



PROJECT **W**

WORKS BY DIVERSE WOMEN COMPOSERS

CHICAGO SINFONIETTA / MEI-ANN CHEN

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CHICAGO SINFONIETTA / MEI-ANN CHEN

FLORENCE PRICE (1887–1953)
ARR. WILLIAM GRANT STILL
Dances in the Canebrakes (9:28)

- 1 I. Nimble Feet (2:32)**
- 2 II. Tropical Noon (3:37)**
- 3 III. Silk Hat and Walking Cane (3:13)**

CLARICE ASSAD (b. 1978)
4 Sin Fronteras (13:27)

JESSIE MONTGOMERY (b. 1981)
5 Coincident Dances (11:40)

REENA ESMAIL (b. 1983)
6 Charukeshi Bandish (2:58)
Reena Esmail, vocals

7 Black Iris (13:02)

JENNIFER HIGDON (b. 1962)
Dance Card (23:07)

- 8 I. Raucous Rumpus (2:17)**
- 9 II. Breeze Serenade (6:34)**
- 10 III. Jumble Dance (3:42)**
- 11 IV. Celestial Blue (7:55)**
- 12 V. Machina Rockus (2:25)**

TT: (74:10)

All World Premiere Recordings

PERSONAL NOTE BY MEI-ANN CHEN

Welcome to our celebration. This is not just another album, this is a statement. Not only does it celebrate the Chicago Sinfonietta's 30th anniversary and what we stand for — diversity, inclusion, and racial and cultural equity in the arts through the universal language of symphonic music — but it is a promise. A promise that we will continue to be that which our founder, Maestro Paul Freeman, began — a bold and daring ensemble striving to make connections with those in our community and beyond through music.

As big as the world is, in this day, it is easier and easier to connect with one another and learn about and find similarities among cultures around the globe. It is increasingly clear in our modern world how rich we are because of our unique differences, as well as for what we share in common. We are more aware of how much women can and do contribute, and we celebrate all of this.

As a young girl growing up, I was told I could not possibly be a conductor. I am not the only one. Many girls have been told they can't be musicians, singers, composers, etc., for a variety of reasons. There are many stories similar to mine — thank goodness so many of us did not listen! Featuring works by nine different women composers over the course of our 30th Anniversary Season was a fitting tribute to Maestro Freeman. (The last Sinfonietta program Maestro Freeman conducted, during which he handed me the baton, was a program devoted to works by women composers.) During the 2017–2018 season, this focus on women composers also brought unexpected nationwide attention as the Chicago Sinfonietta became the No. 1 orchestra in the country in terms of the percentage of works by women composers programmed.

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This album reflects the Sinfonietta's year-long initiative highlighting and celebrating contemporary, diverse women composers. In the four commissioned works on this CD, you'll hear music shaped by a variety of cultures and experiences. Brazilian-American composer/pianist/singer Clarice Assad brings the influence of her Brazilian heritage and experiences living in Brazil, France, and the US to her work; Indian-American composer Reena Esmail works between the worlds of Indian and Western classical music; American composer Jennifer Higdon was influenced early on by popular and folk music as well as geography and nature, and forges all these influences into her unique and powerful voice; and African-American composer/violinist Jessie Montgomery sees music as a place where people can express both their differences and commonalities. All of these composers celebrate life with their music.

To those of you who have been with us on this exciting journey, attending our concerts, thank you. For those of you just now joining us via this recording, welcome! Come celebrate with us.



Mei-Ann Chen
Chicago Sinfonietta Music Director

PROGRAM NOTES BY DON MACICA

In late-2016, the Chicago Sinfonietta began planning its 30th Anniversary season with these questions: How do we honor the legacy of Dr. Paul Freeman, the orchestra's founder and music director for its first 24 years? How do we celebrate the groundbreaking work of its current music director, Mei-Ann Chen? And even more important, how do we move the organization forward in its ongoing commitment to showcasing diverse classical composers in its milestone season?

Dr. Freeman was already an internationally acclaimed African-American conductor when he founded the Chicago Sinfonietta in 1987. Inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Freeman dedicated himself and his new orchestra to highlighting seldom-heard composers and performers from diverse backgrounds and putting them on an equal footing with the white European and American canon so familiar to the classical audience.

At the turn of the millennium, Freeman found a partner in Chicago-based Cedille Records and the Chicago Sinfonietta soon released the first of four albums featuring works by African-American composers.

Mei-Ann Chen is charting new roads as an Asian woman in a historically White male-dominated field. Following in Freeman's footsteps, she uses her podium as an instrument of change by giving a voice to the underrepresented. In 2011, Chen dedicated her second concert with the Sinfonietta (a guest conductor appearance immediately prior to her appointment as music director) to women composers. She recognized that, as with other voices outside of the male-dominated field of classical music, women's contributions have been overlooked.

Dedicated to diverse women in classical music, the Sinfonietta's *Project W* concerts and recording spotlight their musical contributions and confront the persistent gender gap in classical music today. Few women hold music director posts and orchestral works written by women made up barely 1% of performed repertoire in 2017. Mei-Ann Chen and the Chicago Sinfonietta addressed this situation with the commissioning and co-commissioning of four new orchestral works. By coupling these brand-new, never-recorded compositions with a historic work by Florence Price, *Project W* represents the past and present of women in classical music, while pointing towards a more inclusive future. The powerful voices of the women included in this program serve as a stirring reminder that we all lose when women's contributions are silenced. The Sinfonietta premiered two of the commissioned works on the orchestra's season-opening concert in September 2017. The others followed on the orchestra's March 2018 *Hear Me Roar* concert, Chen's second program dedicated entirely to women composers.

6 Mei-Ann Chen begins this album of new commissions by tipping her baton to history with the inclusion of a 65-year-old piece by a composer who lived much of her life in Chicago. **Florence Price** (1887–1953) was the first African-American woman acknowledged as a symphonic composer. If there is ever to be a major Price revival, Maestro Chen will surely be one of its driving forces. She has conducted four different Price compositions in the last several years, both at the helm of the Sinfonietta and as a guest conductor around the world, including with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Price was born and began her music career in Arkansas after studying at the New England Conservatory of Music. Worsening racial tensions in Arkansas convinced Price to move to Chicago in 1927, where she pursued further studies at the American Conservatory of Music and Chicago Musical College before establishing herself as a teacher, pianist, and organist. Her Symphony No. 1 debuted with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1933, the first time a major orchestra had ever performed a work by an African-American woman.

Price's inclusion on this album of premieres serves as a through line that connects the Sinfonietta's historic and unwavering advocacy of Black composers to its championing of gender representation.

Dances in the Canebreaks is a suite of dances based on African-American melodies. Price originally wrote this piece for solo piano at the end of her life. Immediately after her death, it was orchestrated by none other than William Grant Still, widely regarded as the dean of African-American composers and a great admirer of Price's art. The orchestral version debuted in 1953, and you can hear quite a bit of Southern folk song and spiritual tradition in its three movements. They are, nonetheless, dances, and lively ones at that. The piece is divided into three movements, each with its own title: *Nimble Feet*, *Tropical Noon*, and *Silk Hat and Walking Cane*.

Following Price's work is the first of the album's newly commissioned pieces, by singer, pianist, and composer **Clarice Assad** (b. 1978). Assad's new work, *Sin Fronteras* (Without Borders), dissolves the geographic, cultural, and moral boundaries that disconnect people from one another. She readily admits that it is somewhat of a utopian ambition, given that drawing boundaries is something the human race has willingly subscribed to for thousands of years.

Assad was born in Brazil but has spent the last two decades living in the United States. She considers her home to be *The Americas*, not one or the other. Her new work starts its aural journey at the bottom of South America, traveling up both Atlantic and Pacific coasts all the way to the northern hemisphere via Central America. Each theme borrows a little something from the other to create something new, yet that new thing is still rooted in the culture from which it grew. *Sin Fronteras* was originally written with dancers in mind, choreographed by Wilfredo Rivera for Chicago's Cerqua-Rivera Dance Theater.

The rhythmic quality that Assad deftly employs in *Sin Fronteras* also applies to *Coincident Dances* by **Jessie Montgomery** (b. 1981), violinist and member of New York City's adventurous and highly acclaimed Catalyst Quartet. Montgomery grew up in New York City, a profoundly multicultural environment where a simple walk to the market entails a multitude of sounds and experiences overlapping each other. *Coincident Dances* is an expression of that environment. It is a fusion of several sound-worlds: English consort, samba, mbira (the African thumb piano), dance music from Zimbabwe, swing, and even 21st-century techno.

Indian-American composer **Reena Esmail** was born in 1983. Her *Project W* commission is the provocative composition *Black Iris*. A graduate of the Juilliard School and Yale School of Music and a 2011–2012 Fulbright Scholar to India, Esmail draws elements from both Western and Hindustani (North Indian) classical music.

Esmail was already in the process of writing her new piece when #MeToo entered the national consciousness in October 2017. Moved by both her own rage and solidarity with the bravery of the women who were telling their stories, she took her responsibilities as an artist and composer to their necessary conclusion: To use that platform to start real, honest discussions about how each one of us can contribute to a better future for everyone. Thus, what was already underway with a working title of *Avaaz* (transliteration of the Hindi term for “voice”) was given new purpose and became *Black Iris*. As the work took on new meaning, its shape was altered. There is a point where the forward motion stops entirely. After an uncomfortable silence, the women musicians of the Sinfonietta reenter singing, one by one, in the order of the year they entered the orchestra, their individual voices joining together to bring the work back to life. The listener is left to

contemplate what was lost when their voices were silenced and how much humanity is enhanced when they are heard and honored. About the events that inspired the piece, Esmail writes:

The harm itself happened when I was in high school and college, but I only began to admit it — even to myself — in 2015, when I first wrote honestly about it in words. And one of the first things I put in this writing was that I was hoping at some point that I could express those emotions, which were still so raw at that point, in an orchestral work. This piece, #metoo, written almost three years later, is that work.

As at its concert premiere, on this album Esmail's own singing serves as an introduction to *Black Iris*. The composer writes:

*I wrote a melody for this piece in a traditional Hindustani form, called a “bandish” — a short melodic composition upon which a musician would then improvise. It is in Raag Charukeshi, one of my favorite raags, because of its constant shifting between what Westerners hear as major and minor. It turns on a dime between darkness and light. The first track presents the Charukeshi bandish in its purest form. In *Black Iris*, the bandish serves as the “protagonist” of the piece — a woman who is trying to navigate through a world filled with pitfalls, dead ends, dark turns — each time finding the way back to her own, individual, powerful voice.*

About her performance of *Charukeshi Bandish*, Esmail states: “While I am certainly not a professional Hindustani singer, I have studied the artform for a number of years, and I truly enjoyed recording the bandish for this album.”

The final commission is by **Jennifer Higdon** (b. 1962), a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer with longstanding ties to both the Chicago Sinfonietta and Mei-Ann Chen. In fact, her most celebrated composition, *blue cathedral*, was performed on the Sinfonietta's *Women in Classical Music* concert in 2011 where Paul Freeman retired and officially handed over the baton to Maestro Chen.

A self-taught flutist, Higdon began composing at 21 and is fluent across genres, including orchestral chamber, choral, vocal, and wind ensemble. This new work, *Dance Card*, is a co-commission of the Chicago Sinfonietta, River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, and New Century Chamber Orchestra.

The whimsically, yet purposefully named piece is a celebration of the joy, lyricism, and passion of a group of strings playing together. Higdon composed it in five movements, each of which is designed so that it can also be played as a separate work. From a string fanfare to gentle serenades and actual wild dances, the musicians get a chance to highlight their soloistic and ensemble playing.

Project W: Works by Diverse Women Composers demonstrates that, just as there is no “typical” kind of classical music or composer, compositions written by women are a product of their whole selves, reflective of both their shared and diverse experiences. Yes, *Project W* focuses on women, but it also points the way to a future where inclusion is a matter of course, instead of exceptional.

Chicago Sinfonietta would like to thank the generous supporters of the *Project W* initiative, including Tom Baron; Women's Philharmonic Advocacy; the National Endowment for the Arts; Illinois Tool Works; Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP; and Fifth Third Bank.

A 25-year veteran of the music industry, Don Macica is Founder and Director of Home Base Arts Marketing Services. Before starting that enterprise, he was Director of Communications for the Chicago Sinfonietta.

BIOGRAPHIES



MEI-ANN CHEN

Chicago Sinfonietta Music Director

Innovation, imagination, passion, and dynamism are the hallmarks of conductor Mei-Ann Chen. Music Director of the MacArthur Award-winning Chicago Sinfonietta since 2011, Artistic Director and Conductor for the National Taiwan Symphony Orchestra Summer Festival since 2016, and Conductor Laureate of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, Ms. Chen is acclaimed for infusing orchestras with energy, enthusiasm, and high-level music-making, and galvanizing audiences and communities alike.

A sought-after guest conductor, Ms. Chen's reputation as a compelling communicator has resulted in growing popularity with orchestras globally.

North American guest conducting credits include appearances with the Symphony Orchestras of Atlanta, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Chicago, Detroit, Fort Worth, Houston, Indianapolis, Oregon, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, Toronto, and Vancouver. She has appeared with distinguished orchestras throughout Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, including the symphonies of BBC Scottish; Denmark's National, Aalborg, Aarhus, and Odense; Sweden's Gävle, Gothenburg, Helsingborg, Malmö, and Norrköping; the Netherlands Philharmonic at the Concertgebouw, Norwegian Radio, and Trondheim; Finland's Tampere Philharmonic; Austria's Grosses Orchester Graz; Germany's Badische Staatskapelle Karlsruhe; Brazil's São Paulo Symphony; and the National Taiwan Symphony.

meiannchen.com

CHICAGO SINFONIETTA

Now in its 31st year, the Chicago Sinfonietta has pushed artistic boundaries to provide an alternative way of hearing, seeing, and thinking about a symphony orchestra and is dedicated to promoting diversity, inclusion, and racial and cultural equity in the arts. Each concert experience blends inventive new pieces with classical masterworks, each from a diverse array of voices, to entertain, transform, and inspire. In 2016, the Chicago Sinfonietta was the proud recipient of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's prestigious MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions (MACEI). This award recognizes exceptional organizations that are key contributors in their fields.

The orchestra was founded in 1987 by Maestro Paul Freeman (1936–2015) to address the disconnect between the complete lack of diversity in orchestras and the vibrant, nuanced communities for which they play. For more than 30 years, the Chicago Sinfonietta's mission has been to represent the city of Chicago, reflecting that vibrancy on stage and in its programming, making classical music accessible for everyone. In everything it does, the Chicago Sinfonietta continues to be inspired by founder Paul Freeman's unique vision. Highlights of the orchestra's 31 years include six European tours, two Kennedy Center performances, two Millennium Park concerts attended by over 19,000 people, and 15 recordings.

chicagosinfonietta.org

FIRST VIOLIN

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Lori Ashikawa
Sylvia de la Cerna
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Michael Folker
Jon Johnson
Ryan Kahlbaugh
Dave Victor

HARP

Faye Seeman

CELESTE

George Radosaljevic



FLORENCE PRICE

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, Florence Price (1887–1953) is known as the first African-American woman to have an orchestral piece played by a major American orchestra: her *Symphony in E Minor* was performed by Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1933. After she earned two artist diplomas at the New England Conservatory, beginning her studies at the age of 16, Price's early career was as an educator based in the South,

first at two schools in Little Rock, and then eventually as the head of the music department at Clark University in Atlanta until 1912. Her life in Chicago began after her family joined the Great Migration and moved north following racial incidents in 1927. This move led to a burst of compositional creativity and widespread recognition for Price's compositions beginning in the 1930s. By the end of her life, Price's works numbered over 300 (unfortunately most remain unpublished). She is perhaps best known for her vocal works (including two songs that appear on baritone Thomas Hampson's 2018 Cedille album, *Songs from Chicago*); her Spiritual arrangements were frequently performed during her lifetime by singers such as Marian Anderson and Leontyne Price and remain important to the American vocal canon.



CLARICE ASSAD

One of the most widely performed composers of her generation, Clarice Assad is a Grammy-nominated Brazilian-American composer, pianist, arranger, and singer of musical depth and versatility. Assad's compositions include works for piano and guitar, works for large and small chamber ensembles, and 15 orchestral works. Although the ensembles she writes for are mostly classical, her voice as a composer has been heavily influenced by Brazilian music, jazz, and world music. She has been commissioned by Carnegie Hall,

the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Orquestra Sinfônica de São Paulo, General Electric, Sybarite5, Cedille Records, and the Vail and La Jolla Music Festivals. Her works have been recorded by prominent soloists including Dame Evelyn Glennie, Yo-Yo Ma, Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, and Liang Wang. She has served as a composer-in-residence for the Albany Symphony and Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music and was composer-in-residence for the New Century Chamber Orchestra for a decade. Assad is the recipient of numerous awards including the Aaron Copland Award, Van Lier Fellowship, NPR's All Songs Considered, and the McKnight Visiting Composer Fellowship. She is the founder of VOXploration, an award winning research-based workshop on spontaneous music creation that requires participants to use only their voices and bodies as musical instruments.

clariceassad.com



JESSIE MONTGOMERY

Jessie Montgomery is a New York native violinist, composer, and music educator. Her compositions are performed throughout the United States, the UK, and Europe and broadcast on radio worldwide. Since 1999, Jessie has been affiliated with The Sphinx Organization, which supports the accomplishments of young African-American and Latinx

string players. In 2014, Jessie was awarded Sphinx's generous MPower grant toward her acclaimed debut album, *Strum: Music for Strings* (Azica Records 2015). Jessie holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the Juilliard School. In 2012, she completed her graduate degree in Composition for Film and Multimedia at New York University. Since 2012, she has been a member of the highly acclaimed Catalyst Quartet, which *The New York Times* calls "invariably energetic and finely burnished... performing with earthly vigor," touring regularly in the United States and abroad. In addition to composing, Jessie can also be heard performing regularly with Silkroad, The Knights, and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra.

jessiemontgomery.com



REENA ESMAIL

Indian-American composer Reena Esmail works between the worlds of Indian and Western classical music and brings communities together through the creation of equitable musical spaces. In recent seasons, Esmail has worked with the Kronos Quartet, Imani Winds, Albany Symphony, River Oaks

Chamber Orchestra, Salastina Music Society, SOLI, and American Composers Orchestra. Her work is performed regularly throughout the US and abroad, and has been programmed at Carnegie Hall, the Barbican Centre in London, Schloss Esterhazy in Hungary, and throughout India. She has served as Composer-Educator in Residence for the Albany Symphony, Street Symphony in downtown Los Angeles, Concerts on the Slope in Brooklyn, and Pasadena Master Chorale. In addition to her work as a composer, Esmail is Co-Artistic Director of Shashtra, a nonprofit organization that promotes cross-cultural music that connects the great musical traditions of India and the West.

reenaesmail.com



JENNIFER HIGDON

Jennifer Higdon is one of America's most acclaimed and most frequently performed living composers. She is a major figure in contemporary Classical music, receiving the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in Music for her *Violin Concerto*, a 2010 Grammy for her *Percussion Concerto* and a 2018 Grammy for her *Viola Concerto*. Most recently, Higdon received the Nemmers Prize from Northwestern University, which

is given to contemporary classical composers of exceptional achievement who have significantly influenced the field of composition. Higdon enjoys several hundred performances a year of her works, and *blue cathedral* is one of today's most performed contemporary orchestral works, with more than 600 performances worldwide. Her works have been recorded on more than 60 CDs. Higdon's first opera, *Cold Mountain*, won the prestigious International Opera Award for Best World Premiere and the opera's recording was nominated for two Grammy awards. Dr. Higdon holds the Rock Chair in Composition at The Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Her music is published exclusively by Lawdon Press.

jenniferhigdon.com

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