

A Boston Birthday Celebration (And Residency) For Composer Joan Tower

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By [Keith Powers](#) 



[New England Conservatory](#) is calling it a residency for composer Joan Tower, but

it feels more like a birthday party.

And it is — just a bit premature. The esteemed American composer turns 80 this September, and NEC, along with the [Boston Modern Orchestra Project](#), has organized an early acknowledgement of the milestone. BMOP goes first, with an all-Tower program Friday evening at Jordan Hall. NEC plays host for the whole week, which includes a women-in-leadership conference, a masterclass and seminar, and a chamber music concert on Feb. 13 as well.

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Tower is prolific, and already well honored. In 1990, she was the first woman to win composition's largest financial prize, the Grawemeyer Award, for her orchestral piece "Silver Ladders." Her "Made in America" might be the most frequently performed piece of contemporary music: a commission consortium of 65 orchestras funded it, and it has been performed in all 50 states. A recording of "Made in America" won a Grammy.

Early in her career, Tower founded the Da Capo Players and performed on piano with the chamber ensemble. Her compositional life gradually took over, and during her career she has served as artist or composer-in-residence for the St. Louis Symphony, the Orchestra of St. Luke's, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and the Albany Symphony.

This week's residency seems ceremonial, but previous ones — especially an early career stay in the mid-1980s at St. Louis, after an invitation from conductor Leonard Slatkin — were seminal to Tower's development.

"Each residency with an orchestra was different," she says. "I've been lucky enough to do four. When I was assigned to St. Louis, it was the old Meet the Composer series, which was supposed to create an advocacy for living composers.

"I took that opportunity to meet with the soloists — Rudolf Serkin, Alicia de Larrocha. I would just sit in rehearsal, with the score, trying to find out things from them. I would only speak at certain times, and that way I earned their trust."



Those relatively early experiences have led to a lifetime of close work with performers. “One of my loves, and my nourishment as a composer, is working with players,” she says. One of those collaborations comes to life in the BMOP program, where flutist Carol Wincenc will perform two works written for her by Tower, a flute concerto and “Rising,” composed in 2009 for string quartet and soloist.

“Carol is right there at the top of my favorite players,” Tower says. “I think I’ve written four pieces for her. She’s a musical soul, and working with her is a joy.”

Here’s a performance of the “Flute Concerto,” written in 1989 and performed here by Wincenc with piano accompaniment.



“Every instrument is different,” Tower says about composing. “They all have a different DNA. And the existing repertoire has a lot to do with it. In the violin world, a composer is nothing special. Everyone has written for the violin. And the piano.

“But for flute it’s different. And viola too. I wrote a piece for solo viola, and now, every time I’m with an orchestra, the violists will come up to me and ask for my autograph. The violins act like I’m not even there.”

The close association Tower has with instrumentalists has crossed over to her teaching methods. A longtime professor at Bard College, Tower thinks everyone studying music should study composition as well.

“It helps them develop a deep curiosity about what a piece is like,” she says.

“Some performers can’t do it. I had one piano student, he fought me and fought me over composing. He ended writing a waltz, in the style of Chopin. It wasn’t so good. But then I had him play other students’ compositions, and he played them so beautifully that now two of those players have continued to compose. You just don’t know where it will lead.”

In this short video, Tower talks about composing her most widely heard work, “Made in America,” but also about the breadth and experience of being a woman

composer.



Comparing the 80th birthday celebrations of Tower to those of fellow New Yorker Philip Glass last year might be unfair, or irrelevant. But as the stark absence of female composers on major orchestral programs is getting [increased scrutiny](#), the nature of the two “celebrations” stand out.

Among the many presenters marking Glass’s milestone, the New York Philharmonic performed his Concerto for Two Pianos — the first time that orchestra had ever programmed his work. No such programming of Tower’s works was planned. Here in Boston, it’s a conservatory, and the estimable BMOP, who are acknowledging her career. The orchestra across the street at Symphony Hall has no such intentions.

Tower is certainly no stranger to collaboration with major orchestras — her long relationship in St. Louis being a great example of that. But it was the commissioning and performance history of “Made in America” — concerts all

across the country by regional orchestras — that offered Tower a more grassroots avenue toward getting that work performed.



“Made in America” is the centerpiece of the BMOP program. It’s a simple work, in one-movement, that takes snippets of “America the Beautiful” and weaves them into the fabric of the orchestra. The work is hardly jingoistic; Tower has referred to it as “a musical struggle,” and says “perhaps it was an unconscious reacting to the challenge of how to keep America beautiful.”

In addition to the two flute works featuring Wincenc, the BMOP program includes “Red Maple,” a concerto for solo bassoon (Adrian Morejon) and strings, and “Chamber Dance,” a 2006 piece alternating solo sections with tutti orchestral ideas. The Feb. 13 chamber program includes performances by the Borromeo String Quartet — playing works by Tower and by one of Tower’s former students, composer [Kati Agócs](#) — violinist Soovin Kim and the NEC Percussion Ensemble.



The [Boston Modern Orchestra Project](#) and [New England Conservatory](#) celebrate composer Joan Tower's 80th birthday with performances Friday, Feb. 9 at Jordan Hall and Tuesday, Feb. 13 at NEC's Shattuck Black Box Theatre.

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