



Jessie Montgomery

Born: 1981,
New York City

Banner

Premiered: September 2014

debates over *The Star-Spangled Banner's* suitability as a national anthem have been going on nearly since the ink dried on Francis Scott Key's lyrics, penned after a battle in the War of 1812. (The melody originated decades earlier across the Atlantic, beginning its life in London as a gentlemen's club song.) Key, a power player from a wealthy slave-owning family in Maryland, was a slave owner himself, a fact which led Abolitionists to mock Key for the hypocrisy of his line "the land of the free." For these and other reasons, complex feelings about *The Star-Spangled Banner* have existed for generations, and it only became our national anthem in 1931.

addressing the paradoxes

Necessarily, anyone who engages with the national anthem is engaging with more than just a piece of music: we're also engaging with what it means to be an American, and what it means to be free. This is especially true in our time and place, 16 months after George Floyd was murdered by police on a street corner ten minutes away from Orchestra Hall.

The Sphinx Organization commissioned *Banner* from American composer Jessie Montgomery upon the 2014 bicentennial of Key's poem. In *Banner*, Montgomery addresses the paradoxes raised by the anthem in a direct and powerful way. As she writes in her composer's notes, "For most Americans, the song represents a paradigm of liberty and solidarity against fierce odds, and for others it implies a contradiction between the ideals of freedom and the realities of injustice and oppression....I've made an attempt to answer the question: 'What does an anthem for the 21st century sound like in today's multi-cultural environment?'"

That answer employs symbolic instrumentation: a string quartet set against an orchestra, representing individuals interacting with a larger whole. Throughout the piece these two ensembles play off each other constantly. Sometimes they support each other; sometimes they drown each other out; sometimes they come into outright, cacophonous conflict.

meaningful melodies and ideals

Banner opens with a burst of trills. The string quartet enters with a seemingly battered (albeit resolute) version of *The Star-Spangled Banner*. Then the first violin steps forward to offer a clear-eyed rendition of the Mexican national anthem. This new music energizes the orchestra and sets off a cascade of fleet-fingered notes in the violins and flutes.

Suddenly the piece enters an otherworldly interlude. The flutists bend pitches downward and the string players make clacking sounds using the wood of their bows. The low tom and kick drum start quietly pounding. Soon the string players are actually stomping their feet and drumming on their instruments. The orchestra has been transformed into a quintessentially American ensemble, the marching band.

The finale begins with four snappy chords from the string quartet. Here Montgomery layers scraps of meaningful melodies on top of each other: excerpts from protest songs, folk songs, Puerto Rican melodies and, yes, even *The Star-Spangled Banner* itself. At one point, a full seven of these pieces sound simultaneously. Heard together, they paint a dazzling portrait of what might happen when Americans' identities collide with, complement, and shape who we are and who we ought to be. In Montgomery's words, a modern tribute to the national anthem requires no less than "acknowledging the contradictions, leaps and bounds, and milestones that allow us to celebrate and maintain the tradition of our ideals."

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, timpani, snare drum, kick drum, low tom-tom and strings

Program note by **Emily Hogstad**.

