



Joan **TOWER**

Strike Zones

Small

Still/Rapids

Ivory and Ebony

Evelyn Glennie, Percussion

Blair McMillen, Piano

Albany Symphony

David Alan Miller

Joan Tower (b. 1938)

Strike Zones • Small • Still/Rapids • Ivory and Ebony

An experienced chamber player herself, Joan Tower has long appreciated the technique and artistry of her fellow musicians. It is no wonder, then, that many of her compositions feature star turns for stellar players – in solo or concertante form. This program features two virtuoso examples of each type.

Tower wrote *Strike Zones* for percussionist Evelyn Glennie, whom the composer describes as an “extraordinary” performer. This imaginatively named concerto is tailor-made for Glennie’s unique blend of dazzling technique, impeccable musicianship and magnetic personality. It is a work of great timbral variety that also features a visual/spatial element. As Tower explains in her program note:

“Most percussion instruments are struck (hence the word ‘strike’ in the title) and I decided to have the percussion placed across the front of the stage with the soloist moving from one ‘zone’ to another – starting with the more fragile vibraphone and ending with a tour de force of drums. The other ‘zones’ include a marimba solo, a cymbal/hi-hat group, an ensemble of smaller/softer instruments (like the maraca, piccolo woodblock, castanet), a xylophone solo, and a trio with two other players placed in the hall echoing/‘reverberating’ the glockenspiel (with crotales) and the castanets (with more castanets).”

Throughout, Tower supports the soloist with orchestration carefully crafted to sustain and enhance the color and articulation of the percussion instruments. Consider the quiet opening, in which clarinets, horns and sustained strings provide delicate support to the vibraphone; oboe and additional woodwinds join the orchestral palette, while solo violin engages in a soulful dialog with the soloist. The orchestration thickens with brass as the soloist moves to another “zone,” where access to drums of all sorts allows the decibel level to rise

considerably. A marimba cadenza using four mallets leads to a rhythmic passage of jazz-like intensity featuring pizzicato strings, followed by a *tutti* of immense power. What follows is, as so often in Tower, a complete contrast: a string quartet in conversation with temple blocks. Yet another cadenza ensues – this time on cymbal/hi-hat – that calls, in part, on the player’s ability to improvise.

Eventually, the full orchestra begins its longest passage without the soloist – thundering, rhythmic and formidable. When the soloist returns, Tower features the xylophone in a heated argument with the rest of the orchestra. The temperature cools down briefly only to work up again as Tower pits first field drum and then snare drum against *tutti*. A final cadenza – including improvisation “on any drum,” per the score – leads to the trio of mounted castanets (keep in mind the spatial separation of the three players that clearly delineates the rhythmic interplay) that intensifies until the orchestra returns with a dotted rhythm and the soloist brings the work to a crashing conclusion with a final improvised passage that combines musicianship with manual dexterity and sheer decibels.

Commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra, *Strike Zones* premiered at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., on 4 October 2001. Leonard Slatkin conducted; Evelyn Glennie was the soloist and dedicatee.

Small, also written for Glennie (“with admiration”), premiered at a Joan Tower Celebration given by the New England Conservatory in Boston on 13 February 2018. The composer says, “I always thought that percussionists have too much work to do hauling big equipment, carrying heavy cases, taking way too much time setting everything up ... and then taking it down (particularly the marimba). So I decided to write a piece where smaller instruments would be packed away in one little carrying case and be able to fit onto a tiny table.” Again, one is tempted to imagine a visual: the soloist working like a brilliant chef, with all her ingredients laid out on the table before her – mixing, stirring, shaking, pounding and combining to whip up a percussive *soufflé extraordinaire*.

Still/Rapids developed over a number of years into its present form. Tower composed her first piano concerto, *Homage to Beethoven*, in 1985. Ten years later, pianist Ursula Oppens – having played the earlier work in Los Angeles and elsewhere – requested a follow-up, asking the composer for a work with even greater technical challenges. The result was *Rapids*, a 13 minute, single movement piece commissioned by the University of Wisconsin for its 100th anniversary and premiered there in 1996. In the following years, Tower revised the orchestration and made other tweaks in the work until, in 2013, she added a slow-moving introductory movement. As she has said, “*Still* was written ... as an introduction to *Rapids* because I felt that the fast-paced and busy *Rapids* might be helped by a short, slow and simpler soft piece. It is dedicated to my friend and colleague Blair McMillen.” The artists on this recording premiered the work in early March 2014 while Tower was serving as Mentor Composer for the Albany Symphony. Music critic Joseph Dalton reported at the time that, “despite their difference in age and character, the two movements were cohesive and very satisfying.”

Like so many of her colleagues and predecessors, Tower often draws inspiration from nature. In this case, it is the glistening beauty and powerful force of water that inspired her muse. In a program note, she has explained the intended dissimilarity between the movements: “Where *Still* is like sitting in a rowboat on a quiet day on a lake where the water is completely still, *Rapids* is like being in a canoe going down a challenging river of speed and rapid waters and trying to stay afloat.” She achieves this contrast through her skillful manipulation of the basic elements of tempo, texture and dynamics.

Still demonstrates Tower’s lyrical gift. Although her earlier works were often replete with high energy and impressive volume, she began exploring more meditative moods during the 1990s with such chamber pieces as *Night Fields* (1994) and *Turning Points* (1995). Strings open the movement with static open harmonies, soon joined by the piano soloist with a single melodic line supported by arpeggiated chords. After a brief dialogue between piano and solo horn, the piano part expands to a

florid, two-part structure. Flowing arpeggios and arabesques suggest the spirit of Debussy hovering over the work, while staid strings continue underneath. A brief cadenza leads to a coda recalling the opening when, suddenly, the second movement bursts forth without a pause.

Sheer physical power has been a defining characteristic of Tower’s music since her first orchestral piece, *Sequoia*. The composer has said that “creating ‘high-energy’ music is one of my special talents. I like to see just how high I can push a work’s energy level without making it chaotic or incoherent.” The musical rapids she evokes here are not just fast-moving – they are fearsome and formidable. The imagery she presents is of a force of nature that is wild and unpredictable. Melodic motifs are largely abandoned in favor of ascending and descending lines that cut through and cascade over one another.

The pianist plays non-stop for the first 29 bars, setting up a torrent of fast-moving notes that evokes an unstoppable flow of raging water. Meter changes and other rhythmic complexities reflect surface interruptions as the stream encounters wind, rocks and other obstacles in its way. The orchestra takes over briefly but the pianist soon re-enters the fray. An orchestral retreat leads to a remarkable passage for two flutes and solo violin succeeded by the first of the movement’s two solo cadenzas – a finger-wearingly exercise in forward momentum. Once the orchestra returns, Tower’s ability to balance and contrast elements of rhythm, melodic direction, color and form creates a musical juggernaut. The water imagery is sustained through long linear passages, unpredictable melodic leaps, contrasts in articulation and dynamic levels, irregular rhythmic groupings and constant interplay between the virtuosic piano part and the resplendently orchestrated *tutti*. In a review of an early performance of *Rapids*, critic Howard Vogel provided a concise summary of the movement’s affect: “Cascading sound, rippling up the piano and down the strings, flew off into the other sections with musical material that grabbed this listener’s ear and didn’t let go.”

The San Antonio International Piano Competition commissioned *Ivory and Ebony* as a test piece for their

2009 contest. The title, naturally, refers to the instrument's black and white keys, which the composer says provide the thematic basis for the work. "When they are separate, they offer different but (mostly) consonant pitch collections of various color combinations, but when they are together, the dissonance increases," she notes. *Ivory and Ebony* "tries to use those separate and together color combinations as a narrative throughout the piece." It was also intended to provide daunting technical challenges for the competitors – challenges met with seeming ease by the work's dedicatee, Blair McMillen.

The piece is a free-form fantasia that once again brings to mind Tower's own self-descriptive adjective, "high-energy." It opens with clusters of white notes alternating with clusters of black. Much of the texture is

two-voiced, with one hand on the black notes and the other on the white. In its relatively brief span, it embraces many traditional rhetorical flourishes over the full range of the keyboard, such that it might be considered an *étude* for aspiring pianists.

Now in her ninth decade, Joan Tower rightfully enjoys iconic status among 20th- and 21st-century composers. Over her lifetime, her artistry, advocacy, and engagement with listeners, audiences and performers have significantly advanced the cause of contemporary music. The works on this program, highly approachable and richly gratifying, are part of a growing legacy that one pundit has described as "The Power of Tower."

Frank K. DeWald

Also available



8.559775

Dame Evelyn Glennie



Dame Evelyn Glennie is the world's premier solo percussionist, performing internationally with the most celebrated orchestras, conductors and artists. Her discography exceeds 40 solo recordings and includes two GRAMMY Award winners, and she has received over a hundred international awards to date, including the Polar Music Prize and the Companion of Honour. In 1993 she was made an OBE. A commissioner of new music, she has expanded the solo percussion repertoire by more than 200 pieces and she is herself a composer for film, theater and television. She is currently curating The Evelyn Glennie Collection of musical instruments and has plans to open a center for music education under the banner: Teach the World to Listen.

Blair McMillen



Blair McMillen is a versatile and sought-after pianist and a major advocate for contemporary repertoire. He has premiered hundreds of solo works in venues ranging from Carnegie Hall and Disney Hall to the Knitting Factory. He is co-director of the Rite of Summer Music Festival, an outdoor new music series held on Governors Island, New York City. He has performed with The Knights, International Contemporary Ensemble, Da Capo Chamber Players, American Modern Ensemble, and the piano sextet, Grand Band. He lives in New York City and teaches at Mannes School of Music in The New School and at Bard College Conservatory.

Albany Symphony



The Albany Symphony fulfills its mission by performing, commissioning and recording the works of established and emerging American composers. Founded in 1930, the orchestra serves a diverse regional audience covering more than seven counties of New York and parts of three states. Its annual programming includes a nine-concert 'Classics Series' with performances throughout New York's Capital Region, each featuring a recent or world premiere composition by a living composer; an annual American Music Festival, its capstone multi-day celebration of new music, including a performance by the new music ensemble Dogs of Desire; a Family Series with costumed cast which inspires new generations of symphony patrons; and holiday and pops concerts, in collaboration with area youth performing arts groups. The orchestra's commitment to recording new music has led to four GRAMMY nominations, a 2014 GRAMMY Award for its recording of John Corigliano's *Conjurer* with Dame Evelyn Glennie (8.559757), and a 2021 GRAMMY for its recording of Christopher Theofanidis's *Viola Concerto* with Richard O'Neill. www.albanysymphony.com

David Alan Miller



David Alan Miller is one of the leading American conductors of his generation. The two-time GRAMMY Award-winning music director of the Albany Symphony has reaffirmed the orchestra's reputation as the nation's leading champion of American symphonic music. He and the orchestra have appeared twice at Spring for Music, a festival featuring America's most creative orchestras at New York's Carnegie Hall, and at The Kennedy Center's SHIFT Festival of American Orchestras in 2018. Miller has guest conducted most of the major orchestras in the US, including the orchestras of Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Houston, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and San Francisco, as well as the New World Symphony, the Boston Pops, and the New York City Ballet. In addition, he has appeared frequently throughout Europe, the UK, Australia and the Far East as guest conductor. Miller received GRAMMY Awards in January 2021 for his recording of Christopher Theofanidis' *Viola Concerto*, and in 2014 for his Naxos recording of John Corigliano's *Conjurer* with the Albany Symphony and Dame Evelyn Glennie.

Violin I

Jill Levy (CM)
Kathryn Aldous
Jessica Belflower
Marla Bracco
Natalie Favaloro
Heather Frank-Olsen
Shenghua Hu
Amy Kimball
Gregor Kitzis
Arthur Moeller
Jamecyn Morey
Claudia Schaer
Elizabeth Silver
Yinbin Qian
Mingzhao Zhou

Violin II

Mitsuko Suzuki (P)
Barb Lapidus (P)
Brigitte Brodwin
Ouisa Fohrhaltz
Margaret Hickey
Akiko Hosoi
Aleksandra Labinska
Gabriela Rengel
Julie Signitzer
Michelle Stewart
Muneyoshi Takahashi
Sara Tribou
Ubaldo Valli
Harriet Welther

Viola

Noriko Herndon (P)
Carla Bellosa
Sharon Bielik
Daniel Brye
Ting-Ying Chang-Chien
William Hakim
Dana Huyge
Elizabeth Moll
Susan Saint-Amour

Cello

Susan Debronsky (P)
Erica Pickhardt (P)
Kevin Bellosa
Matthew Capobianco
Arthur Cook
Marie-Therese Dugre
Guy Fishman
Catherine Hackert
Petia Kassarova
Jameson Platte

Bass

Philip Helm (P)
Luke Baker
Jered Egan
Jeffrey Herchenroder
Stephen Sas
Brian Thacker

Flute

Albert Brouwer (P)
Kim Collins
Kaoru Hinata

Oboe

Karen Hosmer (P)
Nathaniel Fossner
Sherwood Wise

Clarinet

Susan Martula (P)
Benjamin Baron
Weixiong Wang

Bassoon

Stephen Walt (P)
Brooke Allen
William Hestand
Lori Tiberio

Horn

William Hughes (P)
Victor Sungarian (P)
Nicholas Caluori
Joseph Demko
Virginia Fossner
Sophie Goluses

Trumpet

Eric Berlin (P)
James Thompson (P)
Eric Latini
Scott Sabo

Trombone

Gregory Spiridopoulos (P)
Ryan Bisson
Patrick Herb
Sebastian Vera, J.

Tuba

Nathaniel Turner (P)

Timpani

Kuljit Rehncy (P)

Percussion

Richard Albagli (P)
Mark Foster
Scott Stacey

Harp

Lynette Wardle (P)

Piano / Celesta

Christopher Oldfather (P)

Joan Tower



Joan Tower is widely regarded as one of today's most important American composers. Recognizing her more than 60-year career and lasting contributions as composer, performer, and educator, Chamber Music America honored her with its Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award in 2020, *Musical America* chose her to be its 2020 Composer of the Year, and in 2019 the League of American Orchestras awarded her its highest honor, the Gold Baton. Tower, the first composer awarded a Ford Made in America commission, wrote *Made in America* for a consortium of 65 orchestras. Leonard Slatkin and the Nashville Symphony recorded it in 2006 (with *Tambor* and *Concerto for Orchestra*) on Naxos 8.559328. That recording collected three 2008 GRAMMY Awards, including Best Classical Composition for *Made in America*. In 1990 Tower became the first woman to win the prestigious Grawemeyer Award with *Silver Ladders*, written for the St. Louis Symphony as Composer-in-Residence. Other residencies include the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Orchestra of St. Luke's, and the Albany Symphony. She was co-founder and pianist for the Naumburg-winning Da Capo Chamber Players for 15 years. Major ensembles and soloists continue to commission her. Tower is Asher Edelman Professor of Music at Bard College, where she has taught since 1972.

Joan
TOWER
(b. 1938)

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|----------|-------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | Strike Zones (2001) | 21:10 |
| 2 | Small (2016) | 6:31 |
| | Still/Rapids | 17:36 |
| 3 | I. Still (2013) | 5:00 |
| 4 | II. Rapids (1996) | 12:36 |
| 5 | Ivory and Ebony (2009) | 7:33 |

WORLD PREMIERE RECORDINGS

Evelyn Glennie, Percussion **1** **2**

Blair McMillen, Piano **3–5**

Albany Symphony **1** **3–4**

David Alan Miller **1** **3–4**

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Producer and engineer: Silas Brown

Booklet notes: Frank K. DeWald

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AMERICAN CLASSICS

Joan Tower is widely regarded as one of today's most important American composers. The works heard here in their world premiere recordings are part of a growing legacy that one pundit has described as "The Power of Tower." *Strike Zones* is tailor-made for percussionist Evelyn Glennie's dazzling technique and impeccable musicianship. The work's orchestration is crafted to enhance a stage filled with percussion instruments – while in *Small* they are contained on a single table, the soloist working like a brilliant chef. The piano concerto *Still/Rapids* was inspired by the glistening beauty and powerful force of water, and *Ivory and Ebony*, written as a test piece for an international piano competition, is infused with Tower's "high-energy" signature.

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Playing
Time:
53:16