

# Jessica Johnson

*new works for piano*

## Missy Mazzoli

1 *Isabelle Eberhardt Dreams of Piano* [8:43]

## Regina Harris Baiocchi

2 *Azuretta* [3:43]

## Sarah Kirkland Snider

3 *The Currents* [7:37]

## Elena Ruehr

*109 Improvisations for solo piano*

4 *Evocation* [3:37]

5 *Pastorale* [2:28]

6 *Fantasy Variations* [2:24]

## Lawren Brianna Ware

*Italian Portraits for solo piano*

7 *Uno: Seas of Sorento* [1:39]

8 *Due: The Catacombs of St. Callixtus* [1:09]

9 *Tre: The Desolation of Vesuvius* [2:38]

10 *Quattro: Florentine Nights* [2:29]

with Anthony Di Sanza, percussion

## Serra Hwang

11 *Circle  $\Delta$  Square for piano* [8:17]

12 *Sojourn for piano and percussion* [10:22]  
Anthony Di Sanza, percussion

## Laura Schwendinger

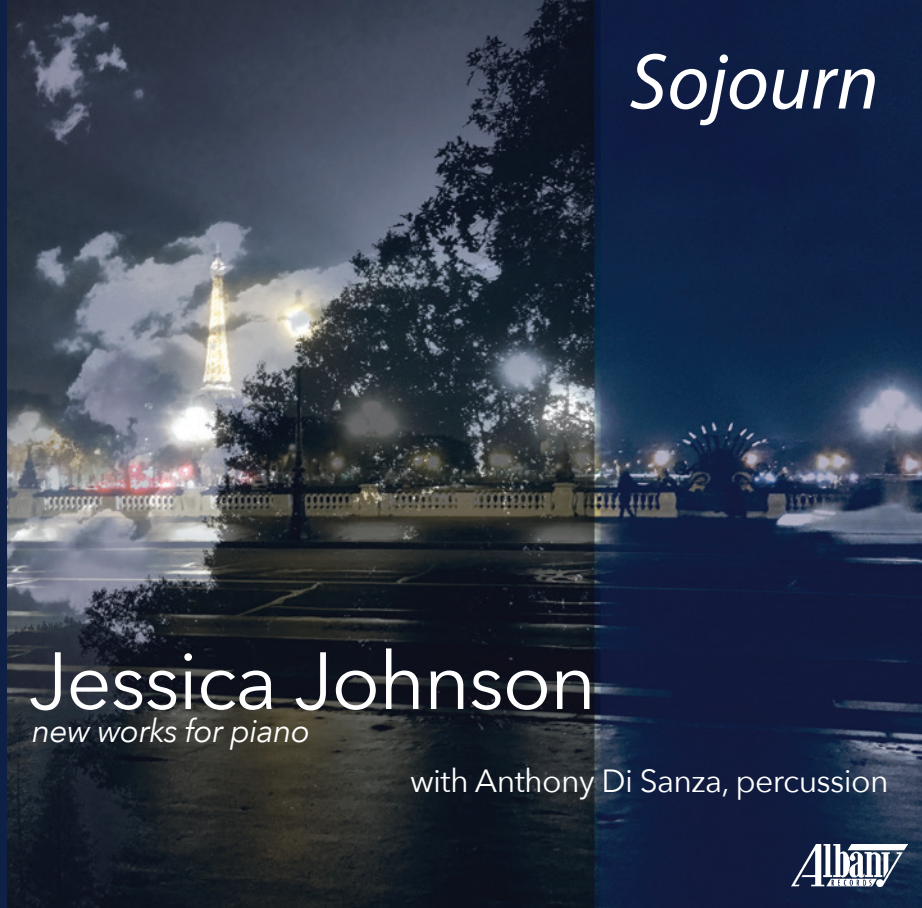
13 *On Being – this flood of stillness* [3:57]

14 *Equatorial Jungle for piano and percussion* [7:41]  
Anthony Di Sanza, percussion

Total Time = 66:51

Sojourn | Jessica Johnson, piano | Anthony Di Sanza, percussion

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# Sojourn

# Jessica Johnson

*new works for piano*

with Anthony Di Sanza, percussion



*Sojourn* features new works for piano all written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, six of which are newly commissioned. My own journey and evolution as an artist owe much to collaborations with living composers. I've always been a passionate advocate for the performance of new music and have premiered over 40 solo and chamber works over the course of my career. I love focusing on the performance of works by women and other underrepresented groups, who continue to be systemically marginalized in classical music.

All works were recorded on a DS Standard 5.5® ("7/8") size piano keyboard (<https://dsstandardfoundation.org>). As a pianist with a small handspan, I have spent my entire professional career seeking creative strategies for performing on conventional-sized keyboards. Since the life-changing moment I started practicing and performing on an alternatively sized piano keyboard, I experienced a whole new level of artistic and technical freedom. This seems like the perfect pairing: performing on a smaller keyboard that fits my hands (studies show that the conventional keyboard is too large for 87% of female pianists!), while championing works by women composers who are typically underrepresented.

It is a tremendous responsibility to premiere a new work. I am deeply indebted to Serra Hwang, Elena Ruehr, Laura Schwendinger, and Brianna Ware for believing in me and providing this incredible opportunity. It is a privilege and honor to work with each of you. My heart is full of gratitude.

## The Music

Isabelle Eberhardt was an explorer and writer who, at the beginning of the 20th century, abandoned a comfortable aristocratic life for a nomadic existence in North Africa. She was a liberated individual who rejected conventional European morality in favor of her own path. She died in a desert flash flood at the age of twenty-seven. **Isabelle Eberhardt Dreams of Pianos (2007)** imagines her riding on horseback through the desert, lost in thought, remembering sounds and sensations of her old life. Fragments of Schubert's A Major sonata pierce her consciousness and are quickly suppressed. In her fatigue she dreams of a piano half-buried in sand, a flash flood of sheet music swirling around her. (Missy Mazzoli)

**Azurette** ("Little Girl Blue") is my musical reaction to a debilitating stroke Dr. Hale Smith suffered in 2000 AD. It was unbearable to witness my mentor, friend and master composer rendered mute and paralyzed. Hale was such a vibrant man who loved to talk, hold court; and he had the goods to do so. Unfortunately, Hale subsisted in a mute, paralyzed state until he passed 24 November 2009. Fortunately, Hale's incredibly legacy speaks for him and itself. (Regina Harris Baiocchi)

**The Currents (2012)** was commissioned by the American Pianists Association for its Classical Fellowship Awards. Piano was my first instrument and musical passion, so a solo piano commission for a competition initially intimidated me. I know the literature well—how deeply and imaginatively the instrument has been explored, how difficult it is to invent new ways to challenge the pianist. There is an idea that a piece written for a competition should do this, that it should invent new technical demands and showcase pyrotechnical dazzle. When I was younger, I wrote some piano music that consciously strove for virtuosity, but these days I'm more interested in getting at what is most peculiarly personal and in need of expression.

So, when I was asked to write this piece, I decided my contribution would be something that challenged the pianist to be at their most expressive, poetic, and lyrical, something that would reward a sharp attention to detail and sensitivity to pacing and narrative. Of course, the fact that it was for a competition never fully left my mind, so the piece does require a formidable technique, but my hope is that *The Currents* allows the performer to focus on storytelling as well—skills that, to my mind, are just as essential to becoming an unforgettable pianist.

The title of the piece, and the overall emotional impetus, was inspired by a larger cycle of poems, *Unremembered*, by poet Nathaniel Bellows, which I set a few years ago. The cycle is about memory, innocence, and the ways we cope with an unpredictable world. The line from which I drew the title reads “But like the hidden current/somewhere undersea/you caused the most upheaval on the other side of me.” (Sarah Kirkland Snider)

### **109 Improvisations (2020)**

Jessica Johnson approached me with an idea to write a work inspired by Beethoven’s Opus 109. I began by playing it over and over again and listening to various recordings. As I started composing, I found that I was improvising with small figures that I loved from 109. It reminded me of when I was a teenager and I used to improvise at the piano every night while my mom cooked dinner. I never wrote down these improvisations because it would have interrupted my flow. What I found as I was writing these pieces for Jessica Johnson was that I was back playing for my mom (in my imagination) but now I had such greater skill at writing things down that I could write as I improvised. Tempos should be fluid and improvisatory, and pedaling, while suggested, is at the discretion of the performer. (Elena Ruehr)

### **Italian Portraits for solo piano (2021)**

Italian Portraits is a set of four pieces that were inspired by my 2014 trip to Italy. This was my first trip outside of the United States and was also my very first flight! I was in Italy for three weeks with the Samford University Fellows Program for the culmination of our two years of study. During our time there, we travelled

all around the country, including visiting Rome, Sorrento, Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Florence. Sorrento’s calming shores, the catacombs of Saint Callixtus (Rome), and the nightlife of Florence were especially memorable and enjoyable for me. Additionally, seeing the devastation caused by the 79 AD eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in person (which buried the cities of Pompeii, Herculaneum, Oplontis, and Stabiae) was unforgettable and tragic to behold. The locations that I visited on my trip acted as inspiration for these short pieces. Thank you to Dr. Johnson for commissioning me to write Italian Portraits. I am so blessed and thankful to be included in this incredible project! (Lawren Brianna Ware)

### **Circle Δ Square for piano (2018)**

When searching for ideas for this composition for Jessica Johnson, I began improvising on the piano, creating many sketches. After many days of experimentation, I discovered that there were a few core ideas that continued to present themselves; I considered them as building blocks or prototype ideas. The title “CircleΔSquare” is used to describe something that is foundational. In Korean cosmology, the circle, square, and triangle symbolize heaven, earth, and humankind, respectively. (Serra Hwang)

### **Sojourn for piano and percussion (2004)**

Composed for Sole Nero piano and percussion duo in 2004, *Sojourn* is a Korean folk drumming inspired piece. The rhythmic cycles used for the piece, such as 8+9+10+10+9 or 10+6+10+10 are combinations of patterns that are common in folk drumming, especially folk ritual music of traditional Korea. Within each cycle, groupings between 2 and 3 are constantly changing to create an active and evolving energy flow. The large recurring rhythmic cycle produces a distinctive groove. Above this groove of percussion, the piano flows more freely, singing, telling, and chanting a story. It is to give the listeners a chance to sojourn into rural Korea. (Serra Hwang)

### **On Being – this flood of stillness (2022)**

The last two years have been stressful for the world. During this period, we have been shuttered away, off and on, indoors, far from family and friends. It has been a lonely time for many and yet in some ways we have been more connected through zoom and other platforms more than ever before. The poem, On Being by Denise Levertov, encapsulates what many of us feel in these remarkably challenging days. This work was commissioned by and written for Jessica Johnson. (Laura Schwendinger)

On Being by Denise Levertov

I know this happiness  
is provisional:

the looming presences—  
great suffering, great fear—

withdraw only  
into peripheral vision:

but ineluctable this shimmering  
of wind in the blue leaves:

this flood of stillness  
widening the lake of sky:

this need to dance,  
this need to kneel:  
this mystery:

### **Equatorial Jungle (2006)**

Equatorial Jungle was commissioned by and dedicated to Jessica Johnson and Anthony Di Sanza of Sole Nero and was inspired by the Henri Rousseau painting by the same name. In 2006 I was lucky enough to see a retrospective of Rousseau's work at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. What struck me about Rousseau's paintings was how beautiful the canvasses were but how incredibly naïve his jungle world really was. Created solely from his imagination, his fecund, large, leafed jungles bear no resemblance to any true jungle on earth.

In my piece, Rousseau's busy jungle world opens up to a view of a smoky salon scene in Paris. With veiled hints of the early jazz from the Montparnasse milieu of Rousseau's life, the musical jungle of my work, literally metamorphoses into a scene from the bar. Once the musical change has happened, the business of the jungle music never quite loses its jazzy side. Still, more aspects pulled from my memory of Rousseau's art are incorporated into my Equatorial Jungle, they are, the rigidity of the subject within the apparent looseness of the actual canvass, and a certain poignancy, which captures for me, Rousseau's personal longing to be accepted into an artistic world that he never quite achieves. Ultimately, there is a sadness that permeates my piece as well as it paradoxically permeates Rousseau's otherwise seemingly vibrant and wild canvasses. (Laura Schwendinger)

## The Performers

Praised for her “exquisite sensitivity and expression” (*American Record Guide*), **Jessica Johnson** is passionate about championing new music. As a member of *Sole Nero*, a piano and percussion duo with Anthony Di Sanza, percussion, the group has contributed significantly to the repertoire, including commissions by Evan Hause, Dave Hollinden, Serra Hwang, Joseph Koykkar, Les Thimmig, Joel Naumann, Elena Ruehr, and Laura Schwendinger. An advocate for the adoption of the Donison-Steinbuhler (DS) Standard, her latest recording project *Sojourn* (Albany Records) features newly commissioned works by Serra Hwang, Elena Ruehr, Laura Schwendinger, and Lawren Brianna Ware performed on the DS5.5™ (“7/8”) keyboard.

An active clinician, she has given workshops and presentations at the European Piano Teachers Association International Conference, World Piano Pedagogy Conference, ISME, MTNA, CMS, Performing Arts Medicine Association (PAMA), National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy (NCKP), Portland International Piano Festival, as well as held residencies at major universities and colleges throughout North America, South America, Europe, and Asia. Johnson has articles published in *American Music Teacher*, *Piano Journal* of the European Piano Teachers Association, *Piano Magazine*, and the *Piano Pedagogy Forum*. She is a three-time winner of *American Music Teacher’s* Article of the Year Award for “Feeling the Sound: Reflections on Claiming One’s Own Musical Voice” (2014), “The Art of Listening with Depth, Understanding, Flow and Imagery” (2007), and “Awakening Rhythmic Intuition and Flow in the Developing Pianist” (2019). Current research explores cross-modal, multi-sensory engagement in the creative process and the impact of contemplative practices on making music joyfully, with vulnerability.

Johnson serves on the piano faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as professor of piano and piano pedagogy and director of graduate studies. A devoted teacher, Johnson’s students have secured teaching positions in North America, South America, Europe, and Asia. Passionate about community engagement and arts outreach, she serves as director of Piano Pioneers, a

program that brings high quality piano instruction to low-income community members and at-risk youth in Wisconsin. She holds the DMA and MM from the University of Michigan, and the BM from East Carolina University.

**Anthony Di Sanza** has performed and presented master classes globally and serves as Professor of Percussion at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, where was recognized with the Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professorship in 2019. Active in a variety of Western and non-Western percussive traditions, he can be heard on many internationally distributed CD’s and videos. In review of his solo CD release, *On the nature of...*, All Music Guide writes, “Di Sanza dazzles not only in the assurance and polish of his playing but in his tremendous vitality and spontaneity.” Current projects include a second solo CD/video series, a soon to be released recording by the global percussion group, *Duniya*.

Di Sanza has percussion compositions published by TapSpace, Alfred and HoneyRock. He is principal percussionist with the Madison Symphony Orchestra and has signature percussion products with Black Swamp Percussion and Encore Mallets. He endorses Black Swamp, Encore, Marimba One, Sabian, Remo products and Pro-Mark products.

## The Composers

**Regina Harris Baiocchi** writes notes and words to fill vessels called music, poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Regina is driven by her curiosity to create art that is informed by research, speaks to diverse audiences, and moves people. Regina's catalogue includes compositions for woodwinds, brass, percussion, strings, orchestra, keyboard, multi-media, choral, sacred, jazz, opera, art songs, and pop tunes. Her music has been performed by members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Seattle Philharmonic, US Army Band, American Guild of Organists, Chicago Brass Quintet, Gaudete Brass Quintet, Milwaukee Brass Quintet, Lincoln Trio, Avalon String Quartet, and other acclaimed artists.

**Serra Hwang** was born in Seoul, Korea and received her education in the United States. She received her MA and DMA in Composition from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Musical awards include the performance of her orchestral piece *Pinari* by the Hallé Orchestra for the BBC (British Broadcasting Company) Composer's Platform and the winning of first prize in the International League for Women Composers' Search for New Music Competition. Serra Hwang's music has been performed in South America, Asia, Europe, and North America, including concerts more recently at the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts in Seoul and ICWM (International Conference for Women Musicians) in Beijing, China. Recent composition projects include writing for cellist Angela Son, PEP (Piano and Erhu Project), and the Vancouver International Women in Film Festival. CD recordings include IEL (Innocent Eyes & Lenses) label's *Asian American Music Compilation CD Project, Boldly Expressive: Music by Women* on Albany, cellist Anthony Arnone's *Beckoning* on MSR, and pianist Jessica Johnson's *Sojourn* on Albany. Hwang has been on the faculty of Illinois Wesleyan University and Illinois State University. Currently she teaches composition at the University of British Columbia.

Recently deemed "one of the more consistently inventive, surprising composers now working in New York" (*New York Times*) and "Brooklyn's post-millennial Mozart" (*Time Out New York*), **Missy Mazzoli** has had her music performed by the Kronos Quartet, LA Opera, eighth blackbird, the BBC Symphony, Scottish Opera, and many others. In 2018 she became one of the first two women, along with Jeanine Tesori, to receive a main stage commission from the Metropolitan Opera and was nominated for a Grammy award. She is Composer-in-Residence at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and from 2012-2015 was Composer-in-Residence with Opera Philadelphia. Upcoming commissions include works for Opera Philadelphia, the National Ballet of Canada, Chicago Lyric Opera and Norwegian National Opera. Her works are published by G. Schirmer.

Composer **Elena Ruehr's** work has been described as "sumptuously scored and full of soaring melodies" (*The New York Times*), and "unspeakably gorgeous" (*Gramophone*). An award-winning faculty member at MIT, she has also been a Guggenheim Fellow, a fellow at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute and composer-in-residence with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, which performed and recorded her major orchestral works (*O'Keeffe Images*, BMOP Sound) as well as the opera *Toussaint Before the Spirits* (Arsis Records). She has numerous recordings including: *Six String Quartets by Elena Ruehr (Avie)*, *Averno* (Avie with the Trinity Choir, Julian Wachner, conducting), *Jane Wang considers the Dragonfly* (Albany), *Lift* (Avie), *Shimmer* (Metamorphosen Chamber Ensemble on Albany) and *Shadow Light* (The New Orchestra of Washington with Marcus Thompson on Acis). She has written five operas and many cantatas, orchestral music, chamber music and songs. She has also written for film and dance. She is an enthusiastic teacher at MIT, where she has received the Baker Award for Undergraduate Teaching.

**Laura Schwendinger**, composer of *Artemisia*, winner of the 2023 American Academy of Arts and Letters Charles Ives Opera award (\$50,000), was the first composer to win the Berlin Prize in 1999. A Professor of music composition at UW-Madison, her works have been championed by Dawn Upshaw, Jennifer Koh, Janine Jansen, Matt Haimovitz, the Arditti, JACK and Spektral Quartets, International Contemporary Ensemble, Eighth-Blackbird, Juilliard, American Composers Orchestra, Franz Liszt Chamber Orchestra of Hungary. Her music has been performed at the Kennedy & Lincoln Centers, Berlin Philharmonic, Wigmore & Carnegie Halls, Miller Theater & Théâtre Châtelet, Tanglewood, Aspen, Ojai, Talis, & Bennington Music Festivals. She has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, Radcliffe Institute at Harvard, Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, First Prize of the 1995 ALEA III International Competition, as well as multiple fellowships from the American Academy Arts Letters, Copland House, Fromm, Koussevitzky and Bogliasco Foundations, MacDowell, and Yaddo Colonies. Her music has been called “captivating, artful and moving”, “music of infinite beauty” in the *New York Times*, as well as “the genuine article... onto the ‘season’s best list” in the *Boston Globe*. Recent premieres include her second opera, *Cabaret of Shadows*, (a Fromm Commission) produced by Musiq at MATCH 2 in Houston, *Nightingales* for Eleanor Bartsch and Ariana Kim, a consortium commission from the Dubuque & UW Symphony Orchestras, and a harp concerto, *Second Sight* for Atlanta Symphony Principal Harpist Elisabeth Remy Johnson, commissioned for the 100th anniversary of the Emory University Orchestra program. A new solo cello work *Fluorecenza*, was commissioned as part of Matt Haimovitz’s Primavera Project. A *San Francisco Classical Voice* review of her opera read “*Artemisia* is sumptuous on every level” and Colin Clarke wrote of her JACK CD QUARTETS, “the sheer intensity of the music is spellbinding...the passion shines through like...light.”

Composer **Sarah Kirkland Snider** writes music of direct expression and vivid narrative that has been hailed as “rapturous” (*The New York Times*), “ground-breaking” (*The Boston Globe*), and “poignant, deeply personal” (*The New Yorker*). Recently named one of the “Top 35 Female Composers in Classical

Music” by *The Washington Post*, Snider’s works have been commissioned and/or performed by the New York Philharmonic; San Francisco Symphony; National Symphony Orchestra; Detroit Symphony Orchestra; Philharmonia Orchestra; the Birmingham Royal Ballet; Deutsche Grammophon for mezzo Emily D’Angelo; percussionist Colin Currie; vocalist Shara Nova; eighth blackbird; A Far Cry; and Roomful of Teeth, among many others. The winner of the 2014 Detroit Symphony Orchestra *Lebenbom* Competition, Snider’s recent projects include *Forward Into Light*, an orchestral commission for the New York Philharmonic inspired by the American women’s suffrage movement; *Mass for the Endangered*, a Trinity Wall Street-commissioned prayer for the environment for choir and ensemble; and an opera on 12th-century polymath St. Hildegard von Bingen, commissioned by Beth Morrison Projects. A founding Co-Artistic Director of Brooklyn-based non-profit New Amsterdam Records, Snider has an M.M. and Artist’s Diploma from the Yale School of Music, and a B.A. from Wesleyan University. Her music is published by G. Schirmer.

**Lawren Brianna Ware**, a Gadsden, Alabama native, recently completed her Doctor of Musical Arts degree in composition at UW-Madison with a minor in historical musicology. She owns her own private Madison-based piano studio, B. Ware Works Piano Studio. Additionally, she accompanies vocalists and instrumentalists and performs as often as she can. Ms. Ware has been awarded the David and Edith Sinaiko Frank Graduate Fellowship for a Woman in the Arts, Mullen Prize for Sacred Music (composition, 2017) and was named the 2017 Overture Center Rising Stars Grand Prize Winner. As a result of the Rising Stars win, she had the opportunity to perform as an opener for The Branford Marsalis Quartet in April of 2019. She holds degrees in piano performance from Samford University (BM) and The University of Wisconsin-Madison (MM).



## Acknowledgements

This recording project has been the dream of a lifetime. I am indebted to these extraordinary composers who have enriched my life in immeasurable ways. What a privilege to collaborate with Serra, Elena, Laura, and Brianna. You have inspired me to be the best artist I can be. Special shout out to Laura for the beautiful cover art. Thanks to Buzz, Audrey, and Mark for your amazing ears, imagination, and patience. This recording would not have been possible without piano technician extraordinaire, Baoli Liu, who helped prepare the DS Standard 5.5® size piano keyboard. I am so lucky that my life partner is also my duo partner and producer for this recording. Tony, you make my whole world better. And finally, thanks to Maggie for enduring hours and hours of practice during the pandemic as I lovingly learned this music. You are a light for the universe.

Recorded at Collins Recital Hall and Mills Concert Hall, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI.

Recording Engineer: Buzz Kemper, Audio for the Arts  
Recording Engineer for Sojourn and Equatorial Jungle: Mark Hetzler  
Audio Engineers: Buzz Kemper and Audrey Martinovic, Audio for the Arts  
Producer: Anthony Di Sanza  
Digital Mastering: Justin Perkins, Mystery Room Mastering  
Piano Technician: Baoli Liu  
Cover Art: Laura Schwendinger

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