

Chicago's Giantess of the Flute

An Interview with Artist and Teacher Jennie Oh Brown

By Gianna Capobianco

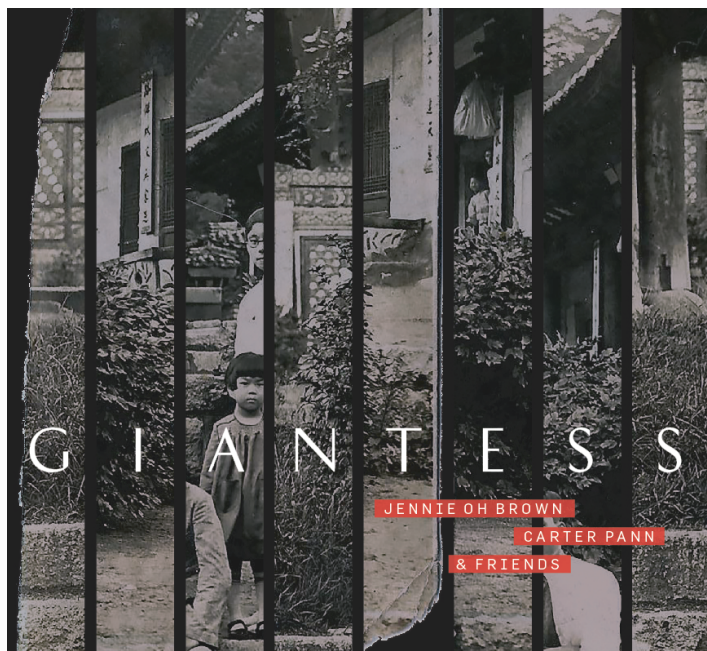
This fall, performer, teacher, writer, and curator Jennie Oh Brown will be one of the featured guest artists for the Chicago Flute Club's 31st season as part of the CFC's new *Fluting with the Stars* virtual series for 2020–2021. In anticipation of this event, I had a lovely interview with her on Zoom where we discussed the inspiration behind her critically acclaimed album *Giantess*, her multifaceted career, advice for entrepreneurs, her love of teaching, and COVID-19. Dr. Brown spoke eloquently and offered a fascinating snapshot of her career.

Giantess

Music critic Howard Reich of the *Chicago Tribune* featured *Giantess* on his list of "Best Classical Albums of 2019." Inspiration for this critically acclaimed album came from works Brown feels a strong personal connection to, and the pieces share common themes such as courage, resilience, and survival. These traits were embodied by her grandmothers, both of whom lived through the Korean War and the Japanese occupation of Korea. As a way of honoring her grandmothers, she dedicated this album to them.



Composer Carter Pann's larger-than-life piece *Giantess* was written in dedication to his wife, Heidi Ames Pann. The work explores themes of heroism, strength, and fearlessness. Pann also composed *Double Espresso*, a vibrant, fun, and virtuosic piece. Valerie Coleman's *Wish Sonatine* is based on the middle passage that Africans traveled across the Atlantic as they came to the United States to be sold into slavery. This piece dives into the bravery and tenacity that the Africans showed as well as the terrible violence and oppression they endured. *Plea for Peace* by Augusta Read Thomas was commissioned by The University of Chicago for the commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of Chicago Pile-1, the world's first artificial nuclear reactor. Overall, *Giantess* is a powerful album containing emotionally charged works that highlight the incredible skill and artistry of Brown and her collaborators.



Entrepreneur

Throughout her varied career, Brown has embodied an entrepreneurial spirit. In addition to releasing her solo album *Giantess* in 2019, she also released her debut solo album *Looking Back: Flute Music of Joseph Schwanter* in 2015. In 2020, she released a trio album *Vox* with the Heare Ensemble, all to critical acclaim. She is an active performer in the Chicagoland area and is the founding artistic director and flutist of Picoso, a chamber ensemble that presents masterworks from all eras and from diverse contexts. In addition, she is on the faculty at Elmhurst College, Wheaton College, and she is the founder, director, and is on the faculty with Credo Flute. In 2019, she launched the New Music Chicago Presents series at the Chicago Cultural Center and was recently named Executive and Artistic Director of the Ear Taxi Festival. Brown has published multiple articles in the National Flute Association's journal *Flutist Quarterly*, *Flute Talk* magazine, and in the Chicago Flute Club's *Pipeline* magazine.

When asked where this entrepreneurial spirit came from, Brown explains that it started with a revelation that came while she was a graduate student at the Eastman School of Music. In the midst of her intensive musical studies, she found solace in a graduate-level literature class at the University of Rochester. The study of oral traditions in literature gave her a new perspective on approaching the communication of stories in diverse



cultural contexts, a concept she found appropriate and applicable to music as well. Additionally, during her doctoral studies at Eastman, she was offered a TA position in the musicology department, a position normally held by musicology PhD students. This forced her outside of her comfort zone, especially since the other TAs had been teaching music history throughout their academic careers, and she was thrust into it "completely green." This ended up being a very formative time in that Brown realized she could push herself, grow, develop a new skill, and have fun during the process. She also became aware that she enjoyed "reaching beyond what was considered the normal route of studying and moving through music." Lastly, these experiences made her realize that her "comfort zone" is when she is doing multiple projects; that is when she feels the happiest.

Interestingly, Brown never set out to have an entrepreneurial career. She knew that she wanted a stable career that would give her complete control over her schedule, allow her to work with people she loves, offer something of value, include opportunities to teach, and enable her to help and encourage people. In addition, she now focuses on "finding opportunities that express a larger purpose for me."



Wise Words

When asked what advice she would give for aspiring musicians, Brown gives the following wisdom: “You have to be fearless. If you lose, fail, or something goes wrong, who cares? You must keep pushing forward. The ultimate freedom is being able to let things go and not feel as though your identity is tied to success and failure. You must have a sense of purpose and hold tightly to the things that take you in the right direction. When you begin to sense the right path for you, be smart, strategic, and assertive in putting yourself out there.”

Teaching Philosophy

Having studied with Dr. Brown for the past several years, I can attest that she is an incredibly kind, generous, and wise instructor and mentor. When asked what she enjoys most about teaching, she says, “Honestly, I just really like my students! I think they are fun and funny, and if I’m equipped to give the student a handful of skills then that makes me really happy.” She adds, “I think of it as an honor to walk beside people as they are discovering their passions and ambitions. I just want to be able to share whatever skills I have that will help them reach that next step.”

COVID-19

COVID-19 has created a challenging situation. Musicians, especially freelancers, are facing

uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. Brown feels strongly that musicians will adapt and that the arts will survive. Artists and ensembles are already changing and becoming better at online concerts and teaching, she continues. Brown offers the following wisdom on how to move through these difficult times: “Think about what you have to do to survive. In what ways can you really reach into your full skill set and use it. You might discover that you have something marketable that you didn’t even realize. Be really strategic.”

Brown is staying motivated by taking this difficult period to do things that she normally doesn’t have time for during the year. For example, she is spending a lot of time practicing traverso and recording Bach’s cello suites, which has been a fifteen-year goal of hers. She also advises: “Use this pandemic as a time of healing and introspection and do things that are gratifying for you. If you don’t practice for two weeks, don’t beat yourself up. Grant yourself the kind of grace and encouragement that you extend to your students when they are feeling down. It’s totally ok to take a step back and not be so pressured all the time. That doesn’t mean don’t be ambitious and don’t work hard, it just means do it in a way that’s positive, fun, and doesn’t lead to being self-critical in an unhealthy way. All that to say, take good care of yourself. I think that’s really important.” ~

