

MUSIC ACCORD

JESSIE MONTGOMERY *Sergeant McCauley* (2019)

Program Notes

Jessie Montgomery
Sergeant McCauley

"Music is my connection to the world," says violinist and composer Jessie Montgomery, and her oeuvre bears witness to the visceral truth of that claim. Her music, marked by a deeply personal compositional language that combines her classical training with vernacular and improvisatory styles, impresses for its narrative power—a quality for which the composer credits her family's storytelling tradition. Montgomery's mother is an actor and playwright who has created numerous theater pieces rooted in her family history, "So I've been witness to that all of my life," she says. "That ethos has found its way into my music." Montgomery's tone poem *Records from a Vanishing City* (2016), composed for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, recounts her childhood on Manhattan's Lower East Side during an artistically vibrant time. More broadly probing her African-American heritage is *Five Slave Songs* (2018), commissioned for soprano Julia Bullock by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Sergeant McCauley similarly draws from Montgomery's personal history. Scored for wind quintet and string quartet, the work is inspired by the Great Migration, the movement of more than six million African-Americans over the early and mid-twentieth century from the rural south to urban centers across the United States. The work specifically tracks the journey of Montgomery's great-grandfather, the *Sergeant McCauley* after whom the work is titled: a buffalo soldier who migrated northward before ultimately returning south to Mississippi. Montgomery's reconstruction of his journey is based as much on research (military records documenting his travels, etc.) as on family lore, nurtured in conversation with her mother and aunt.

Like a sound map of *Sergeant McCauley's* travels, Montgomery's score makes use of African-American spirituals and work songs that would have been heard in the locales he likely passed. *Sergeant McCauley's* five movements allude to these songs, each representing a stop along the way. The first movement is based on "Just Now," a Methodist hymn thought to have originated in the northern seaboard slave states (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina), which *McCauley*, a Virginian Methodist, may have known from his youth. The flute dreamily issues the tune over a quiet, whispered texture in the strings, before the full ensemble gradually joins in.

The second movement, "Makina," depicts *McCauley's* time in the military, working on the construction of the country's young railroad system and the building of the Panama Canal. Unpitched air noises and key clicks in the wind instruments and percussive effects on the strings conjure a bustling construction scene.

Following a reprise of the opening hymn tune, the fourth movement features "My Father, How Long?", a slave song whose words—"My father, how long, poor sinner suffer here? And it won't be long, poor sinner suffer here"—at once express a yearning for spiritual salvation and for freedom from the oppression of slavery.

The work's final movement, "Lay Dis Body Down," cites a funeral song said to originate from the region surrounding South Carolina, and represents *Sergeant McCauley's* final resting place. Montgomery sets the song as a slow, meditative procession.

Sergeant McCauley was commissioned for Imani Winds and the Catalyst Quartet by Music Accord and the Sphinx Organization.

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Sergeant McCauley

Composer: Jessie Montgomery

Instrumentation: string quartet and wind quintet

Premiering Artists: Catalyst Quartet and Imani Winds

Duration: 14

Publisher Contact

<https://www.jessiemontgomery.com/contact>

Artist Contact

Catalyst Quartet

<http://catalystquartet.com/contact>

Imani Winds

<http://www.imaniwinds.com/contact>

Jessie Montgomery



Catalyst Quartet



Imani Winds

About Music Accord

Comprised of top classical music presenting organizations throughout the United States, Music Accord is a consortium that commission new works in the chamber music, instrumental recital and song genres. The Consortiums goal is to create a significant number of new works and to ensure presentation of these works in venues throughout this country and, if the occasion arises, internationally. Music Accord awards commissions principally to performers who are US citizens or reside in the US and assists these performers in selecting composers who are United States citizens or who reside in the United States.

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