

# PRELUDE

FEBRUARY 2024 • MASTERWORKS #5



## Enduring Love Stories February 9 - 11, 2024

Featuring the works of living composers is important and necessary to advance the future of symphonic music. Brazilian-American composer, Clarice Assad, has created a new concerto, in a very special collaboration with HSO guest artists Laura Metcalf and Rupert Boyd. We embraced the opportunity to speak with Clarice about the project and our conversation with Clarice is shared in this edition of *Prelude*.



Clarice and Sergio Assad

Born February 9, 1978, into a musical family, Clarice is the daughter of guitarist Sergio Assad, and her uncle is guitarist Odair Assad.<sup>i</sup> Today, at age 46, Assad is a Grammy Award-nominated composer, pianist and vocalist. Described by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as a “serious triple threat”, Assad is a composer, performer, and band leader. She is fluent in Portuguese, French and English, and sings in all three languages, as well as Spanish and Italian. She has released multiple solo albums, and her website reflects more than 70 works that include compositions for voice, orchestra, solo instruments and chamber groups. Her recognition as both a popular and classical artist is well-established. She has been the Composer-In-Residence for the Albany Symphony and this year was named the Composer-In-Residence with the Allentown Symphony in 2024. Off stage, Clarice works with young people in schools in both the United States and Brazil under her education initiative, *Voxploration*, which helps young girls gain confidence to express themselves freely.<sup>ii</sup>

The performance of works by women composers is relatively new in the orchestral world. In 2014, Classic FM, observing gender in the opera world, found that the percent of operas performed by women composers was ZERO,<sup>iii</sup> and the numbers were

only slightly better for symphony orchestras that year. Sadly, four years later, in 2018, not much had changed. At that time, the chief programming officer of the Philadelphia Orchestra confessed, “Zero is a very damning number” when confronted with this stark truth: of the 55 different composers whose works would be performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra in the 2018-2019 season, NONE were women.<sup>iv</sup> The same was true at the Chicago Symphony and numbers were not much better at the New York Philharmonic or the Cleveland Orchestra.<sup>v</sup>

The absence of opportunities for women is painfully real for all female composers. In HSO’s recent



Voxploration Education Initiative

conversation with Clarice, she recalled that in 2018, she had a completed piano concerto “sitting in a drawer,” but because it had not been “specifically commissioned by an orchestra” she could not find any orchestra willing to perform the premiere.

Today, in 2024, we are observing a long-awaited change. The pandemic and the years since have witnessed an increased focus on racial injustices and gender disparities, which appears to have accelerated efforts to bring more diversity to classical music.<sup>vi</sup> The

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change was also observed by Simon Woods, president and chief executive of the League of American Orchestras, who noted, “The change that has been talked about for a very long time has suddenly been tremendously accelerated.”<sup>vii</sup> The 2022 Orchestra Repertoire Report demonstrated a 638% increase in music by women in American symphony halls in the past six years.<sup>viii</sup>

Clarice Assad is a significant voice in the classical, world music, pop and jazz genres. We were thrilled at the chance to talk with her.

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### **HSO: How did you navigate the transition from performer to composer?**

Those two paths happened simultaneously for me. I started playing music at a very young age, and I was always composing and writing simple songs on the piano. As a child vocalist, I was performing jingles and commercials on Brazilian radio and TV, and later, was simultaneously arranging music for theater, plays and musicals. It always felt as if performing and composing were being developed simultaneously.

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### **HSO: A quick glance at your website shows that you are quite prolific. How do you create such an enormous body of work?**

I think that the more you do something, the more proficient you become. I have put in so many hours, and so many years, to develop the craft of composing. I work with real musicians, so I benefit from their immediate feedback. This, plus my years of experience, has taught me what works and what doesn't. I don't believe in “writer's block” or, at least, I don't want to believe that it exists! I love what I do.

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### **HSO: Beyond composing, you've been a celebrated and gifted performer, both vocally and on piano. Are you actively performing still?**

I do still perform, but with the increase in my work as a composer, and the demands of having two young children, I now have less and less time to practice

piano. I know I was a much better pianist in the past, and my ability to perform at a high technical level has declined as I put more of my time into composing.

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### **HSO: Can you describe the process that you use to compose?**

It varies, depending on the project. I can hear different music and sounds in my head, and I think the music is drawn from my surroundings. I sometimes get a melody or theme that plays on a loop in my head to the point that it can be maddening! I remember that as a small child I often heard music playing in my head, and I remember asking my mom to “make the music stop.” I learned that by sitting at the piano, I could get the music out of my head and into my hands. I remember feeling that the piano was speaking to me and communicating with me in a way that I could never explain or fully understand, but it's the way I began to compose.

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### **HSO: How did you begin work on *Anahata*?**

In the best way possible – through collaboration with the artists who would be performing it. I had wonderful conversations with Laura (Metcalfe) and Rupert (Boyd) and asked what they wanted as a theme. It is most interesting to work in collaboration, because I can get inside the head of an artist and learn what emotions they are looking to convey in their performance. It surprised me when Laura said she wanted me to “write a piece about love” but I was excited by the concept. Love is universal but there are so many kinds of love. I have two little girls and Laura has a child, so I knew I could draw from my own experience with parental love. But I didn't yet know all their musical tastes, so the collaboration with Laura and Rupert evolved in stages. For me, collaborating with musicians is the best way to create music, so this piece is the culmination of a wonderful journey that we took together.

The title of the piece, *Anahata*, means “unhurt” or “unstricken” in Sanskrit and refers to the core heart chakra. It is the psychic hub that governs our capacity for kindness and deep human closeness, which is the basis of every kind of love.

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**HSO: We know that your violin concerto was written for Nadja Salerno Sonenberg. Was it the same process of collaboration on that piece?**

Yes. The idea for that concerto began during a conversation in the summer of 2003. I was traveling with my father and uncle (Odair Assad) and Nadja, as they were performing as a trio across the United States. I had just graduated from the Chicago College of Performing Arts and was about to begin work on my master's degree at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, majoring in composition. Nadja lightly said, "you write a piece and I'll play it at your graduation recital." First, I thought she was joking, but she was very serious, and that is how that piece began. I asked Nadja to tell me everything she likes – and doesn't like – about music, so the piece was really built just for her. Nadja has been an important person in my life. I looked up to her, and she has always been a major force for me.

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**HSO: One of your compositions, *Sephardic Suite*, written in 2015, was inspired by Sephardic music. Is that something from your own culture or something you were drawn to?**

I became connected to two great musicians, Denis (Azabajic) and Eugenia (Moliner), who are husband and wife and perform as the Cavatina Duo. They commissioned the piece, and I was fascinated by their desire to play music based on the Sephardic themes that were rooted in Eugenia's Spanish heritage, dating back more than five centuries. I was amazed by the music, which is a fantastic combination of language and music. I chose themes from Ladino songs and then worked from there. I had fallen in love with the ornamentation and sounds of the music of the middle east, which I heard for the first time in Doha. Even though I could not understand the words, the music was compelling and in a strange way, it felt familiar. Working on that project with Denis and Eugenia was truly thrilling, and it helped to fulfill Eugenia's dream of bringing the music of her ancestors to life.

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**HSO: You have lived in so many places. You were born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, but you've lived in the United States as well. How do you define home?**

That is a wonderful question, because for me, home is where love is. It's not tied to geography but to emotion. Every move I've ever made has been because of love. When I left Brazil, I was following my love of music and pursuing my desire to study music in greater depth. I moved to New York City because I fell in love with someone, and I lived in various neighborhoods in Manhattan for about fifteen years (the upper West Side, Inwood and Washington Heights.) Now, my anchor is my family, my partner and my two little girls, Antonia and Stella.

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**HSO: You come from a family of musicians, including your father and your uncle. Have your children already been involved with music?**

As you might imagine, my house is always filled with music, and I mean all kinds of music. The children are not permitted any TV or "screen time" but music is present. Antonia is nearly three. When she was born, I had my piano in the apartment, so she heard me playing piano regularly. But when Stella was born (she will turn one in March), I didn't have the same ability to play piano for her. Antonia, being older, demanded more of my time, and as a result, Stella never heard me play piano. But we sing – and there's lots of singing!

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**HSO: You've traveled so much for your work. Do you have a favorite spot to visit?**

I love to travel. Before the girls were born, I was able to really benefit from traveling to all the places that I went for work. But my work is demanding and I'm on the road a lot, so I try to make sure that I am home as much as possible to care for them. As any mother knows, it's a balancing act. But, if I were to take a vacation now, it would be somewhere in the Scandinavian countries. My heritage is so much from the southern hemisphere, but something about

Scandinavia has captured my attention, and I truly love spending time in Denmark. The people seem to be calm and organized, and that appeals to me.

## HSO: Outside of music, do you have other interests or hobbies?

In the past, I always carried a camera with me, documenting my experiences. I still carry the camera, but I don't have any talent for it. However, I've learned that I'm a good editor, which probably comes from music, because as a composer, I'm always organizing and editing so it carries over to the visual side as well. I try very hard to stay in the moment. Both music and computer coding require focus and attention.

Currently, I am obsessed with gadgets and technology. I do plan to use technology more in my music and just completed a piece called *The Evolution of AI*, which was commissioned by the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra and the Chicago Sinfonietta. It was premiered on January 12, 2024, by the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra.

## HSO: Is there anything people would be surprised to learn about you?

Probably the fact that I have an obsessive side to my personality, and I work very hard to not give in to it. But, given my fascination with technology, I use multiple gadgets to track and measure things that I might otherwise obsess over, such as my sleep, my weight, and what I eat. I have "wearable technology" – my watch, bracelet and ring all are measuring something!

**Thank you so much, Clarice, for your adventurous spirit and for your magnificent music! We can't wait to enjoy the world premiere on February 9<sup>th</sup>, which coincides with your birthday!**



**Please join the HSO** on February 9 – 11, 2024, to hear the world premiere of Assad's guitar/cello concerto, *Anahata*, as well as Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy*, Tchaikovsky's *Capriccio Italian*, the *Adagietto* from Mahler's Symphony No. 5 and Jacques Offenbach's Overture from *Orpheus in the Underworld*.

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**Are you interested in hearing more music by Clarice Assad? Over the last decade, the HSO has performed several pieces by Clarice (the first two selections below.) Please click on the links to hear more from Clarice!**

Assad's engaging *Suite for Lower Strings*, with themes many may recognize, can be heard through this link on SoundCloud:

**[Suite For Lower Strings Mov. 1 in Suite For Lower Strings \(soundcloud.com\)](#)**

Assad's discussion of *É Gol!*, her interactive piece for audience and orchestra, can be heard here:

**[É Gol! An interactive piece for orchestra, singer and audience members. - YouTube](#)**

Want to hear Clarice as performer and vocalist? Enjoy this performance with Sergio Assad (on guitar):

**[Sergio & Clarice Assad - House Concert 2021 - YouTube](#)**

For a taste of the unexpected, listen to Assad's *Brazilian Fanfare Overture*, performed by the 5<sup>th</sup> Wave Collective:

**[5th Wave Collective | Clarice Assad: Brazilian Fanfare Overture \(youtube.com\)](#)**

Enjoy this wonderful recording of Assad's orchestral composition, *Sin Fronteras*, performed by the Chicago Sinfonietta:

**[Sin fronteras - YouTube](#)**



**WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC OF OUR FEATURED CONCERT WILL SOUND? Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!**

Delight in Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy*, performed by the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra:

**[Tchaikovsky: Fantasy Overture 'Romeo and Juliet' - Radio Philharmonic Orchestra - Live Concert HD - YouTube](#)**

Enjoy Tchaikovsky's *Capriccio Italien*, performed by the Moscow City Symphony:

**[P.Tchaikovsky. Italian Capriccio \(youtube.com\)](#)**

Please listen to the *Adagietto* from Mahler's Symphony No. 5 by the Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Leonard Bernstein:

**[Gustav Mahler - Adagietto | Leonard Bernstein \(4K\) \(youtube.com\)](#)**

Enjoy the rousing *Orpheus in the Underworld Overture* by Jacques Offenbach, with the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Zubin Mehta:

**[Offenbach: Orpheus in the Underworld \(Zubin Mehta, New York Philharmonic\) \(youtube.com\)](#)**

# CASEY'S CLASSICS

Want the best recordings of the pieces you'll experience on the concert program? **Coleman Casey**, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert.

Tchaikovsky's **Romeo and Juliet** is performed with tremendous grip and passion by Herbert von Karajan and the Vienna Philharmonic (DECCA).

Offenbach's **Orpheus in the Underworld Overture** is given fizzing projection and fun by Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops Orchestra (RCA).



Clarice Assad Albums

## REFERENCES

- i [www.clariceassad.com](http://www.clariceassad.com)
- ii Ibid
- iii [13 graphs that show the alarming gender inequality in US orchestras today - Classic FM](#)
- iv [Our biggest orchestras are finally playing more music by women. What took so long? | Colorado Public Radio \(cpr.org\)](#)
- v Ibid
- vi [U.S. Orchestras Playing More Works by Women and Minorities, Report Says - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)
- vii Ibid
- viii [Our biggest orchestras are finally playing more music by women. What took so long? | Colorado Public Radio \(cpr.org\)](#)