

AUNT CHLOE

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Courtney Bryan



Photo credit: Arielle Pentes

“Common Ground Can Be the Most Magical Feeling”

AUNT CHLOE: I want to ask all kinds of questions about composing that a “beginner’s mind” would ask—and that would probably take too much of your time to answer (if you could even fully address them)—but I hope this isn’t too basic: How does the process of composing music begin for you—or, rather, what lets you know that it has begun? (e.g., Do you hear certain chords or rhythms or a piece of melody...do you start with an idea that evokes certain sounds and textures?) Is there something familiar or customary in beginning, regardless of how your process later unfolds?

BRYAN: Thanks for that question, Sharan, as you know I love discussing the creative process together and have so much deep respect for you and your work. What is fun to me about my own creative process is that there are several ways that I like to work, and it all depends on the project and perhaps what my preferences are at a given time. When I was a child, I studied piano and taught myself to compose inspired by whatever I was learning at the time. For the longest time my composing would always start at the piano. As I began studying composition formally, I tried different methods including starting away from the piano. Now I can comfortably start from a number of starting places, including a sketchbook with words and abstract shapes, or recording into a voice memo on my phone. Sometimes my music starts with ideas of harmony, rhythm, or melody. Other times my music will start with a Bible verse, a poem, an art piece, or with research on a historical event or figure, or a response to contemporary social issues.

The beginning usually includes excitement about the inspiration and, if a commissioned work, about the plan of a premiere. Another important aspect of beginning a piece for me is the research stage which is

the part of the process that fully ignites my energy. There is often anxiety that arises when getting to the stage of composing the music, but I have decided to practice making enough space and time for exploration and experimentation so that I can have a part of the process for creating material and another part of the process for deciding the form and structure of the piece. Most importantly for me, I find it important to start with whatever idea feels most present and most natural at that moment. There is a trial-and-error period of trying out musical ideas at the piano or at my musical notation program on the computer. It is often a mix of pre-planning and in-the-moment experimentation on the ideas, using my ear for the final say. Eventually, I edit the piece to a final version. Ideas that I decide to not include are not thrown away, but considered for new pieces to come.



Courtney Bryan (composer), Helga Davis (vocalist), and Sharan Strange (librettist)- collaborators on *Yet Unheard*

AUNT CHLOE: You're from New Orleans. Did the city's endemic musical character and legacy influence your desire to make music? How has NOLA, specifically, shaped you as a musician and composer?

BRYAN: Growing up, New Orleans had a profound influence on my desire to be a musician. Music is all around and is a part of life, not only something separate to do for entertainment. My earliest memories of music in my life are from my church, St. Luke's Episcopal Church of New Orleans. St. Luke's included people from the Caribbean, Central and South America, Africa, and the U.S. We combined all kinds of music—Gregorian chant, Anglican hymns, Negro spirituals, Caribbean rhythms, and West African percussion on special occasions. St. Luke's is also where I had my first professional experience with music as I would substitute for the organist when I was in middle school. This began what has been a lifetime role as a church musician.

I started studying piano at five, following my older sisters Amy and Alma. I had so many important teachers in New Orleans of various traditions. The first composers whose music I remember learning and loving were Scott Joplin and Frederic Chopin. When I got to high school, I started studying jazz at the Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong Summer Jazz Camp and then at the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts. In New Orleans, educators trained us to be versatile, to focus on the fundamentals and be able to succeed in a large range of musical settings and styles.

Upon returning home to New Orleans [after living in other places], I find most inspirational the spiritual nature of the city, the mysterious yet super down-to-earth nature of the city and of the people. It is a fascinating city. Since the pandemic I've found myself enthusiastically becoming a church musician again at St. Luke's Episcopal—first, virtually over the phone/computer, and now, in person. I'm grateful because the experience has been feeding me spiritually and emotionally, and because I am connecting with more vivid memories of childhood and of my late grandparents. It is helpful to have this grounding experience in my life during this very unstable time. It brings me to my roots as a working musician and I believe it will help inspire me as a composer in ways that I have not yet imagined.

AUNT CHLOE: How much do social issues catalyze the work you're making? For example, you and I collaborated on a piece to honor Sandra Bland, but her death due to police brutality had already informed at least one of your previous compositions. Do concerns around Black social death or "soul murder" continue to inform your work? Are there particular themes related to Black life that are especially compelling for you?

BRYAN: Before we collaborated on *Yet Unheard*, I wrote a piece called *Sanctum* for orchestra and recorded sound. This was commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra with a 2015 premiere at Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York City. It was my first official commission, and at first the piece was inspired primarily by holiness preaching traditions. However, with the instances of police brutality happening all around and the effect it had on me, I decided to deal with my emotions and thoughts through music. At that point *Sanctum* became my musical response to police brutality. Following this premiere, I heard from Eun Lee, co-founder of The Dream Unfinished: An Activist Orchestra, about a commission to write a piece for orchestra and chorus in honor of Sandra Bland. Right away I reached out to you about the possibility of collaborating and I am so grateful we did. Another piece I wrote during this time, called *Spirits*, is for piano and another group of improvising instrumentalists. In the tradition of Billie Holiday closing concerts with the song *Strange Fruit*, I would often include *Spirits* towards the end of my performances for years.

Black social death or "soul murder" has informed some of my work. In general, I find an interest in using art to recognize a person's or community's humanity and their spirit. In particular, this includes a focus on Black women. Generally speaking, what I am drawn to at a given time is guided by a spiritual impetus and where I am mentally and emotionally at a given time. I see my role as a composer similarly to my role as a church musician, creating music to offer a space for healing.

AUNT CHLOE: Which of your compositions do you feel most proud of? surprised by? intrigued by? confounded by? (Select one—or more, if you'd like.) Why?

BRYAN: I wrote a piece when I was seven that I would consider a piece I am still most proud of. I remember a piece I wrote at five as well and feel a certain affection for it (and am grateful to remember it). But the piece I wrote at seven stands out to me because I remember working on it in sections and creating this multi-section piece at the piano that I composed and played from memory. Somewhere inside of my process as a composer I reflect on that moment whenever I am stretching my capabilities and reaching for something more. Some of the influences in this piece were video game music, songs from movies and radio, and my knowledge of triads in C major and the relative key A minor.

AUNT CHLOE: You compose music for solo performance (by you or by others) and for collaborations with ensembles, orchestras, etc. Your process also involves working with poets, vocalists, filmmakers (and perhaps other kinds of artists?), as well as with pre-existing texts and sound materials created by others. What are some of the delights and challenges of composing within these differing contexts?

Courtney Bryan (composer), Helga Davis (vocalist), and Sharan Strange (librettist)—collaborators on *Yet Unheard*

BRYAN: I like balance within my body of work, that of composing music for other performers, composing for myself with other performers, and composing in collaborative settings across fields. The balance is what makes it fun and constantly fresh for me. I have had collaborative projects that have really helped me approach music in different ways. For example, the collaborative process with you and Helga Davis on *Yet Unheard* helped me reach for and locate some different sounds. Your text helped inform my approach to harmony, to dissonance and tension, and to consonance and release. From my improvisation with Helga on your poetry (the day that we all met in the rehearsal room), I was able to consider what elements would be most fitting to explore when I composed the music.

One of my most recent collaborations was with visual artist Tiona Nekkia McClodden on her piece *Be Alarmed: The Black Americana Epic, Movement III - The Triple Deities*. For this project, I composed a solo piano piece, *Jewel / Garment / Flame*. While I composed the score for *Jewel / Garment / Flame* over the course of a few months, the preparation for writing this music started several years ago. Preparation included learning McClodden's concept for her series *Be Alarmed: The Black Americana Epic*, and specifically the various inspirations for *Movement III - The Triple Deities*. We discussed the meaning of "Songs to the Dark Virgin" by Florence Price (1941) and inspiration from the text of this song, written by Langston Hughes (1926). Because McClodden's work "considers how African American classical musicians historically used the art song form as a critical tool while examining present-day perspectives," this history became part of my study and as well a consideration of my own role in this history. The prompt from McClodden was to compose an original score for solo piano for the film that references Price's song as well as a range of African American and diasporic musical genres and styles. This was a joy for me to include a wide range of influences into this work, including gospel, spirituals, rhythm & blues, jazz, and other styles, as it resonates naturally with my compositional aesthetic. Other influences in the music include, but are not limited to, music by composers Stanley Cowell and Julius Eastman. I composed original themes to represent key images from McClodden's film based on Hughes's text, including a theme for the obsidian mirror (jewel), for the chainmail (garment), and for the camera (*flame*). In response to the spiritual themes in the film, noted within the score are quotations of various Orisha chants as they relate to McClodden's concept.

Noted in the score are areas, also, for improvisation with a vocalist for the live performance version of this piece. The vocal score is separate as an addendum to *Jewel / Garment / Flame*. The vocal score includes musical fragments and melodies with improvisation guidelines, along with suggestions of related music genres. For the premiere in Philadelphia in June 2021, due to COVID considerations, composer and sound engineer LaTasha Bundy recorded vocalist Joel Dyson performing these improvisations. We also recorded the original Price song as a duet. In the live performance, I performed my original score and triggered these recorded vocal improvisations and improvised along with them. In the future, this element will be a live improvisation at specific moments as noted in the score.

Check out excerpts of the project with Tiona Nekkia McClodden here: <https://www.tionam.com/ttd>

I also enjoy working on pieces for orchestra or other ensembles where I work in a more solitary process and get to really explore my imagination in a free and adventurous way. And when I compose music for myself and improvisors that I know well, I enjoy the process of writing for each person's musical personality. In a recording I started working on in 2019, tentatively called *Sounds of Freedom*, I made prompts to guide conversations and meditations on selected words ("freedom", "spirit", "home", "love")

followed by free improvisation. I have many ways I like to work, and it depends on the setting, the ensembles or individuals, the context, and what I find most exciting as a composer at that time.

Whether collaborative or solitary, any project can come with its set of delights and challenges. It is always a joy when everyone is on the same page and shares similar values, but this is not always the case. Sometimes collaboration or other commissioned work will require more work to find common ground. But when common ground is present, it can be the most magical feeling.

AUNT CHLOE: What are you stimulated by these days...in the culture, in the world, etc.? What do you fall asleep or wake up thinking about most? What is “humming in the background” for you? (Metaphorically, or even literally—as in, also, what music are you listening to?)

BRYAN: Recently I’ve been very inspired by sunrise and sunset. I have learned during the pandemic to pay more attention to nature and to find magic in everyday occurrences that I may not have noticed as much in recent years. I also have been steadily fascinated with figures that represent the divine feminine. Figures include Mother Mary, particularly images of Black Madonna, and various saints I learned about during my time in Rome—St. Rita, St. Cecelia, a Black woman saint of the Anglican church, St. Frances Joseph-Gaudet, originally from New Orleans, and the orisha Oshun. I also have a longtime fascination with numbers and patterns, and so those remain inspirations for my music right now.

Check out music by Courtney Bryan [here](#).

(This interview was conducted via email by Sharan Strange. Courtney Bryan photo on Aunt Chloe homepage by Alex Smith.)

Composer and pianist Courtney Bryan is the Albert and Linda Mintz Professor of Music at Newcomb College in the School of Liberal Arts, Tulane University. She is also a Creative Partner with the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, and formerly artist-in-residence with the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra and Carnegie Hall, among other organizations. Her works for orchestra, ensemble, and solo performers have been performed widely, garnering her major recognition and honors, including the 2018 Herb Alpert Award in the Arts for music, the 2019-20 Samuel Barber Rome Prize in Music Composition, and selection as a 2018 Hermitage Fellow, a 2020 United States Artists Fellow, and a 2020-21 Civitella Ranieri Fellow. She has two recordings, *Quest for Freedom* and *This Little Light of Mine*, and a third, *Sounds of Freedom*, is in progress.