

Works by Very Young Composers of New York City

Jordan Millar and **Camryn Cowan** are two of the exceptional talents to have emerged out of the New York Philharmonic's Very Young Composers (VYC) initiative, through which students write original compositions and hear them performed by Philharmonic musicians and, in some cases, by the full Orchestra. Philharmonic Teaching Artists affiliated with the program, all of whom are professional composers and musicians, assist the students as mentors and scribes. Students are selected for

the program based on their enthusiasm for music, whether or not they have had previous musical training. The Teaching Artists help them tap into their innate creativity, express their musical ideas, clarify their musical options, and turn their conceptions into notated, performable compositions.

The program began in 1995 as a relatively modest after-school undertaking in several public schools around New York City. Since then, it has grown under the leadership of its

Boogie Down Uptown

Jordan Millar

Born: August 18, 2006, in New York City

Student at: Poly Prep Country Day School, Brooklyn

Work composed: 2018

World Premiere: January 31, 2018, at David Geffen Hall, by the New York Philharmonic, Joshua Gersen, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 3 minutes

An 11-year-old pianist who also studies jazz clarinet, Jordan Millar has studied piano at the Brooklyn Youth Chorus with Julian Shore, and clarinet at Brooklyn's P.S. 11 and now at Poly Prep Country Day School. For Jordan, learning music has developed her creativity and provided a way for her to convey ideas and feelings through musical expression. She composed her first work, *Turn Back the Hands of Time*, when she was in the fourth grade.

Jordan identifies Alicia Keys as her greatest musical inspiration; she cites the poet Maya Angelou and the artist Aaron Douglas as additional inspirations for her music. She offered this comment about *Boogie Down Uptown*:

The theme of *Boogie Down Uptown* is the excitement of stepping out for the first time onto the lavish streets of Harlem. Throughout the piece, the Orchestra builds up to the grand scene of finally reaching the real center of buzz in Harlem. ... When composing, I create a story line to build off of that takes the audience on a journey. Then I plan out a main melody and harmony for each section, adding layers and other instruments for depth. Lastly, I add dynamics and articulation for volume and texture. I also created digital art for my Harlem street scene. From meaningful images to bold pieces, I hope to inspire people through my music.



Artistic Director Jon Deak, former New York Philharmonic Associate Principal Bass and himself an active composer. Today, NYC continues to provide after-school instruction to fourth and fifth graders under the banner of NYC Schools, and it also serves middle-school pupils through the NYC Bridge program at the Philharmonic's home in David Geffen Hall. Every year, more than 100 new compositions by Very Young Composers are

played by ensembles of Philharmonic musicians or by the full Orchestra at the Young People's Concerts for Schools.

The Teaching Artists coach the students to make informed but ultimately personal decisions; every note in the finished composition is the student's. The program does not take a paint-by-numbers approach, but rather encourages students to follow their inspiration in the direction it leads. Said Deak:

Harlem Shake **Camryn Cowan**

Born: May 18, 2007, in New York City

Student at: P.S. 11, Brooklyn

Work composed: 2018

World premiere: February 1, 2018, at David Geffen Hall, by the New York Philharmonic, Joshua Gersen, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 3 minutes

Camryn Cowan recently completed the fifth grade at P.S. 11 in Brooklyn. She began studying the violin at the Clinton Hill Music School when she was seven years old. She also studies piano with E. Harrison Gordon at the Nubian Conservatory of Music. She composed her first piece, *Journey to Adventure*, with the New York Philharmonic's Very Young Composers program in 2017, and she now participates in NYC Bridge program.

She loves many styles of music, including classical, hip-hop, gospel, K-pop from South Korea, and soca, a Caribbean genre that originated in Trinidad and Tobago. She also enjoys experimenting with sounds and creating music on her iPad using GarageBand. The name *Harlem Shake* plays off a popular dance from a few years ago. Camryn has provided these thoughts about her composition:



I aimed to infuse sounds of early 1920s jazz with the contemporary Hot Jazz sound that I heard last summer while visiting New Orleans. I wanted the music to be catchy, upbeat, and to give off positive energy. I drew my inspiration from Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and The Preservation Hall Jazz Band. If you listen closely you will hear a round (perpetual canon) where the same melody is overlapped but begins at slightly different times. You will also hear a solo by the saxophone that will make you want to get up and shake!

I sometimes use a visual metaphor. It's as if we give the student a big, blank wall, and paint, and fancy brushes, but then we don't instruct them to use those things in a specific way. We might say, you could mix this color with another and see what comes out, but the students will make their own choices.

The VYC initiative has given rise to affiliate programs in Colorado, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, as well as in 15 countries, including China, Finland, Israel, Japan, Spain, South Korea, Venezuela, and the State of Palestine. United by their common bond of music, the young composers communicate among themselves through musical postcards online, invariably including a live component in their messages. For example, a composer in Japan might make a video of herself playing a musical phrase and send it to a composer in Finland, who responds with a video in which he completes the phrase. In the process, both composers polish their creative skills, and in the long run they help build a worldwide community based on music.

Both of the works performed in this concert were written as part of a project that encouraged the composers to express something relating to the Harlem Renaissance, which was the focus of the Young People's Concerts for Schools this past winter. Five pieces by Very Young Composers were included in the concerts, along with works by William Grant Still, Harry Burleigh, and Duke Ellington. Philharmonic Vice President, External Affairs, Adam Crane said:

I was incredibly moved by what I heard. As soon as the concert ended, I convened a meeting to see what we could do about putting these before a broader audience on our Parks concerts. It seemed like the right opportunity to showcase this amazing program and two brilliant young musicians.

The composers represented in these performances were among several who were encouraged to go to Harlem "to listen, write, feel what it's like," as Deak put it. Camryn Cowan's composition began as a setting for five instruments; Jordan Millar's was mostly notated as a piano piece. The composers then scaled them up for full orchestra, working throughout the composition and orchestration process with their respective Teaching Artists — Angélica Negrón (for Camryn Cowan) and Justin Jay Hines (for Jordan Millar). "Both reflect a mixture of Classical and boogie music," said Deak. "Jordan's ends with a bang, and Camryn's ends with a whisper."

Instrumentation: *Boogie Down Uptown* calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, alto saxophone, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, drum set, vibraphone, harp, and strings. *Harlem Shake* employs two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, alto saxophone, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, drum set, snare drum, hi-hat, and strings.