

# The Musical Journey of “Genius Grant” Recipient Courtney Bryan

*By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor*

**W**hen Courtney Bryan, a New Orleans-born and raised classical music composer, was notified in September that she was being awarded a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship grant, no one could have been more surprised than her. “I didn’t even know I was being nominated for this,” she said in a recent interview with Breakthru Media magazine.

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Courtney was one of only 20 of the most recent grantees nationwide and one of two from New Orleans. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellows Program grants are often referred to as “Genius Grants,” most frequently given to “outstanding individuals for their creative contributions in the sciences, arts and humanities,” according to their website. Awardees receive a sum of money that is disbursed incrementally over a five-year period. They are free to spend the funds as they see fit, although the expectation is that they will use at least some of the money to invest in their creative work.

Heralded as “a pianist and composer of panoramic interests” by the *New York Times*, Courtney, in her early 40s, can point to a lengthy list of accomplishments and premieres. Her compositions have been performed by dozens of orchestras and chamber groups nationwide in some of the nation’s most prestigious concert halls. In addition to an undergraduate degree from the renowned Oberlin Conservatory, Courtney holds advanced degrees from three Ivy League colleges, culminating with a doctorate in music composition from Columbia University with advisor George Lewis, followed a post-doctoral position in African American Studies at Princeton University. She is currently the Albert and Linda Mintz Professor of Music in the Newcomb College Department of Music at Tulane University.

Much of the credit for Courtney’s many accomplishments and the gift of her creativity can be attributed to the upbringing she experienced. Growing up in New Orleans East, Courtney stated, “I received a lot of inspiration and encouragement from my parents and other family members.” Her father, Trevor Bryan, is a retired attorney from a prestigious downtown New Orleans law firm, and her mother, Dr. Violet Bryan, is a retired English professor from Xavier University. Both of her sisters, Amy Bryan and Alma Bryan Powell are visual artists, as is her brother-in-law.

Courtney traces some of her early musical roots to playing at St. Luke’s Episcopal

Church in Mid-City where she still worships today. She attended Benjamin Franklin High School and the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts (NOCCA) where she studied with Clyde Kerr Jr. and took piano lessons from Dr. Daniel Weilbacher. During the summers she attended the Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong Summer Jazz Camp.

When asked about her plans for the MacArthur grant money, Courtney replied, “My first response was to make a list of what I want to do with it over time. But then I realized it was a good time to pull back and think about my life and what I want right now. So that’s kind of where I am at the moment. What do I want overall, career-wise, and in life in general and then I’ll use the security of the award to take steps towards those goals.”

One of those goals she spoke about was eventually returning to an original opera

project she had begun while in Rome after winning another prestigious award, the Samuel Barber Rome Prize in Music Composition. Among the possible subjects she’s considering for her opera would be a work based on the novel, “Myal,” published in 1989 by Jamaican author Erna Brodber, a cousin on Courtney’s father’s side of the family.

“Myal” is described as “an exploration of the links between the ways of life forged by the Afro-Americans and the Afro-Jamaicans and the story of women’s cultural and spiritual struggles in colonial Jamaica.” Courtney noted, “It’s something I’ve wanted to do for a long time. I had ideas for it before the pandemic and I’m very much into the exploring stage of those ideas.”

However, while continuing to keep the opera project concept alive, Courtney had other projects in the works that she



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completed. One of them was a 20-minute piece for an 11-member ensemble, including two female vocalists. It premiered in New York City in November 2023 and is titled “DREAMING (Freedom Sounds).” The piece has an underlying Civil Rights theme that Courtney explained was inspired by her mentors at the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts (NOCCA) and by a dissent letter written by Supreme Court Justice Katanji Brown Jackson regarding the striking down of affirmative action programs.

Another composition that Courtney is especially proud of is a piano concerto for a full orchestra and a smaller chamber version of the same piece that premiered the past season with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. It is titled “House of Pianos.”

The inspiration, she said, was “imagining a house that I walked into; a dream world where every room has a different gathering of great pianists hanging out together and playing. It was a nice way to mix different styles and different time periods of pianists playing jazz, classical, gospel, and combinations of styles.”

Each of the piece’s five movements totaling between 20 and 25 minutes, feature original themes but they reference the

styles of many pianists from Scott Joplin through the present, Courtney pointed out.

Another recent piece of hers, “Gathering Song,” was performed with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in Lincoln Center and the lyrics were sung by renowned bass-baritone, Ryan Speedo Green.

Also, within the past year, Courtney added yet another prestigious accomplishment to her resume. She signed on with Boosey & Hawkes, a British music publisher purported to be the largest repository of classical music scores in the world. They hold exclusive rights to her published body of work.

Locally, Courtney had one of her works

commissioned in 2019 by the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra titled “Rejoice.” As she explained, “My inspiration for the piece came from verses in the New Testament Book of Philippians extolling the virtues of prayer and thanksgiving.”

She has also performed at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. A good number of her compositions have elements of New Orleans-style jazz and gospel deftly woven into the total fabric of the pieces. “This is the music that I grew up with,” Courtney said.

In what little spare time she has, Courtney cherishes the “quiet time” she has with family and friends. She also enjoys walking through City Park and visiting art galleries and art museums.

“I like to see art for inspiration,” she said. “But my biggest inspiration is going out to the Lakefront,” she added. “It helps get my mind free. It’s one of my favorite areas.”

Looking toward the future and reflecting on her many accomplishments, Courtney is not content to simply rest on her laurels. “I am always looking ahead,” she noted. “There’s always the next project. Whatever you’re working on always feels like you’re starting over and working from scratch. That’s just the way it is and I love it.”

*For more information about Courtney Bryan visit her website at <https://www.courtneybryan.com/> or her Boosey & Hawkes page, <https://www.boosey.com/composer/Courtney+Bryan>*



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