady, bold, and urgent. It was premiered by Hans Vonk and the Houston Symphony as part of their Fanfare Project in 1987.

The most popular of the six “Fanfares,” No.1 has received over 500 performances and has earned a secure position in the canon.

Percussion dominates the opening of the second “Fanfare” as well, with the castanet’s motoric 8th notes serving as an invitation to the whole percussion *batterie* before the brass enters. The work, commissioned by Absolut Vodka, was composed in 1989, revised in 1997, and dedicated to Joan Briccetti, former general manager of the St. Louis Symphony. Tower uses an intriguing and very effective layering technique in the brass, with a hockett-like result. Scored for four horns, three trumpets in C, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, glockenspiel, marimba, and chimes, the work is about 3½ minutes in length and maintains throughout an energetic, propulsive character.

Composed and premiered in 1991, the 3rd “Fanfare” features a double brass quintet, each ensemble comprised of two C trumpets, French horn, trombone, and tuba. The work was commissioned by Carnegie Hall in celebration of the Hall’s 100th anniversary and was affectionately dedicated to Frances Richard, then-director of the Symphony and Concert Department at ASCAP. Two French Horns open the work in a subdued, lyrical, and affecting exchange of descending 4ths before the entry of the rest of the brass, the first of numerous antiphonal passages that are the highlight of this “Fanfare.” The lyrical character soon organically transforms into one that is more insistent, with rippling motifs that drive the work to its conclusion. Conductor Zubin Mehta premiered the five-minute work in Carnegie Hall with the New York Philharmonic principal brass and the Empire Brass Quintet.

Originally called “Fourth Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman” and re-named “For the Uncommon Woman,” this was the first in the “Fanfare” set to use full orchestra. Dedicated to conductor JoAnn Falletta, the five-minute work was composed in 1992 and premiered in the same year by William McGlaughlin and the Kansas City Symphony, who had commissioned it with funding from AT&T. Not strictly a “Fanfare” due to its use of instruments other than brass and percussion, “For the Uncommon Woman” retains a fanfare’s splendor and sense of pageantry. Bright, dissonant, shimmering, propulsive, and big-hearted, the work contains many brass flourishes and percussive effects.

The fifth “Fanfare,” which dates from 1993, features four trumpets and was commissioned by the Aspen Music Festival for the opening of the Joan and Irving Harris Concert Hall. The 3 ½ -minute work opens with a lone trumpet voicing a descending minor 3rd, a motif immediately echoed by the entire ensemble. The somewhat laconic introduction gains momentum and new rhythmic impetus, only to return temporarily to its former, quieter nature. In the last quarter of the work, the “Fanfare” truly lives up to its name, releasing radiant, joyous, mostly-tonal volleys among the four trumpets. Tower herself conducted the Empire Brass in the work’s premiere in August 1993. There is also an arrangement of the “Fanfare” for four trombones.

Originally composed for piano, dedicated to composer Tania Leon, and later arranged for full orchestra, “Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman No. 6” dates from 2014. It was premiered two years later by Marin Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in celebration of the ensemble’s centennial season. Here Tower projects a galvanic Stravinsky-esque demeanor, replete with 8th-note ostinati throughout, glissandi, string/wind doubling, and bountiful meter

changes. This is a compelling, stormy work that ends triumphantly. Although it prominently features brass and percussion, “Fanfare No. 6” is more overture than fanfare.

The “Fanfares” were added to the National Recording Registry in 2014, having met the Library of Congress’ criterion of being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically important.” They are among Joan Tower’s most recognizable works, having much in common with the bulk of the composer’s oeuvre: they are exhilarating, colorful, textural, dynamic, and vigorous, making clear and persuasive statements in a unique musical voice.

Ellen Grolman is Professor Emerita at Frostburg State University in Frostburg, Maryland, where she taught for 30 years in the Department of Music. She is the author of “Emma Lou Diemer: A Bio-Bibliography”; “Joan Tower: The Complete Bio-Bibliography,” and the editor of a two-volume set of Maddalena Lombardini Sirmen string trios. In retirement, she produces and hosts a weekly, two-hour live radio show, “Music of our Mothers,” on WFCF 88.5 FM.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.