

# Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

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## *blue cathedral*

### Jennifer Higdon

**B**orn in Brooklyn, Jennifer Higdon grew up in Atlanta and in rural Tennessee in a counterculture family — both parents were visual artists — for whom art happenings and experimental film festivals were the norm. She thought she might become a writer and didn't have any involvement with music until she started teaching herself to play the flute at the age of 15. In the course of her education at Bowling Green State University (Ohio), the Curtis Institute of Music, and the University of Pennsylvania she developed her exceptional talent as a composer.

Today her dance card for commissions is very full, and at least one of her orchestral works, *blue cathedral*, seems destined to become a classic, having already been performed more than 600 times, by more than 150 notable symphony orchestras, since its premiere in 2000. Higdon composed it on commission from the Curtis Institute, her alma mater, where she holds the Rock Chair in Composition. She has served as composer-in-residence for many music festivals, including Bravo! Vail, Music From Angel Fire, and the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival. In 2004 she was the first woman to be named a featured composer at the Tanglewood Contemporary Music Festival. She has also served as composer-in-residence with the orchestras of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Fort Worth. In addition to her faculty position at Curtis, Higdon has taught as the Karel Husa Visiting Professor at Ithaca College and, from 2016 to 2018, as Barr Laureate Scholar at the University of Missouri–Kansas City. In 2018–19 she was in residence at the University of Texas at Austin. Higdon's compositions have earned her the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Music, for her Violin Concerto, which also received a Grammy Award; another Gram-

my for her Percussion Concerto; and, in 2018, the Nemmers Prize of Northwestern University.

Although she has written a number of choral and solo vocal pieces, not to mention the 2015 opera *Cold Mountain*, Higdon is principally an instrumental composer, having produced an impressive body of works for orchestra and for various chamber formulations. Her teacher George Crumb has acknowledged specific qualities that go to the heart of her music: its “rhythmic vitality, interesting coloration, and sensitivity to nuance and timbre.” These are indeed her musical fingerprints, but beyond what are essentially technical matters one also hears in her scores an immediacy of contact, a genial and sincere desire to connect with the listener.

Higdon's *blue cathedral* represented a leap forward in her catalogue. She elaborated in a commentary that appeared with a recording of the work by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra:

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### In Short

**Born:** December 31, 1962, in Brooklyn, New York

**Resides:** in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**Work composed:** 1999, on commission for the 75th anniversary of the Curtis Institute of Music; dedicated “in loving memory of Andrew Blue Higdon”

**World premiere:** March 1, 2000, in Philadelphia, by the Curtis Institute of Music Symphony Orchestra, Robert Spano, conductor

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances

**Estimated duration:** ca. 13 minutes

I began writing this piece at a unique juncture in my life and found myself pondering the question of what makes a life. The recent death of my younger brother, Andrew Blue, made me reflect on the amazing journeys that we all make in our lives, crossing paths with so many individuals singularly and collectively, learning and growing each step of the way. This piece represents the expression of the individual and the group — our inner travels and the places our souls carry us, the lessons we learn, and the growth we experience. In tribute to my brother, I feature solos for the clarinet (the instrument he played) and the flute (the instrument I play). Because I am the older sibling, it is the flute that appears first in this dialogue. At the end of the work, the two instruments continue their dialogue, but it is the flute that drops out and the clarinet that continues on in the upward progressing journey.

This is a story that commemorates living and passing through places of knowledge and of sharing and of that song called life.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (one doubling piccolo), oboe and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, crotales, marimba, tam-tam, vibraphone, orchestra bells, bell tree, sizzle cymbal, suspended cymbal, chimes, small triangle, large triangle, bass drum, large tom-tom, harp, piano (doubling celesta), and strings. In addition, tuned water glasses are played by the horns, trombones, and tuba, and at the end of the work most of the orchestra's musicians play Chinese bells (aka Chinese health reflex balls).

*This essay is derived from a note originally written for the San Francisco Symphony and is used with permission. © James M. Keller*

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## In the Composer's Words

Although Jennifer Higdon composed *blue cathedral* in response to her brother's passing, the piece is uplifting rather than mournful: it is to a dirge as a memorial celebration is to a funeral. She transcends the specific, regrettable circumstances of her inspiration to achieve a short work of exquisite balance and emotional precision. Why blue, and why a cathedral? The composer explains with a dreamlike image:

Blue — like the sky. Where all possibilities soar. Cathedrals — a place of thought, growth, spiritual expression, serving as a symbolic doorway into and out of this world. Cathedrals represent a place of beginnings, endings, solitude, fellowship, contemplation, knowledge and growth. As I was writing this piece, I found myself imagining a journey through a glass cathedral in the sky. Because the walls would be transparent, I saw the image of clouds and blueness permeating from the outside of this church. ... The listener would float down the aisle, slowly moving upward at first and then progressing at a quicker pace, rising towards an immense ceiling which would open to the sky. As this journey progressed, the speed of the traveler would increase, rushing forward and upward. I wanted to create the sensation of contemplation and quiet peace at the beginning, moving towards the feeling of celebration and ecstatic expansion of the soul, all the while singing along with that heavenly music.

