



After the Fact | [From Idea to Art: Exploring the Creative Process](#)

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TRANSCRIPT

[Excerpt from orchestral recording of “Fly Forward” plays]

Jennifer Higdon, Pulitzer Prize- and Grammy-winning composer, 1999 Pew arts fellow:

So that is “Fly Forward,” actually. This is the third movement of the concerto. And interestingly, when I was writing that, the Olympics were going on. That was the summer Olympics, and I had in my head the image of Hilary Hahn in a mad dash, crossing a finish line with the violin on one hand, the bow in the other.

Dan LeDuc, host: That’s Jennifer Higdon with her music performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, featuring Benjamin Beilman as the soloist. She composed the “Fly Forward” Violin Concerto for American violinist Hilary Hahn—and won the Pulitzer prize for music in the process. Jennifer has also won a Grammy for her Percussion Concerto. We’re going to talk to her about how a composer actually creates and gets those sounds in her head out on a sheet of music.

[Music continues, followed by applause]

Dan LeDuc: From The Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Dan LeDuc, and this is “After the Fact.” That music that inspires us, that painting that mesmerizes us, or that play that leaves us breathless in our seats. How do they all begin? And how do they get from the minds of their creators onto the stage? In a few minutes, Jennifer Higdon, who lives in Philadelphia and is one of today’s most sought-after and accomplished classical composers, is going to tell us about her creative process.

But first a bit of data, because that’s what we do on this program. Our data point for this episode: 764 billion—that’s dollars. And it’s the annual economic impact of the arts in the United States, according to a study this year from the Bureau of Economic Analysis and the National Endowment for the Arts. That economic impact is a return on an investment—by the patrons who support artists, the people who buy books and paintings and theater or concert tickets, by the orchestras that commission composers like Jennifer Higdon. Paula Marincola is a professional patron. She is executive director of the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage in Philadelphia, which, incidentally, selected Jennifer Higdon as a Pew arts fellow in 1999, helping launch her amazing career.



[To Paula Marincola] One of the reasons I thought it was really important to talk to you in an episode about creativity is—I think most people think about artists and they think about a brilliant painter or a composer or a musician. And as we think about how art is created, we might even think about the critic who reviews it after it's created.

But to get to that point requires patrons assessing the world. Tell me what you do.

Paula Marincola, executive director, Pew Center for Arts & Heritage: My job is to enhance the cultural life of the community by supporting projects and artists that are of high artistic excellence, ambition, imagination, and courage. Creativity requires courage.

Dan LeDuc: What is happening now is we have generous patrons who support the arts because they know they're important. But why do they do that?

Paula Marincola: So why do they do it? I think there are a variety of reasons. I think in terms of philanthropic institutional patronage, because there is a sense that this is important for a community to have a vibrant cultural life.

Art inspires us. It educates us. It entertains us. It lifts us up. It shows us our stories. It reflects society. It holds up a mirror to our various narratives. It memorializes our cultural legacies.

Good art does challenge us in some way. It challenges our ideas. It shows us things that we thought we knew, but it shows it to us in a different way, perhaps. It opens our minds. It allows us to empathize with experiences we don't have or wouldn't necessarily have had.

It's a very important thing in any society. And I think that philanthropies recognize that, have recognized that. I think there are individuals who also recognize that and are also in love with art and artists. I mean, they just can't get enough of it.

And then there are some people who do it for investment. They think of it as a good investment. And if you look at certainly the visual art market over the last few years, it can be an extremely lucrative investment. But most of the really, I would say, “good” patrons do it because they really believe in what artists can do and the importance of furthering that kind of creative expression.

Dan LeDuc: In this episode, we're having an extended conversation with Jennifer Higdon, the composer, who has had great acclaim in the last decade.

Paula Marincola: She has.



Dan LeDuc: Probably one of the most—

Paula Marincola: Deservedly.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah. One of the most prolific contemporary composers. Early in her career, the Pew center named her an arts fellow. And she has talked about what that meant for her creatively. Talk to us about that process and how artists need time.

Paula Marincola: Well, you can't just sit down and say, okay, today for 10 minutes I'm going to be creative. And then I'm going to go wash the dishes, and then I'm going to go do the grocery shopping, and then I'm going to pick the kids up from school. Sustained creativity requires time.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah.

Paula Marincola: Time. Sometimes that time can be—you know, it looks like you're doing nothing or you're just walking along the street or you're just sitting quietly in “a room of one's own,” to quote Virginia Woolf. But it's one of the things that we thought was so important with our fellowships program was that the honorarium be large enough that it would give the artists the gift of time.

Dan LeDuc: Patrons, you were saying a moment ago, are going to look for what's distinctive, what advances art, what's fresh about something. So certainly, Jennifer Higdon is one who's been the beneficiary of those sorts of patrons and now commissions.

Paula Marincola: Indeed.

Dan LeDuc: What was it about her early on that showed such promise?

Paula Marincola: That's an excellent question, because I think it was evident from early on that she had this great kind of formal control, this virtuosity, if you will. And it could run in a really almost experimental direction. But it never got frozen in that. There was always this sense of emotionality, of feeling, so that the work was both technically really good and emotionally accessible. You felt it.

This city, Philadelphia, is extremely vibrant right now. It's a great place for individual artists to live and work. It's an affordable city, still affordable. But we have such a diversity of artistic practices and types here.

[Excerpt from orchestral recording of “Concerto for Orchestra” plays]



Dan LeDuc: That is the Philadelphia Orchestra playing the Concerto for Orchestra, and I should say your Concerto for Orchestra, because we are joined by Jennifer Higdon. Welcome.

Jennifer Higdon: It's good to be here.

Dan LeDuc: So that was really cool to hear. What's your feeling when you hear your work played? I mean, you've heard that a million times. How does that feel?

Jennifer Higdon: You know, part of it is I have an instant memory of the world premiere of that and kind of the adrenaline that I had. I did not sit out in the audience for the opening night premiere. It was a very unusual occasion. The Philadelphia Orchestra was hosting the League of American Orchestras conference, and the entire audience was nothing but orchestra managers. So I knew that my entire career was either going to take off that night or that was the end of it.

Dan LeDuc: Well, we know what happened.

Jennifer Higdon: Thank goodness.

Dan LeDuc: Let's talk about that. It's this incredible driving, wonderful piece that just excites the senses. I want to talk about creativity for a while. What we just heard from this brilliant orchestra began as sounds in your head.

Jennifer Higdon: Yeah.

Dan LeDuc: How did you get it out of your head so the rest of us got this great experience? How did you do that?

Jennifer Higdon: I guess this is the way I approach most of these things. I know the instrumentation. I know the duration. And when I was writing the Concerto for Orchestra, I wrote the movements out of order. That was the first movement, but it turned out to be the last movement that I wrote.

So I knew that I needed to create a story with a beginning that kind of encapsulated all of the energy in a 30-minute piece, which is why it's got that energetic burst there, and pretty hard parts. In fact, the percussionists were telling me that that's actually one of the harder percussion parts that they've ever played. But there's something joyful about hearing it live. Wolfgang Sawallisch, the conductor, really took that thing at the tempo I had marked, which doesn't always happen.

[Laughter]



Dan LeDuc: That's right. You are turning your child over to someone else when this happens.

Jennifer Higdon: Yeah.

Dan LeDuc: What's that feeling like?

Jennifer Higdon: It's a little scary. And you know, one of the things I was all worried about with the Concerto for Orchestra—because I felt like the other four movements worked. I was really nervous about messing it up at the beginning with the fourth movement. So it was actually the most unnerving movement for me to write, because when you realized you've gotten, basically, 20-some odd minutes composed, and you think they work, and then you've got to back up and do the beginning, you don't want to ruin that.

Dan LeDuc: It's sort of like the novelist writing the opening chapter at the very end, after they know how the story is going to end.

Jennifer Higdon: It's totally an insane way to do it. But you know what? I feel like composing is feeling around in the dark.

And I'm constantly thinking, what are the musicians going to perceive? How are they going to execute this? And will it be convincing to hold the audience's attention? So it often means that I will write maybe 12 beats or something of one melody and then try to figure out what to put with that melody. And I knew, because this was going to be an explosive beginning, that I needed to kind of grab everyone by the collar. I needed a lot of activity, which is why the strings are moving at a real clip.

This is very unusual. The chimes and the timpani is a very unusual combination to put together.

Dan LeDuc: Right.

Jennifer Higdon: But I thought, it's so unusual, it will draw everyone's attention. So I decided to give them a fairly active part. When normally they've got kind of a decorative element, I gave them musical material. But they're also not used to playing that. And it's much harder when, suddenly, you have loads of notes that you have to hit in time with the conductor. So there are a lot of technical things that go into it, but you're also kind of going on a gut instinct.

Dan LeDuc: So you were thinking of the musicians, the conductor, the audience.



Jennifer Higdon: Right.

Dan LeDuc: You think of yourself in part of this process, too?

Jennifer Higdon: I think it happens automatically when I'm trying to come up with musical ideas. But it is interesting. It's a greater challenge if you're having to think about a lot of other people, in addition to what you're trying to think that you need to get down on the page, which you feel like needs to be there.

Dan LeDuc: Do all of these sort of start the same way? I mean, you've had enormous success in the last decade. You write virtually by commission now, right?

Jennifer Higdon: Yeah, all by commission.

Dan LeDuc: All by commission. That's something composers aspire to. That's a good thing for you, right?

Jennifer Higdon: It is.

Dan LeDuc: So you get these assignments. How does that affect what you do? And does each beginning—is each beginning the same, different?

Jennifer Higdon: They're all different.

Dan LeDuc: Okay.

Jennifer Higdon: Every single piece is different, because sometimes the musical language needs to be different.

Dan LeDuc: Because of the commission and how it's starting?

Jennifer Higdon: But they do have certain things that they can do, and you have to talk to the people who are involved in the commission to find out what the limitations are.

Dan LeDuc: You and I talked briefly offline at one point about that a little bit, and I was fascinated because it spoke well of you. You realized that these were young musicians and you want to challenge musicians. But at that age, you can't make it so challenging that you discourage them.

Jennifer Higdon: Right. You don't want them dropping out of the band. *[Laughs]*

Dan LeDuc: Right. Exactly. "I can never do this again."



Jennifer Higdon: Yeah.

Dan LeDuc: But again, you're mindful of your musicians.

Jennifer Higdon: Yeah. And you know what? Maybe because I started out my career—when I did my training, it was as a performer. And so I've actually suffered through pieces that I feel like the composer never gave a single thought to what was going to happen for the person who had to learn this.

Dan LeDuc: You started off playing the flute, right?

Jennifer Higdon: Right.

Dan LeDuc: As a teenager.

Jennifer Higdon: Right.

Dan LeDuc: And I've heard you call yourself a flute player. You're not a flautist—or a flutist.

Jennifer Higdon: Right. Although, you know what? I'm actually a former flutist because the flutist took away my license to operate. I haven't played in like, 10 years. It has been revoked.

Dan LeDuc: Well, there's a wonderful, down-to-earth quality about describing yourself that way. Do you sort of approach your music that way, too?

Jennifer Higdon: Always, always. I think I tend to compose thinking like a performer, which is different than just being a composer who's never played an instrument. I know what it's like to be on the other side of the music stand, that when you have to learn that music, it takes a lot of effort to learn a new work.

Usually, when you're writing an orchestra piece, because there's so many instruments, you sometimes write them what's known as a short score, which is kind of like—I think an artist that they were doing sketches for something. They're not working on the canvas that they're going to have as the final product. So I'm doing tons of sketches, but musical sketches in notebooks, trying to figure out, does this line sound good?

You try to get a sense of how things are unfolding, and sometimes that involves drawing things on just paper.



Dan LeDuc: And those are instructions to the musicians, because it's not like you're sitting next, in the percussion section at the premiere, to go, "Hey, do this."

Jennifer Higdon: Yeah, exactly. I've got to be able to make a roadmap for all 90 players that can be assembled, all of them together, that will kind of take the audience on a journey, whether it's a quiet part or a loud part, a fast or slow. So I'm making a map, basically. It's the same, I think, probably, as a written script, except I'm controlling the tempo, because I've put tempo markings down that the conductor has to get somewhat in the ballpark of.

Dan LeDuc: You are known for any number of amazing works in the last decade. One that's probably the most played is the "Blue Cathedral."

Jennifer Higdon: Right.

Dan LeDuc: Let's listen to a bit of that right now.

[Excerpt from orchestral recording of "Blue Cathedral" plays]

Dan LeDuc: That's the San Francisco Symphony.

Jennifer Higdon: Right.

Dan LeDuc: It's very different from the concerto that opened our conversation, very, very different.

Jennifer Higdon: But written around the same time.

Dan LeDuc: Is that right?

Jennifer Higdon: Ironically, yeah.

Dan LeDuc: So how did that one start?

Jennifer Higdon: That was a commission from the Curtis Institute of Music. And they wanted something to commemorate their 75th anniversary, and I thought I was going to write kind of a fanfare, a celebration. But I had started this—it was probably almost a year after I had lost a younger brother to cancer, and the music that was coming out in my head was not at all matching what I thought I was going to do on the page.



Dan LeDuc: Mmm hmm.

Jennifer Higdon: So I just decided to go with what was like the inklings. It's like a very vague picture. It's almost like a photo that's not very clear. It's very fuzzy, and I'm trying to find the outlines. It's as if I'm trying to draw all over the picture and put something concrete there. And this particular piece, I remember thinking—they told me they needed 12, 13 minutes.

I remember thinking how important all the kids at Curtis—they cross paths with each other later in life, after they've left school. They don't realize how important those relationships are. And then I thought, you know what? For all of us, that's an important thing. All the friendships we have, people that we meet. We go on and we live our lives, we might cross paths later on.

And so I decided I was going to put a lot of solos in this piece to kind of represent all the individuals who were in a school, but also the collective experience of playing in an orchestra and going to that school, which I guess is applicable to a lot of our things in life. But I remember I wanted to open that piece with a very intimate—like things chiming in the distance.

And I also wanted something so intimate that it had a little aspect of chamber music within an orchestral setting. So the first time you hear strings here, it's two violas and two cellos. It's a little unusual. Normally, we use those string instruments, when you're writing an orchestra piece, they all play together. But I wanted something that kind of invited the listener in, something that was a little more intimate before all of the strings came in.

Dan LeDuc: How do you know when you have a good idea?

Jennifer Higdon: You know, you don't always know. Sometimes you know immediately. When I was writing “Cold Mountain,” there was one day, I sat down. I was going to write a duet. I thought, well, this is going to take five or six days to write, and the whole duet came out literally in one day, the entire thing. I've never had three minutes of music come out in one day. And I was so shocked by the arrival of this duet, I was tremendously suspicious. Because normally it's a lot more of a struggle.

But even to this day, when that duet plays, it's such a distinct sound that people in the audience always have a reaction to it. So it comes from somewhere, but we don't really know where. The thing is, as a creative person, is to be open. And I've heard many creative people say, inspiration is showing up every day to work, and the ideas come to you. You just have to wait through the time periods where they're not coming to you.



Sometimes you can try to force it, and sometimes you can't. But it's trying to be open at all times.

This is the thing about creating something. I never have a clear picture of where things are going to go. It's very rare. And so I do feel like I'm kind of feeling around in the dark, trying to figure out what the next thing is supposed to happen.

Dan LeDuc: But if you keep going, you can get where you want to go.

Jennifer Higdon: That's it exactly. Yeah. That's totally accurate. You know, I often tell my students—they start for the summit of Everest in the dark hours, like 2 a.m., 3 a.m. Part of that has to do with the fact that you only walk as far as your headlamp shows you, which means you're not looking up the mountain and how huge this climb is going to be.

So if you're taking it one step at a time, you will get up the mountain. So it's the same thing. And when students panic, I say, look, you've just got to write one note at a time. Don't think about the fact that this is a symphony and there are lots of people and it's 30 minutes. Just worry about that one measure in front of you for today.

Dan LeDuc: So you teach at the Curtis Institute here. We're visiting Philadelphia for this conversation, one of the most esteemed musical institutions of education in this country. These great, aspiring young people are there, and they're going to knock the world's socks off.

Jennifer Higdon: It is, and it's a constant learning experience. I often assign students pieces to go look at. I say, "Look, John Cage was wrestling with this. You should go look at this percussion piece and figure out what he did. And that will be very different than maybe another, like Henry Cowell will write a different kind of percussion piece." So you try to show them other ways of doing things.

But also, they may learn from and reject completely what those people have done, but they may come up with their own way of doing it. So I'm constantly basically looking to make sure they're doing things that aren't physically impossible. And making sure they're handling the instruments well, make sure the notation is clear, make sure that they've got everything in on the page.

But it's also helping them, psychologically and emotionally, to figure out how to be an artist on their own and to problem solve on their own.

So I have to push them constantly to basically try different things to see if maybe—it's like trying on pairs of shoes, and maybe this pair of shoes doesn't quite fit, so you need to try a different kind of shoe.



Dan LeDuc: Let's take another pause, and could we listen to your "Bluegrass Concerto"?

Jennifer Higdon: Yeah.

Dan LeDuc: I think it's the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra.

[Excerpt of "Bluegrass Concerto" plays]

Dan LeDuc: Well, you said a moment ago that some students are afraid of percussion. You're not.

Jennifer Higdon: *[Laughs]* I know. And you know, those are the string soloists, believe it or not.

Dan LeDuc: Wow.

Jennifer Higdon: They're playing percussively, and there's an interesting story to that beginning. This is a perfect example of thinking outside the box, but still getting it to work for instruments. That's time for three playing there, and I know these guys because they all went to Curtis. And they do these really funky sounds that normally you wouldn't want to do in a straight classical piece.

So scrubbing—that scratchy sound, is a scrubbing sort of thing, although Zach De Pue, who's playing that, actually, he's really digging into the instrument. But it's fun to make a really unusual sound at the beginning of a piece. Because, well, I was sitting in the audience once and there was a kid in front of me. And that piece started and the kid said, "Wow, hardcore." *[Laughter]* That kid was like, 9 or 10, and he was just completely riveted. I mean, he was glued to the stage because the sounds were just not what he expected from a classical concert.

Dan LeDuc: Right, right.

Jennifer Higdon: But they actually kind of come out of a bluegrass tradition; they're just set up a little differently.

Dan LeDuc: Well, let's talk about your influences then. I mean, you are not a native Philadelphian. And anyone listening to your lovely voice would know.

Jennifer Higdon: Right.

Dan LeDuc: Where are you from?



Jennifer Higdon: I'm from east Tennessee.

Dan LeDuc: Okay.

Jennifer Higdon: And part of my childhood was in Atlanta, Georgia. So a southern upbringing but around a lot of mountain music. But I did not grow up around classical music.

Dan LeDuc: Do get up every morning excited?

Jennifer Higdon: Yeah. Every day I think, "I get to make music." Every single day. Yeah. It's amazing. I'm 55 now and I'm like, it's incredible that I'm still getting thrilled that what I get to do, and amazed that I'm even allowed to do it. I keep expecting someone to come in and tell me, oh, you've got to get a regular job.

Dan LeDuc: *[Laughs]* Well, thanks so much for your time today.

["After the Fact" closing music]

Our thanks to the Philadelphia Orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony, and the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra for sharing their beautiful recordings of Jennifer Higdon's music that we listened to in this episode. To learn more about other Pew arts fellows or watch a video interview with Jennifer, visit pewtrusts.org/afterthefact.

And if you like what you hear on this program, please subscribe and leave us a review.

Thanks for listening. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."