

Notes on the Program

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

Tread softly

Nina C. Young

Nina C. Young's official biography states that her current artistic interests focus on "collaborative, multidisciplinary works that touch on issues of sustainability, climate change, historical narratives, and women's rights." *Tread softly* represents a clear intersection of a number of these areas with the inspiration of the New York Philharmonic's *Project 19*, an incentive that is commissioning works from 19 women composers to mark the centenary (in 2020) of the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution. The Amendment proclaimed that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex" — a historical narrative concerning women's rights if ever one was.

Several of Young's recent works signal her involvement in writing music of historical narrative or social conscience. *Out of whose womb came the ice*, a work for baritone voice, chamber orchestra, and optional generative video, which was premiered in 2017, was inspired by the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914–17, during which Ernest Shackleton and his team faced extraordinary perils near the South Pole. *Her Rite of Passage* (2016) is a collaborative, participatory piece, realized with women's rights activist and performance artist Erin Helfert that explores the emotional impact of Helfert's five-year rape trial in a Moroccan court; it was premiered in the evocative environs of New York's Federal Hall. Young is currently working on *Making Tellus: An Opera for the Anthropocene*, an evening-long, ritualistic, multimedia work that "addresses the current socio-political conversation surrounding human intervention and the Earth's rapidly changing geology."

Young earned degrees in both music and ocean engineering from the Massachusetts

Institute of Technology. While there, she held a research assistantship at the MIT Media Lab's Hyperinstruments group, which spurred her interest in writing for combinations of acoustic and electronic forces. She completed her master's degree in composition at McGill University, where she held a research assistantship in the Expanded Musical Practice group at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Music Media and Technology and worked at the McGill Digital Composition Studios. She went on to earn a doctoral degree in musical arts at Columbia University.

This past autumn, Young assumed the post of assistant professor of composition at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music. Prior to that, she was on the composition faculties of The University of Texas at Austin (where she directed the school's electronic music studios) and the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and served as visiting composer at the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University. She also serves as co-artistic director of New York's Ensemble Échappé, a collective of 20 instrumentalists, for which she was composer-in-residence from 2015 to 2017.

She was a winner of the 2015–16 Rome Prize in Musical Composition at the American Academy

In Short

Born: December 8, 1984, in Nyack, New York

Resides: in New York City

Work composed: 2019–20, on commission from the New York Philharmonic as part of *Project 19*, its commissioning initiative marking the centennial of the ratification of the 19th Amendment

World premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 10 minutes

in Rome. Other distinctions include receiving a Koussevitzky Commission from the Library of Congress, a Civitella Ranieri Fellowship, a Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Salvatore Martirano Memorial Award, Aspen Music Festival's Jacob Druckman Prize, and honors from BMI, IAWM, and ASCAP / SEAMUS. Her music has been widely performed in the United States, Canada, and Europe by ensembles including the American Composers Orchestra, Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Minnesota Orchestra, Phoenix Symphony, Orkest de ereprijs (Netherlands), Nouvel Ensemble Moderne (Montreal), UNESCO's Fusion Arts Ensemble (Paris), Chameleon Arts Ensemble (Boston), and the Henschel Quartet (a noted German string quartet), as well as on the Los Angeles Philharmonic's *Next on Grand: Contemporary Americans* festival and Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra's *Liquid Music* series.

Apart from her concert music, Young composes, arranges, and realizes sound-design work for theater and dance. Her biography observes:

In the Composer's Words

Nina C. Young has inscribed the following in the score for *Tread softly*:

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

The Cloths of Heaven
W.B. Yeats

One hundred years after the 19th Amendment was ratified, it still seems radical that I can have a voice, that women can be heard, and taken seriously as equal weavers of the tapestry of American culture. Ideas fly rapidly through my head and paint a dreamscape that, despite all language of equality, always risks being thwarted too soon, edited, erased. We protect ourselves, or we acquiesce, and our pedestal becomes a cage. In the coming seasons, 19 women will work with this illustrious orchestra. And so I ask you, as we spread our sounds into your minds, tread softly, because you tread on our dreams.

Her experience in the electronic music studio informs her acoustic work, which takes as its given not melody and harmony, but sound itself, continuously metamorphosing from one state to another. Her musical voice draws from elements of the classical canon, modernism, spectralism, American experimentalism, minimalism, electronic music, and popular idioms. Her projects strive to create unique sonic environments that can be appreciated by a wide variety of audiences while challenging stylistic boundaries, auditory perception, and notions of temporality.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, crotales, orchestra bells, vibraphone, suspended cymbals, tam-tam, tamboourine, temple blocks, snare drum, bass drum, harp, piano, and strings.

