



Interview with Jennifer Thomas

Top Billboard charting and award-winning Pianist, Violinist, Composer, Yamaha Recording Artist

How has the pandemic time been for you? Were you able to overcome adversity and focus on new projects or you became even more connected with social media and its new normality?

First of all, thank you so much for having me, Luciano! It's wonderful to be featured in this interview with Blueberry Musica.

This pandemic has been such a series of ups and downs for me personally (as it probably has been for many of your readers). Rewinding back to the end of 2019, I actually had just finished up a USA-nation wide concert tour for *The Fire Within* (my most recent album) where I performed in 20 different cities. My entire family came with me (my husband and 3 boys), for 8 weeks on the road where we all worked very hard to put that tour on. It was such an amazing yet challenging adventure that sometimes required 14 hour work days, little sleep, and lots of road travel. I'm so proud of my little family for how hard we all worked.

When that tour was over, I was completely exhausted and really enjoyed my down-time afterwards. My husband and I also took a much-needed vacation after my tour. We then were in the process of planning another smaller tour on the East coast that we had hoped would happen in the Spring of 2020, and then, BOOM. The pandemic hit.

My first thoughts were, strangely, gratitude. Let me explain - it was gratitude that we were able to accomplish my tour and take our vacation when we did, especially because as we all know, tours have not been happening for over a year now. My heart breaks for all of the artists out there who had concerts and tours planned that they had to cancel or postpone - especially those artists who rely on performing as their main source of income.

Again, I felt gratitude that I was able to complete my tour just before the pandemic hit, but also felt grateful that my own artist income did not rely on touring - as I have always been able to do much of my work from my home studio while working remotely with other artists and producers from around the world. That did not change with the pandemic.

However, focusing on projects was difficult in the beginning of the pandemic for me. I felt an enormous amount of stress and anxiety over the global situation. In addition to trying to figure out how to deal with how to handle my own anxieties and how to keep our family safe, I kept very busy working on content for my YouTube channel. I did not do any live streaming concerts (as I felt too many artists were all of a sudden doing that and I didn't want to compete for the attention), and I put my efforts into creating and filming piano tutorials, vlogs, and also some pre-recorded live performances from my home.

Being a parent also added a whole other level of stress to the situation as well. Both my husband (Will) and I work from home on my music career. Right before the pandemic started, it was our very first year that all three of our children were finally in school all day long. This is a big deal to finally have that kid-free time to get work done. Well, that only lasted for 5 months, and since then we have had our children doing remote online school from home, as we've been trying to work AND be homeschool facilitators as well. It is very strange that my youngest son only went to half of his Kindergarten year in-person, and is now almost finished with 1st grade and has done it all from home.

In recent months, music has surprisingly become an escape for me and I have gained a lot of inspiration to compose again. So new music is slowly coming. It all has been a LOT to juggle, but I think we are just doing the best that we can and remembering to give ourselves lots of grace, patience, and a lower standard of perfection right now.

You have this ability of taking some inspiration within the classical world and even some compositions and make your own music. When was the moment that you became aware of this talent of yours?

Well thank you! I think this partly comes because of my background in being trained in classical music for so many years starting when I was 5 years old, all the way up to university and after. It seems to just be part of my brain and how I hear music, how I decipher it, take it apart, and analyze it. I also didn't start composing until years after I'd graduated from college, and so coming from that classical world, it's truly where I was coming from as I was embarking on composing my own music.

I have found many times while writing my own original music, that something will spark a remembrance of a classical theme, and I'll think to myself, "Wouldn't it be so cool to mix that in with this song?" And before I know it, I have created a new combination of both original music mixed with classical music. I think this is something that can be so satisfying to the ear as well; to hear something that is new and fresh, and then something also familiar within that.

Of course, that is where so much of the Classical Crossover genre stems from - this mixture of the old with the new. I think Classical purists are not huge fans of what composers like myself do with classical music, but I feel that music evolution is only a reflection of humanity - of always learning new things and pushing new boundaries. Personally, it isn't an attempt to tear apart the past, but it's a way that I honor it to keep it alive. It's my way of expressing "I love this music so much and I want to include it."

You clearly have this classical and soundtrack influence in your music. Do you recall any compositions within both fields that really have impacted on your signature sound?

Ok full disclosure, I sat here for 15 minutes trying to think back through my musical life to answer this question, haha! To be honest, I don't think there have been specific compositions or songs that have had direct influence, but I would say more broadly speaking there are musical elements that have influenced my sound.

I have always loved the music in movies. My CD collection, even as a kid, was mostly all movie soundtracks. And my taste has always been inclined more towards dramatic music - like the scores composed by Hans Zimmer, John Williams, Danny Elfman, James Horner, and so many others. And my classical musical preference was equally dramatic as I preferred Beethoven, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Debussy, Chopin - many of whom were

considered rebels of their time. But at the same time, I also love electronic music, especially when different musical elements are combined. The "TRON Legacy" soundtrack for example, took the music of Daft Punk and combined it with a cinematic orchestra (still one of my favorite movie scores ever).

And then I also found inspiration in artists who were taking the piano and combining it with a modern orchestra. People like Yanni with his concert "Live at the Acropolis", whom is still a huge inspiration to this day to so many modern pianists. He's a legend in what he created, and I grew up watching that concert footage.

I don't believe I ever found exactly what I wanted all within ONE music though, which is probably why music has evolved into what it is - and it is still evolving. My first album, *Key of Sea*, was quite classically influenced and had a lot of solo piano pieces on it, whereas my 3rd album, *Illumination* (my highest streamed album to date), I had really upped my game in my home studio and was integrating a lot more synths and electronic elements into my orchestration (I produced and orchestrated that entire album with the exception of a few songs where Swedish film composer, Glen Gabriel, contributed some additional orchestration). Six albums later, my recent *The Fire Within* has orchestra recorded at Abbey Road Studios combined with electronic synths and even dubstep elements (which, when performed on stage with a live orchestra is a whole next-level challenge of recreating the sound).

Really, at the end of the day, it just comes down to the fact that I write the kind of music that I personally would want to listen to.

I think your most critically acclaimed album to date is "The Fire Within", in which you open a personal side of yours, especially with the harmonious song "The Fire Within", and "Girl in the Mirror". Talking about the latter one: how was the process of looking at yourself? Dive deep and translate your feelings into a song that has no lyrics?

Thank you so much. Yes, I put SO much of myself into *The Fire Within*, I definitely came out of that whole album production needing a little break to reboot myself because it really was so personal, and I put my whole being into creating that album.

It's interesting, as lately, I've been trying to put much more into my Instagram stories to show people the behind-the-scenes of what goes into my day to day life creating and composing music. I've been trying to show more clips of my writing process - everything from journaling, researching, listening to other music, and so much more. This isn't something I've been good at capturing in the past, because when you're in the moment of inspiration and working hard, your first thought is NOT to grab your phone, stop, and explain it to everyone. And yet, always without fail, I'll release the music however many months later and always get asked "Please tell me your writing process!". And by that point, I am well beyond the moment and I have to really dig deep and think back. However, in trying to show more of this, I've received so many comments from people who have said, "I had no idea that you put all this work into your music!".

The thing to remember - is that finished and perfectly polished piece of music that you are listening to on your Spotify playlist or CD didn't just magically come to the composer. Most of the time, it's a lengthy refining process and it can be quite time consuming.

So, *Girl in the Mirror*. Yes, let's dive into that one...

This was such a gut-wrenching song to write. For years, beginning in my 20s, I battled body image and developed an eating disorder. I mean, unless you've gone through

something like this yourself, I can't even begin to explain or recount all of the painful experiences over the years. Let's put it this way - it consumes most of the real estate of your mind, and not in a good way. Constantly doubting yourself, not wanting to be seen (I mean really seen), negative self talk, never feeling like you're enough and then trying to fix yourself by an unhealthy means. My heart goes out to anyone currently battling this - I see you, you are not alone in this.

I eventually found healing - and today I am a much healthier person in this regard. Writing *Girl in the Mirror*, even many years later felt like it was part of that healing process, almost as if I had to face this huge dark thing from my past that I had put away, far far away. Bringing it out again was painful.

Writing instrumental music also has a challenge in it - in that you don't have access to words or lyrics to let the audience know exactly what the song is about. It requires being deeply connected with the subject matter and the music together to achieve something where, perhaps, your story transcends through the music into the listeners heart and ultimately there is an understanding.

The other beauty of this, is that the listener has absolute freedom to take that meaning of the music and apply it to their own life experiences and they might get a whole other unique understanding of the music.

When composing *Girl in the Mirror*, through the tears, I composed a poem that accompanies the song. I included it in the liner notes of the album artwork, and have included it here for your readers as well:

Girl in the Mirror

*The girl in the mirror,
Looking back at me
Imperfect and scarred,
Is all I see.*

*Years of hate and breaking down,
Always wondering if she will drown,
In a sea of doubt - so high, so rough
She gasps for air - am I enough?*

*A gift of light, a gift of love,
She glimpses her reflection from above.
Up she rises, eyes now open,
Now she sees that she's not broken.*

*The girl in the mirror looking back at me,
is not imperfect and scarred you see...
She is beautiful, she is tough,
She is capable, she is enough.*

*The girl in the mirror is finally free,
the girl in the mirror...is me.*

In an interview you related these personal issues you had with yourself being confronted when having your third child. Since this topic speaks about a lot of

strength as an artist and mother, I was wondering if you can tell us a little bit about how that was pivotal moment in your life.

This is a great bookend to the last question about *Girl in the Mirror*, and the healing process I experienced in regard to my many years of struggle with body image. Just a forewarning, I am going to get very personal here with this question...

When I was going through those hard years that I mentioned in the previous question, my issues resurfaced again after my 2nd son was born. Something I want to give validation to is how hard it is to have kids. Don't misunderstand me - children are amazing and a huge blessing, and also can bring so much indescribable love. But it's no small task.

I am definitely one of those unlucky women who had really difficult pregnancies with many complications.

After my 2nd child was born, a week later, I was admitted back into the hospital and found that I had both pancreatitis and pre-eclampsia simultaneously, and was in the ICU unit for about a week. Honestly, I was in such bad shape I don't remember a whole lot of the experience, but it was hard, and it was a dangerous situation. Thankfully I am alive and well today.

I think with the combination of another difficult pregnancy, having a baby by yet another emergency c-section (after a 24 hour labor), and then also adding all of the life threatening complications afterwards and being hospitalized again - that perhaps it comes as no small surprise that I found myself dealing with some postpartum depression, and probably a bit of post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) afterwards too. Also, when you struggle with body image and have dealt with an eating disorder, giving up control over your body is one of the hardest things to do. And when you give up that control so that you can bring life into the world, and it doesn't quite go the way that you want, well, it can be triggering.

But it was at that point, when it just felt like the "Bermuda Triangle", and all these things were converging and my eating disorder resurfaced. I was not okay. I was working on my 3rd album, *Illumination*, at the time while also dealing with all of this. This is when, as I mentioned above, where I finally went to an eating disorder clinic and I also found healing through a 12-step program with my church (some of what inspired my song, *New Life*, off of that album). And these programs and tools all helped very much to heal many things, but the biggest healing didn't come until about 4 years later when I had my 3rd (and final) baby.

After what happened with the birth situation of my 2nd, there was NO WAY I was having any more kids. Ever. Are you kidding me? I wasn't a fan of dying.

And yet, there was one more. A 3rd high-risk pregnancy with many issues, and a new thing to add to the list - pregnancy depression. Yes, this is a thing. I feel so vulnerable sharing this - but I want other women out there to know they're not alone if they are struggling with this. Get help from your doctor, and ask your family and friends to check in with you often; daily if needed.

But when my 3rd born, I don't even know how to describe it but it was like LIGHT. Pure light, pure healing. He came into the world, and it was almost as if the dark cloud that had been over me for so long just went away, and all I had left to feel was love. Just pure, amazing love. And it was not only for him, but it was for myself. Finally, after so many years of literally hating my body, he healed me. He showed me the incredible miracle that my body had performed 3 times, and how it deserved love, not hate. I felt love, gratitude, understanding, and so much more.

I'm tearing up just writing this because it brings back so many strong emotions. He just turned 7 years old a few weeks ago, and I thank God that he came into my life. He has taught me so much, and more than anything, he has healed me and helped me to love myself. I know it sounds so cliché, but love is really what it is all about. Sometimes we have to go through some very hard, very painful things in this life, but on the other side of that is healing, love, and happiness.

Many know your piano virtuoso side, but you also play the violin. Was there any shifting point in your education or career that you inclined definitely to play the piano or do you still have the violin present in your artistic life?

Haha, yes! I do also play the violin as well as the piano, not sure if most people catch onto that. I've actually performed violin on several of my own tracks, including *Ascension*, *Awakening*, *New World Symphony*, *A Beautiful Storm*, and many others. But you are correct, it is not my main primary instrument.

My mom started teaching me the violin and piano when I was 5 years old. I had one of those childhoods where practicing my instruments was expected, especially because my mother was a music educator. My siblings and I all played the piano and one additional instrument as well. We woke up at 6:00 every morning before school to practice both of our instruments, and then also arrived at school early to rehearse with the school orchestra. Then after a full day of school, we practiced again afterward. Or, at least I did (not so sure my brothers were very good at that, haha). I also participated in many youth orchestras and music competitions throughout my childhood and teenage years.

When I was younger, I excelled quite well on the violin. I learned to play through the Suzuki method - which uses a lot of ear training. Listening, playing, and reading music came very easy to me and by the time I was 7 years old, I was the concert master of the school orchestra. My stand partner was 12 years old.

However, I felt very inspired to practice a lot more on the piano - and would regularly set goals to learn difficult music like Liszt's 2nd Hungarian Rhapsody, the Tchaikovsky 3rd Piano Concerto and others; usually all music that my hands were not big enough to play, but that did not stop me. Through high school, I continued to perform in orchestras (both school and community), and even had the privilege of having concert violinist Joshua Bell come do a masterclass with my high school orchestra.

When I went away to university, it was then that I really chose to focus mostly on the piano. I auditioned for and was admitted to play with the university symphony as a 2nd violinist and did so my entire time there, but the piano was where my heart was. My university symphony required about 2 hours of rehearsal daily, whereas my piano dedication took roughly 8 hours of practice per day.

When I arrived at the university level, I also realized that my skills on the violin were just sub-par compared to the other violinists who had really put all of their time and dedication into their instrument. And I was perfectly okay with being a sub-par violinist, because as I said, my passion lied with the piano.

Even after graduation from university, I continued to keep up my violin skills as well as the piano. I played as a violinist in several orchestras including the Oregon Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra, the American Fork Symphony, the Murray Symphony, and later also became an employee in the education department of the Seattle Symphony for several years. Simultaneously, I was performing as a classical pianist.

A funny story: I had been performing as a violinist in one particular symphony, and when they had a concerto concert series, I auditioned and won in the piano division and was selected to perform the MacDowell 2nd Piano Concerto. When I showed up to the first dress rehearsal with the symphony, everyone in my violin section was very confused. "Wait, Jennifer, *you're* performing a piano concerto?". Apparently nobody knew that I was really actually a pianist "masking around" as a 2nd violinist in their orchestra, haha.

Where I am at today with both instruments is probably quite obvious in the music that I write - mostly piano centered, but I do a cameo on my violin here and there. But if I want really good virtuoso violin skills on a song, I'll hire it out. I am very grateful for all of my years of performing in orchestras though - as it is a HUGE reason for how and why I've learned to orchestrate some of my music.

If you had to choose a musician to collaborate with in your next project: would it be a violin player, or singer, or else?

So I actually don't collaborate too often, and when I do, I am very picky. I sincerely don't mean for that to sound snobbish at all - but as a working solo artist/musician/composer and a mother, wife, etc - my time seems to be so limited and precious, so if I am going to step outside my zone and work with someone else, I very much want and need that collaboration to be worth that effort - not only speaking of the time involved, but I want the experience itself to be one that is enjoyable.

With that being said, when I am looking for someone to collaborate with, it just really depends on the particular project or album that I am working on. Right now I'm very much into wanting to collaborate with musicians/artists or producers that can contribute a certain sound palette. I would very much love to do a project or two with other film composers (I'm a big fan of Hans Zimmer, for one and would DIE to do something with him). I would love to create something with the utterly brilliant Thomas Bergersen or his duo (with Nick Phoenix) *Two Steps From Hell*.

There needs and must be more women though in this genre/space of instrumental music (and I'm hoping more will pop out of the woodworks). One of my favorite current collaborators is pianist/composer Kimberly StarKey (aka The Rogue Pianist). She and I co-wrote the song *The Fire Within* together and it was such an incredible experience. We've also recently written a new song together (an arrangement of *The Flight of the Bumblebee* by Rimsky-Korsakov), which I hope to release on a future album next year. We are also very currently excited about the traction *The Fire Within* song has been receiving in the figure skating world, as Japanese skater Rika Kihira is currently using it as her short program music (she just competed in Worlds), as well as Juhnwan Cha (South Korea). Crossing fingers for 2022 Olympics?

What are your upcoming plans for this year?

Right now, I'm actually answering these questions from a beautiful beach on vacation in Mexico. My entire family is here with me, and finally, after this difficult year, taking some time to enjoy some peace and calm.

Oh but music? Lots of exciting things are happening...

I'm currently in the middle of composing two new albums. I have been very quiet on the details of these projects, but I'm producing a series of EP (short) albums, each with a different theme of its own (but all in one series). Currently I have 7 small albums in the

works (possibly more), and the first 2 of those are what I am currently working on. This series will take a few years to complete. The first short album (EP) is an ocean-themed album called *Ocean*. It's taken the entire pandemic to finish, but all of the songs for that album are finished being composed and are currently in the orchestration/production phase with the incredible Swedish film composer, Glen Gabriel.

The 2nd concurrent short album following *Ocean* will be a more aggressive sports themed album, of which I am currently working on. I plan to record orchestra again in London later this year for both of these albums. There are more short albums in the works, including *Duets*, which is all music featuring myself with other artists (which will include the new duet that Kimberly StarKey and I co-wrote together).

I'm also currently finishing up a new track that I'm writing as part of the *Epic Women* project - which will be an album featuring several different female artists from around the world that are in the Epic Music genre, including Felicia Farerre, Alexa Ray, Uyanga Bold, Aeralie Brighton, Zefora Alderman, The Rogue Pianist (Kimberly StarKey), Celia Soldream, Julie Elven, myself, and several others! We are releasing this collaboratively, and a portion of the proceeds will also go to support womens charity organizations.

I also have a small film scoring project I'll be doing later this year, as well as filming more music videos (which I'm able to do in part because of the support I receive from my patrons on Patreon - patreon.com/jenniferthomas).

But right now, I've got to do some more relaxing on the beach. :)

I'm so appreciative of your time, and for your incredibly thoughtful questions that you've asked me. I'm grateful for anyone who took the time to read my answers, and for all of the support I receive from musical enthusiasts from around the world. My hope and prayer is that you all continue to stay safe and be as healthy as you can.