



AMERICAN CLASSICS



# JENNIFER HIGDON

## All Things Majestic

Viola Concerto • Oboe Concerto

Roberto Díaz, Viola

James Button, Oboe

Nashville Symphony

Giancarlo Guerrero

## Jennifer Higdon (b. 1962)

### Viola Concerto • Oboe Concerto • All Things Majestic

Jennifer Higdon is a major figure in contemporary classical music: she received the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in Music for her *Violin Concerto* and a GRAMMY® Award in 2010 for her *Percussion Concerto*. Over the last decade, she has established herself among America's most frequently performed composers, and her piece *blue cathedral* is one of the world's most-performed contemporary orchestral works. Her works have been recorded on over five dozen CDs.

Born in Brooklyn, Higdon came to the world of classical music relatively late. She grew up in Atlanta and in the East Tennessee town of Seymour, with much exposure to country, rock, and – thanks to her parents' involvement with the visual arts – avant-garde art happenings. At age 15 she decided to teach herself flute and became a performance major at Bowling Green State University.

The idea of composing, Higdon recalls, emerged almost by chance after a few years of study, when her flute teacher asked her to write a short piece. "I found arranging sounds to be fascinating," she says. Soon the desire to compose became unavoidable, taking over her life. Now, with commissions pouring in and her music in high demand, Higdon is frequently on the road yet still maintains the discipline to compose several hours every day of the week. Higdon also holds the Rock Chair in Composition at The Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

The concerto format figures prominently in Higdon's catalogue. Examples include an acclaimed *Concerto for Orchestra*, a bluegrass-styled concerto for string trio, *Concerto 4-3*, and concertos for piano, violin, viola, soprano saxophone, and percussion, as well as *On a Wire*, an innovative concerto for the chamber ensemble eighth blackbird. Higdon's *Viola Concerto* was premiered by the Curtis Chamber Orchestra at the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress in 2015. She composed the piece expressly for the celebrated Chilean-American violist Roberto Díaz, who also serves as director of the Curtis Institute of Music.

The composer has had a long association with Díaz. Her first major engagement with a professional orchestra was a performance of her *Concerto for Orchestra* by the Philadelphia Orchestra, in which Díaz took part. "I know his sound well and his personality, and I have heard him play a lot," she observes. "As a composer, when you have heard a musician playing an instrument, you tend to keep that sound in your head in a way that resonates. It can be partly the things they choose to play when they are soloing in a chamber situation or with an orchestra, but it's also the personality of the individual. Roberto has a presence about him that is charismatic: an energy I was thinking about when I started the *Viola Concerto*."

In preparing for this composition, Higdon says, "I noticed that pieces for the viola were all very dark and kind of heavy. So I decided to make a piece that is more celebratory and has a real swing to it. Each movement has an American rhythmic drive, with almost jazz-like rhythms that are tricky for the orchestra. They fit together like a little puzzle, where everything is tightly woven. But you also want to think about the gorgeousness of the instrument. The viola sounds great playing long lines."

As a consequence, she veered away from the conventional fast-paced first movement: "I put my slowest movement first. The second movement is a little faster, and the third one is very fast. The architecture was determined by the fact that the viola sounds good doing certain kinds of lines. Overall, it's distinctly an *up concerto*."

Higdon adds, "Musicologists and critics have often written that my musical language sounds American, and, while I don't know exactly how to define that, I am sure that they are right. Since the lead commissioner of this work is the Library of Congress and the co-commissioners are all American institutions of learning and performance, it seemed natural that an American sound would be the basic fabric.

"I have always loved the viola... my first sonata was written for this expressive instrument. It is my privilege to add to the repertoire of an instrument that has moved

from being embedded within ensembles to playing a prominent role at the front of the stage."

Jennifer Higdon's *Viola Concerto* was commissioned by The Library of Congress, in honor of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the Library's concert series. This commission was made possible with the generous support of the Baird Family in honor of Jane and Cameron Baird, and with the support of John J. Medveckis. The work was co-commissioned by the Curtis Institute of Music (with support from the Musical Fund Society), The Aspen Music Festival and School (Robert Spano, Music Director) and Nashville Symphony (Giancarlo Guerrero, Music Director). The concerto was performed on the Tuscan-Medici Stradivari Viola.

The prospect of tailoring a concerto to a particular artist's personality, notes Higdon, stimulates her creativity – and this is certainly the case with the *Oboe Concerto*, which was commissioned by the Minnesota Commissioning Club. The work is inspired by the playing of Kathy Greenbank, principal oboe of The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. "When I met with the Minnesota Commissioning Club," Higdon recalls, "I remember them talking about how even her tuning note sounds like 'butter.'"

While other orchestral works such as *blue cathedral* have at times drawn from the impetus of imagery, Higdon points out that no imagery lies behind the composition of the *Oboe Concerto*: "The music is written so that it should speak to the audience, without them having to have an explanation."

She continues: "This *Oboe Concerto* gives the instrument a chance to highlight its extraordinary lyrical gift. The beauty of the soaring line intrigued me as a starting point, and then the realization that the oboe makes a great partner for duets within an orchestral texture sent me in the direction of creating interactions with other instruments in the supporting ensemble.

"This instrument's playful quality in quick-moving passages set the tone for the faster sections. I have always thought of the oboe as being a most majestic instrument, and it was a pleasure to be able to create a work that would highlight its beauty and grace."

*All Things Majestic* originated in 2011 as a commission from Grand Teton Music Festival to write a major orchestral work commemorating the 50th anniversary of the festival, which takes place over seven weeks each summer in Jackson Hole, along the border of Wyoming and Idaho. Apart from that specific occasion, *All Things Majestic* also represents a musical response to Higdon's deep love of nature, which she cultivates through her passion for hiking.

Higdon refers to herself as an "avid fan of the National Park system, which comes from having hiked so much of the Smoky Mountains. When asked by the Grand Teton Music Festival if I would compose a work to commemorate the festival's 50th anniversary, I jumped at the chance," she says. "*All Things Majestic* is a tribute to the festival, the musicians, and its home, the Tetons, and to the majesty of all of our parks."

As a way of getting into the mindset for this project, Higdon undertook a hike of the Grand Tetons in the company of conductor Donald Runnicles, the festival's music director. The result is a four-movement suite reflecting various facets of this landscape of complex beauty. "I thought a lot about the richness of the land, the fact that you have mountain ranges, plains, rivers, lakes and so many details," she explains. "Essentially, the piece involves a lot of really big sounds, which I associate with the majestic quality of the landscape." At the same time, Higdon focuses on particular sections of the orchestra, foregrounding different colors in each movement.

"In this work," she continues, "each movement represents a musical postcard: the first, the grandeur of the mountain ranges, with their size and sheer boldness, and the solidity with which they fill the ground and air; the second, the lakes and the exquisite mirror-quality of reflection upon their serene surfaces; the third, the rapid flow and unpredictability of the rivers and streams... ever-changing and powerful, yet at times gentle; the final movement pictures the experience of being in the parks, as in a vast cathedral... the beauty of small details such as flowers and plants, within the larger picture of forests and fields... every part contributing to the sheer majesty."

Thomas May

## Roberto Díaz

Photo: Alisa Garin



The violinist Roberto Díaz is president and CEO of the Curtis Institute of Music. As a soloist, he collaborates with leading conductors and composers, including Krzysztof Penderecki, whose *Viola Concerto* he has performed many times with the composer and whose *Double Concerto* he premiered in the United States. In addition to performing with string quartets and pianists in chamber music series and festivals worldwide, Díaz has toured Europe, Asia and the Americas as a member of the Díaz Trio. His tenure at Curtis has seen the construction of a new building that doubled the size of the school's campus, the introduction of a classical guitar department, the launch of summer courses open to the public, and the launch of an international touring series for students, Curtis on Tour. Díaz was awarded an honorary membership by the National Board of the American Viola Society. In 2013 he became a member of the American Philosophical Society, founded by Benjamin Franklin. In addition to his decade-long tenure as principal viola of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Díaz was principal viola of the National Symphony under Mstislav Rostropovich, a member of the Boston Symphony under Seiji Ozawa, and a member of the Minnesota Orchestra under Sir Neville Marriner. Díaz plays the ex-Primrose Amati viola.

[www.robertodiaz.com](http://www.robertodiaz.com)

## James Button



Originally from Australia, oboist James Button made his solo debut with the Melbourne Symphony at the age of seventeen. Principal oboist of the Nashville Symphony since 2011, he was previously a member of the Seoul Philharmonic and the New World Symphony. In 2015 he served as guest principal with the Chicago Symphony under Riccardo Muti. Button has performed at the Verbier, Edinburgh and Tanglewood Music Festivals, as well as at Italy's Spoleto Festival dei Due Mondi and the Granada Festival of Music and Dance. In 2006 he performed the Beethoven *Quintet for Piano and Winds* with James Levine at the Verbier Festival. He attended Temple University and The Juilliard School, where his teachers were Jonathan Blumenfeld and Eugene Izotov, respectively. Other teachers include John Mack, John de Lancie, Joseph Turner and Ian Fallon. Button spends his summers in Santa Fe, N.M., performing as a member of the Santa Fe Opera Orchestra.

## Nashville Symphony



Led by music director Giancarlo Guerrero and president and CEO Alan D. Valentine, the Nashville Symphony has established an international profile with its innovative programming and growing discography. Founded in 1946, the orchestra is one of Tennessee's largest and longest-running nonprofit performing arts organizations. With 170 performances annually, the Symphony's concert schedule encompasses classical, pops, jazz and family performances, along with extensive education and engagement programmes. One of the most active recording orchestras in the country, the Nashville Symphony has released more than thirty recordings, including 28 on Naxos. These recordings have received a total of 20 GRAMMY® nominations and eight GRAMMY® wins, including two for Best Orchestral Performance. Throughout its history, the Nashville Symphony has championed the music of America's leading composers and has commissioned innovative new works from Nashville-based artists, including bassist Edgar Meyer, banjoist Béla Fleck, and singer-songwriter-pianist Ben Folds. In 2016 the orchestra launched the Accelerando initiative, which is designed to prepare young musicians from underrepresented ethnic communities for collegiate study and professional orchestra careers. Notable for its remarkable acoustics and distinctive architecture, Schermerhorn Symphony Center is home to the Nashville Symphony and widely regarded as one of the finest concert halls in the United States.

## Giancarlo Guerrero



Giancarlo Guerrero is music director of the Nashville Symphony, where he has presented nine world premières and has led the orchestra to several GRAMMY® wins, including a 2016 award for his recording of works by Stephen Paulus. He has appeared with many of the prominent North American orchestras, including those of Baltimore, Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Montréal, Philadelphia and Toronto, as well as the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. He has developed a strong guest-conducting profile in Europe, where he has worked with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra, Brussels Philharmonic, Orchestre National de France, Orchestre Philharmonique de Nice and the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse. A passionate proponent of new music, Guerrero has performed and recorded the works of John Adams, John Corigliano, Osvaldo Golijov, Jennifer Higdon, Michael Daugherty, Roberto Sierra and Richard Danielpour. With the Nashville Symphony, he has made recordings of music by Danielpour and Sierra for Naxos, and Béla Fleck's *Banjo Concerto* for Deutsche Grammophon. Guerrero also developed and guided the creation of Nashville Symphony's Composer Lab & Workshop initiative, together with composer Aaron Jay Kernis, to foster and promote new American orchestral music.

Playing  
Time:  
62:47

All rights in this sound recording, artwork, texts and translations reserved.  
Unauthorised public performance, broadcasting and copying of this  
compact disc prohibited. © & © 2017 Naxos Rights US, Inc.  
Made in Germany.



8.559823



Jennifer  
**HIGDON**  
(b. 1962)

**Viola Concerto (2014)\***

- 1 I.  
2 II.  
3 III.

21:57

9:11

4:12

8:34

**4 Oboe Concerto (2005)\***

18:10

**All Things Majestic (2011)**

- 5 I. Teton Range  
6 II. String Lake  
7 III. Snake River  
8 IV. Cathedrals

22:40

3:46

7:07

2:19

9:28

\*WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDING

**Roberto Díaz, Viola 1-3**

**James Button, Oboe 4**

**Nashville Symphony**

**Giancarlo Guerrero**

Recorded live at Laura Turner Concert Hall,  
Schermerhorn Symphony Center, Nashville,  
Tennessee, USA, from 7th to 9th January, 2016 (track 4),  
and on 25th and 26th March, 2016 (tracks 1-3 and 5-8)

Producer and editor: Tim Handley

Engineer: Gary Call

Publisher: Lawdon Press

Booklet notes: Thomas May

Cover: *View across Jackson Lake of the Grand Tetons*  
by Julianna Funk (123rf.com)



AMERICAN CLASSICS

Jennifer Higdon is one of the most distinguished composers working in America today, and her music is a perfect fit for the Nashville Symphony, which has long maintained a commitment to championing the country's most important voices. *All Things Majestic* is a four-movement suite which vividly captures the breathtaking beauty of the American landscape, and her wonderfully expressive concertos for viola and oboe bring out the unique textures and sonorities of these frequently overlooked solo instruments.

[www.naxos.com](http://www.naxos.com)



6 36943 98232 7