

WHO SHE IS

Jessica Meyer

AGE

40

HOMETOWN

Bay Shore, New York

WHERE SHE LIVES NOW

New York City

INSTRUMENT

Viola



WHY I PLAY CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Somewhere in the 20th century, I think, we forgot that all of the great composers we so highly regard also played and improvised

By Jessica Meyer

CLAIM TO FAME

Jessica Meyer is a violist/composer who recently released her first solo CD, *Sounds of Being*, on which she turns her viola into an orchestra of emotion with each piece embodying a different state of being: joy, anxiety, anger, bliss, torment, loneliness, and passion.

She is the co-founder of the contemporary music collective counter(induction), has premiered works at the Tribeca New Music Festival and ETHEL's Met Balcony Bar Series; and was featured on Q2's *Emerging Women Composers* series.

The *New York Times* has hailed Meyers for her "polish, focus, and excitement." As a clinician, she has held workshops at the Juilliard School, the Curtis Institute of Music, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Manhattan School of Music, the Longy School of Music, NYU, and the Chamber Music America Conference.

APPROACH

"New needs need new techniques," said the artist Jackson Pollock more than 65 years ago. "And the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements... the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture."

For the past 17 years, I've been playing mostly contemporary music. It's been a privilege to be part of countless interactions between composers and performers while pieces take shape. I've always been fascinated by the extremely varied palette of colors, sounds, and rhythms I have been asked to play over the years in order to communicate what life is like for us in the modern world. I write this after repeatedly listening to the track that will accompany

my solo-violin part in Eric Moe's new piece "Uncanny Affable Machines." I relish the process of decoding what a fellow composer wants me to do and inputting it into my body until I am ready for the final stage: interpreting all of what is not written on the page. This probably explains my attraction to performing early music, because there is so much room for interpretation via phrasing and ornamentation.

A few years ago, I ran into an old colleague at a festival. At some point in our conversation, he said, "Kids graduating these days are mostly playing pieces written by their friends instead of the greats." He saw this as a problem, but I certainly didn't. Where would those "greats" be without the people they wrote for?

Art gets made because there are people who inspire other people to make it. Somewhere in the 20th century I think we forgot that all of the great composers we so highly regard also played and improvised. Composers and performers started to be put (and put themselves) into two very different boxes.

What happened to just being a musician—someone who interprets, creates, plays with, and communicates through sound?

As I struggled with my need to process what was going on in my life, I climbed out of my "performer" box and started to mess around with sound—much like my five-year-old self did at whatever piano I could find, well before I ever received lessons.

I bought a loop pedal and started writing one-woman orchestral pieces, which then led to me writing for others. I feel like my entire performance career up to this point was just an extended degree program in composition, getting myself ready for when I finally had something to say. The real joy in performing new music is in handing another person your creation. It is very much like the passing of a torch—you do all you can to keep the flame going.

Our struggles to keep concert music relevant is just the world reminding us never to forget that music should be this living, breathing, visceral means of expression that is so distinctly... human. ■