

**The following interview with
JOAN TOWER
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on July 28, 2015.**



LOC: Besides Copland, who/what else inspired “Fanfares for the Uncommon Woman”?

Just Copland. Musically, just Copland. And, the women I dedicated the “Fanfares” to, that becomes a separate issue.

LOC: A “separate issue”?

Well, the fact that Copland wrote for the “common man,” I thought I would be more fair, balance things out a bit. Then a friend of mine, Fran Richards, former head of the classical music division at ASCAP, thought that was an interesting title. So,...I did pay tribute to some of the women I admire, including Fran herself.

LOC: I read that you were once described as a “a performer who composes,” is this accurate?

Yes. I grew up as a performer, a pianist. I didn’t start composing until I was 18. I founded a group, the Da Capo Chamber Players, where I was the pianist for 15 years.

And as my compositional life became more active, I had to leave the Players because they were playing more and more difficult music. They would say, “We can’t play too fast—Joan can’t play it!” They were getting better and better I was getting slower and slower because I had this other compositional life going on.

LOC: A pure craft question: Can you describe to me your actual process?

I compose at the piano.

I like performing the music that I compose. I’m interested in the real-time connection. And in order to get that, in order to know what that connection is, I have to live it, in time.

Beethoven and Stravinsky, my two of my biggest influences, worked the same way. They were both extraordinary performers.

LOC: Do you have a time of day that is most productive for you?

Oh, yeah. It's like a job. I go to my office, which is my studio. I'm there from 1pm and compose until 5. It's an absolute religion. I tell my students not to phone me at that time. I've trained everyone that way and they seem to respect that.

And if I'm running late, I rush home. I have to get there at one!

LOC: What do you look for in a conductor for one of your works? Is there something a female conductor can bring to the pieces that a male conductor can't?

Well, first, I hope they know the score! That takes a while. And that they communicate it to the orchestra, the musical side of it. That, musically, they are "getting it" off the page. And then I hope they have a good relationship with the orchestra.

I don't think it's a gender issue. I think in music, the gender issue is non-existent [at least] in classical and in instrumental music. I'm not talking about pop or vocal. If you add the voice, then you add verbal meaning. That's a whole other ballgame. Then it can become a gender issue but not in instrumental music, it's too abstract

You know, a few years ago we did a blind listening at the National Endowment of the Arts because there was a question about not enough women composers being selected. So we did a blind listening, an anonymous listening. And it didn't make any difference, we couldn't tell the gender of the composer.

LOC: Were you not surprised by that?

No, I wasn't surprised. Musically, it's not about gender.

Now, outside the music, there's all sorts of problems!

LOC: I've seen "Fanfares" described as an "inherently feminist" work. Is there such a thing as an "inherently feminist" work?

I think sometimes writers tend to *read* more than they *listen*. It's not "feminist." It's feminist in that it's dedicated to five women. But musically the works are not feminist. I don't even know what that means.

LOC: You spent some of your growing-up years living in South America. Were your musical sensibilities affected by that?

Oh, yes, definitely. In several ways. I lived there for nine years between [ages] 8 and 17. More like eight years. The Latin culture—I'm speaking of Bolivia—is a very musical, dancing culture. They love to dance! They celebrate every other saints day—which is like every three days!--just in order to dance. I grew up with these festivals, with my nurse, a young pretty Inca girl, who would drop me at the bandstand. And [at the band stand] the band guys would throw some type of percussion instrument at me and I'd be happily playing with them. She was also having a good time, I was having a good time. It was a win-win! [Laughs.]

When I got older, I became a pretty good dancer. I LOVE to dance!

And the percussion!--of course, [percussion] became very important to my work. My percussion concerto, "Strike Zones," was just recorded by Evelyn Glennie for the Naxos label.

Meanwhile, I was studying piano with Mrs. Van Stroheim in La Paz, Bolivia, playing all the dead composers. And I loved that too. So I was simultaneously falling in love with Chopin and Beethoven.

LOC: What are some of the reactions that you have encountered to “Fanfares” over the years?

Well, it’s hard to say. The “Fanfares” are played quite a bit. The orchestras play them—you know they have to play the token living composer. With the “Fanfares,” they can cover two issues--the woman issue and living issue. That sounds cynical, doesn’t it? [Laughs.]

The first and second [“Fanfares”] get played a lot. The first one is played the most. Sometimes, I’m not sure they know there are five others!

I just wrote a sixth—for piano.

LOC: You still teach. What does this bring to your work that you might not get otherwise?

I love to teach! I’ve been teaching for...44 years. I’m up there now, about to be 77.

I’m going to be *taken out* teaching. I love my students. They energize me. They are like my kids; I don’t have kids of my own. I’m their combination mother, teacher, advocate, therapist, cheerleader...torturer. Sometimes I’m *on* them, especially the ones I think are very talented. I love teaching.

LOC: Can you tell me about the women each of the “Fanfares” are dedicated to?

The first was dedicated to Marin Alsop. It was commissioned by the Houston Symphony. She was one of the first women conductors to have a major orchestral position.

The second was commissioned by Absolute Vodka and dedicated to Joan Briccetti. She was the artistic manager for the St. Louis Symphony when I was there. She’s a wonderfully strong woman.

The third was for Carnegie Hall for their 100th anniversary. Two brass quintets: the New York Philharmonic Brass and Empire Brass. That was a BIG deal concert, like \$1000 a seat. That was dedicated to Fran Richards of ASCAP, an extraordinarily independent woman.

The fourth was for the Kansas City Symphony and its 50th anniversary. It was dedicated to JoAnn Falletta, a pioneer woman conductor.

The fifth, which features four trumpets, was for the philanthropist Joan Harris and was done for the inauguration of Harris Hall who commissioned the work for the Aspen Music Festival. I didn’t know [Joan] personally at the time, so I was a little apprehensive about dedicating it to her. But, after I got to know her, I found out what a great person and philanthropist she is.

And, as I said, I just did a sixth. It’s for piano. It just premiered at the annual Music Teachers Association’s meeting in California. Three kids played from memory; they were 13, 15 and 17 [years old]! These kids today were amazing! I haven’t decided on the dedicatee yet.

Marin is going to conduct an orchestral version of this work with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in the May of 2016.

LOC: Will you be there?

Oh, yes, definitely.

Marin did the recording [that was added to the Registry] with the Colorado Symphony with all these pieces-- The concerto is the biggest and toughest of the pieces and she did an extraordinary job.