



J O A N
T O W E R

“Chamber music,” Joan Tower tells me, “is my passion.” And she’s lived it. She was one of the founders, in 1969, of New York’s Da Capo Chamber Players, one of the most virtuosic groups anywhere, and played piano with it for fifteen years. Once her composing career took off, she cut back on the performing, and today she jokes that, because of her rusty technique, she plays only slow piano music. Nevertheless, she was a

**AMERICAN
COMPOSER**

by **KYLE GANN**

dynamite pianist in a dynamite chamber group, and that means she came into composing the old-fashioned way, from being a composer and performer equally and at once. Like Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt, and that crowd.

It may sound commonplace, but that’s an important point, for Tower has been a woman composer in an unusual position. She spent her early years under the wings of a group of composers she now calls “very mental”: Charles Wuorinen, Milton Babbitt, Mario Davidovsky,

and the other hard-core serialists who made composing music in the 1970s a rigorously—and often joylessly—intellectual activity. The association was predestined to end because Tower is a very different kind of person: earthy, visceral, her musical sensibility rooted in playing the Beethoven sonatas she loves. You look at her scores, and you can tell the notes originated not in blackboard gymnastics, but in the feel of playing the instruments, the give and take of chamber players cueing each other. And she is amused by graduate students who analyze her music with charts and diagrams, finding in it calculated systems she had no idea of putting there.

Based on many criteria, Tower is arguably the country’s most highly respected woman composer, and thus probably the world’s as well. Her 60th birthday was celebrated by concerts in more than twenty-five cities. She has had more than a dozen orchestra commissions, including five concertos and her best known works, a series of *Fanfares for the Common Woman*. All this orchestral activity has also brought her a career as a conductor, not only of her own music but of that by dead white males. She admits to loving the feeling of power, but she also complains about orchestral musicians’ attitudes toward composers, and periodically threatens to give up the orchestra forever and devote the rest of her life to chamber music.

She’s written over two dozen chamber works, and each major change in her composing was signaled by one. A crucial example is *Black Topaz* for piano and six instruments, the 1976 work with which she “came out” as a non-serialist,

sometimes even tonal composer. Its premiere, with her twelve-tone mentors present and beginning to frown, was one of the great trials of her professional life: she says she “wished I had a hole in the ground I could disappear into.” Listening today to such an intricate, dissonant work, it’s difficult to find any cause for disapproval. True, the piano solo develops harmonies by building huge chords up in thirds and is increasingly dominated by what will become one of her trademark figures, flurries of sixteenth notes within a small register. Oh yes, and, uh, the piece does kind of end all on a D-flat major scale. I guess I can imagine the smoke coming out of the twelve-toners’ ears by that point.

From that “divorce,” as she refers to it, there was no going back. Soon after followed what is probably her most widely performed chamber piece, *Petroushskates* (1980), written for the Da Capo instrumentation of flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano. Boldly for its time, not a sharp or flat appears until measure seventeen. Those sixteenth-note flurries, here in homage to Stravinsky’s *Petroushka*, dominate, never quite repetitive and always moving somewhere. This piece marks the maturity of what Tower calls her “seamless” style, in which the music is always in transition and changing by the most gradual steps. A piece will start out buzzing within a few pitches, add a pitch, subtract one, shift up a half-step, begin running up the scale tentatively, and although the music isn’t particularly tonal, or rhythmically simple, the listener’s ear is pulled through the ambiguity with a firm hand.

This mode of Tower’s makes me think of butterflies: always fluttering, never resting anywhere, but not flying too fast to keep an eye on. Some of her music of the 1990s took a more meditative turn, such as her *Night Fields* of 1994 (her only string quartet so far, but she’s now writing two more). Widely concerned with whole tone scales and tritones, the piece starts tensely but almost motionlessly, and proceeds by creeping slowly from one idea to another, achieving clarity by painstaking metamorphosis. A more recent work and one of her loveliest, *Big Sky*, for piano trio (2000), grows to a climax that reminds one a little of Copland couched in a motive that Tower has used in her music throughout her career: a minor third expanding to a major one by the lower note’s descending a half-step. Other works evince a strong debt to Messiaen, notably her haunting *Très Lent* (1994) for cello and piano, an explicit homage to the *Quartet for the End of Time*.

It’s a very distinct compositional aesthetic, but hard to pinpoint. It conforms to no -ism, being neither quite tonal nor atonal, fairly complex and disarmingly simple at the same time. It is unremittingly abstract. Tower has never written a piece for voice, never used a text, and swears she never will. Nothing would be less Toweresque than a reference to the extramusical world. At the same time, it is an earthy, tactile body of music, steeped in body movement and performance practice. Its most unvarying characteristic is that it never stays still, but dedicates itself to the art of continual transition. In the works of the 1970s and 80s, that restlessness results in a tension that feels somewhat nervous and disembodied; in the recent works such as *Night Fields* and *Big Sky*, the tension is still present but now underlain by a profound calm. It’s an amazing—and appropriately gradual—transformation in a composer’s development, as though the music has slowly shed its fear without losing its lust for life. ■