

Jessie Montgomery—*Strum*

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a difficult time for many musicians and ensembles. But for Jessie Montgomery, this time of global upheaval has simultaneously been a time of personal transformation. Suddenly, her music is seemingly everywhere—and everywhere it's heard, she is making new fans. It would appear that “going viral” can still be a good thing.

It's not like she came out of nowhere. In 2014, her composition *Banner*—a response to the 200th anniversary of the *Star-Spangled Banner*—was hailed by the New York Times for “daringly transform[ing] the anthem, folding it into a teeming score that draws upon American folk and protest songs, and anthems from around the world...to create a musical melting pot.”

That description could apply to much of what Montgomery writes—and what inspires her. “I've always been interested in trying to find the intersection between different types of music,” she has said. “I imagine that music is a meeting place at which all people can converse about their unique differences and common stories.”

Despite her accessible style and growing acclaim, it wasn't until the 2019-2020 season that Montgomery's music suddenly seemed to be everywhere. The famed Orpheus Chamber Orchestra performed a newly commissioned work from her. Two other works were performed by the Chicago Symphony. And the New York Philharmonic chose her as a featured composer for its Project 19, a celebration of the centennial of the 19th Amendment, which granted women's suffrage. Since that breakout year, her reputation has only continued to flourish, with numerous performances of her works happening around the country.

Strum was originally penned for string quartet in 2006, and then revised in 2012. The title refers to the guitar-like plucking and strumming of strings that open the piece and that propel the music at various points throughout. American folk music is evoked through the use of solo instrumental flourishes over repeating rhythmic patterns and familiar harmonies; yet the music constantly dances slightly off kilter, from its quirky and nostalgic opening to its ecstatic ending.