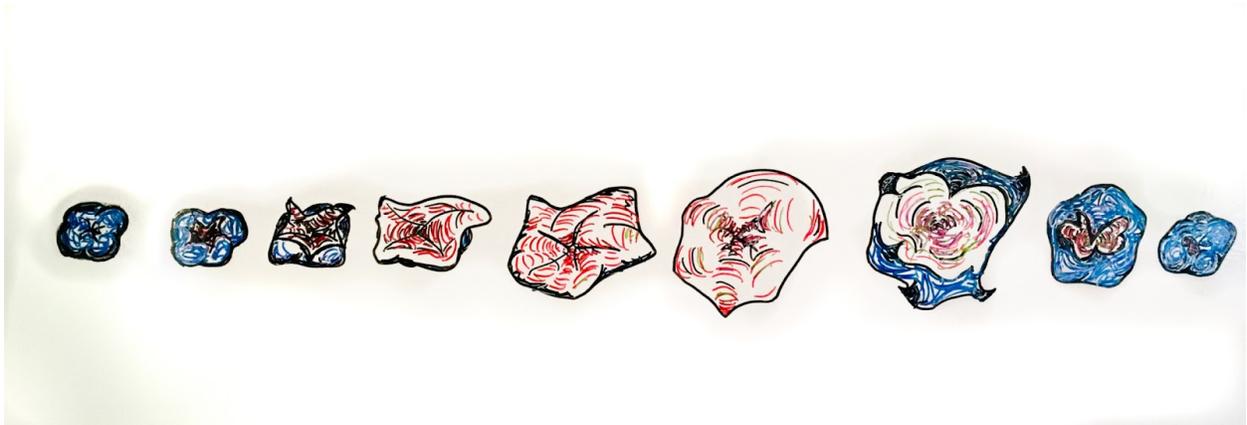




Composer Interview: Jessica Mays



By Daniel Felsenfeld, New York Philharmonic Teaching Artist

Anyone familiar with the composing programs at the New York Philharmonic knows the brilliant person who holds it all together, Jessica Mays. But to say that about her is to omit the most crucial reason why she is so valuable: she is, herself, an accomplished and original composer and songwriter. You can read all about her on her [website](#), but I was happy she agreed to talk to me about her piece Bear, which I loved a lot.

To start, please listen to the piece Bear, [HERE](#)

Danny Felsenfeld: First of all, what an amazing piece, full of texture and drive, and fun and DRAMATIC. But before we get to the music, I want to ask about the words: whose are they, why did you choose them, and what was your overall approach to setting them?

Jessica Mays: Thanks, Danny! I wrote the poem for Bear. This was a unique project where I was asked by Castle of our Skins — a Boston-based concert series — to compose a piece for their program celebrating women themed around black feminism and empowerment. I have written a lot of music, but never have I encountered a project that required me to reflect and process the experience of being a black woman in America.

I wanted to both capture the strength and spirited determination I see in the women in my family, while also communicating the historic struggle and pain brought upon my ancestors, my grandmother, my mother, and so forth. The women in my family are incredibly resilient, but I know life is sometimes an uphill battle.

With this, I picture a bear – with all it’s might and majesty — climbing up a very steep and unstable rockface. Despite the precariousness of the climb, she always pushes upward.

Inspired by this visual, I wrote the poem in a day or so. I sketched it out, bit by bit, using a white board and my journal where I like to write down creative ideas. I decided, for the listener, I wanted the poem to randomly trickle in, bit by bit, not revealing itself in full until the very end. This resulted in three different scenes generated by the poem: the first a fall; the second a fight; the third (the full poem), a bear climbing upward.



DF: In the music you generate the most amazing start-stop, start-stop story in this piece, which I think allows for the (spoiler alert!) vivid ending. How did you go about this? Was it planned and paced or something that happened in the process?

JM: Yes! When I started mapping out my piece, I wanted the music to embody the feeling of angst and longing, brought along by all sorts of complex and sometimes conflicting emotions: push versus pull; struggle versus resilience; feeling trapped versus being empowered; hearing the music halted and hearing the music go, go, go!

You'll notice the all sorts of opposing sound worlds: the groove based opening versus abstract melodies; the cello's contemporary chop technique at the very beginning versus the countertenor (Reginald Mobley) and his baroque inspired flourishes (2:02 – 2:05 and 2:38 – 2:45). All of these opposing sounds to support a sense of tension...and release!

DF: The instrumentation—piano, cello, and countertenor—is quite a gorgeous combination, and you make so much out of it, almost orchestral. Any advice on how to use such small forces in such a big way?

JM: I always recommend talking to your musicians and asking lots of questions. Check out everything they are capable of. For example, though there are a lot of cellists out there, not all of them know how to play chop like Francesca (cello), or clap and play piano at the same time like Julia (piano).

When writing for multiple instruments, consider the ways the instruments within the ensemble can support each other. Allow for each instrument to shine, but pace yourself and be sure not to have too much going on at the

same time, all the time. Map out all the ways you can create tension and release.

Sketch out in advance your intent or aim for your project and then experiment with all sorts of different textures, articulations and extended techniques within your ensemble to help bring your ideas to life. Never underestimate the power of dynamics and tempo as well! We have so many tools as composers to make our music come ALIVE. Have fun with it!

DF: What role does drama play in writing your music? Do you think theatrically or does it come to you naturally?

JM: Hmm...perhaps it depends on the project. The poem and inspiration for Bear was definitely charged with drama and conveying of strong emotions. I also think Bear may be more theatrical just by having the opportunity to utilize words sung by a world-class performer like Reggie. Having a vocalist definitely creates a unique potential for theatre/drama.

DF: Did you have a sense of the length of the piece when you sat down to write?

JM: With this commission, I was given a specific time limit of 5 to 7 minutes.

DF: It's a cliché, but since we are the VERY YOUNG COMPOSERS, I wonder if you have any advice to young(er) composers.

JM: Art is a reflection of the world and time we live in. It is a reflection of our sadness and pain; our sense of joy and wonder; our study of beauty, and so many other emotions that make us uniquely human. You should all - now and always - continue to find opportunities to create, process and express yourselves. Whether by ourselves, at home with family, or with

friends near and far, create opportunities to collaborate and share in your community. Practicing our craft fuels us with the inspiration to move onward to bigger and better things - Never stop exploring and creating, Young Composers, and never stop searching for those things that inspire you.