

Jeanine Tesori's Musical World | Tesori's Words

"I knew that I was writing it for a 47-piece orchestra. I wanted it to have some new music, but some of the style of—not a folk opera, exactly, but of real people, of what they sound like to me. What do men sound like in a sports bar? The world is operatic to me, in the way that you can hear counterpoint, and you can hear when something soars above it. Maybe it's the Sicilian roots—I feel like it's in my blood, my grandfather being a composer."

"I am a melodist, and I also really love dissonance in terms of the tension and relief, so you understand the consonance, the foil, and the release of it. In terms of the choral work, I didn't want to write for a Baptist choir. I wanted to write true choral music."

"Buryl Red was one of my mentors. He wrote for gospel choir, but also, he and I did so much choral work together. Buryl was a student of Elliott Carter, but his openness to all music—still to this day, he is the youngest musician I've ever known. He did not judge, did not compete, was not interested in the bullshit of who gets what and the gold shiny things. It did not interest him. He wanted to know what people were writing and why they were writing it."

"I'm trying to think about the characters and what I think they sound like. I think about and live with these characters to a certain extent. It isn't through a determined filter; I try to write the heartache as I can experience it myself, the way I hear it, and trying to translate it through this character. I am a visitor in the story. I am a listener in the story."

"The first teacher I had really unlocked a pivotal moment for me about not judging the music. It's music first, as opposed to the source, in terms of judging it. So, we played TV themes at the same time as Beethoven and Kabalevsky and analyzed them."

"I've always had a real love of percussion, which I studied in my 20s, especially drums and the djembe. There are all different ways that cultures keep a beat. And it's just unbelievably fascinating, and you just listen, and you go across cultures, and you realize how much we share. Though we don't acknowledge it, we do."

"I started playing when I was three, and I played all rhythm stuff. I played everything that I could get my hands on, from Carole King to Stevie Wonder to Billy Preston. But I also listened to Shostakovich and Kabalevsky, and I had this amazing teacher who said, you can get to know people through music. That is the portal. That is the key. Do not judge it, because if you judge it, you stop listening. And if you stop listening as a musician, you're sunk. I'm seven, so I'm thinking, what the hell is he talking about? The piano was the way in for storytelling to me and through theater. I didn't even really see a musical until I was 18."