
**Phenomenal Women:
Concerto for Woodwind Quintet Soli and Chamber Orchestra**

Valerie Coleman, Composer

**A Listening Guide
by Melanie Zeck**



LISTENING GUIDE

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DEFINITIONS

- **Concerto:** piece for two contrasting performing bodies (usually a soloist [or, in this case, a group of five soloists] and orchestra)
- **Woodwind Quintet:** ensemble with the following five instruments
 - Flute
 - Oboe
 - Clarinet
 - Bassoon
 - French horn
- **Soli:** (plural of solo) group of featured performers
- **Program Music:** instrumental piece that conveys a message through depiction and without spoken or sung words

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PURPOSE

This guide offers a series of prompts by which you can learn more about Phenomenal Women and the women portrayed in the piece.

Apply what you already know to what you hear and see. Then, investigate further using resources available through the Library of Congress. Consider how music can convey specific concepts and ideas without spoken or sung words. Go at your own pace and enjoy the process!

RESOURCES

The [score and a recording](#) (made with a synthesizer) are available on the composer's website. The time stamps in this guide correspond with this particular recording.

LISTENING GUIDE: Phenomenal Women

These questions are designed to help you get a sense of the piece and the composer's intentions.

BIG QUESTION	Specific questions	Answers
WHO	Who is the composer? Who is/are the composer's inspiration(s)? Who is referenced in the piece? Who are the performers? Who is the intended audience?	
WHAT	STRUCTURE What is the role of the woodwind quintet? the orchestra? What is the overarching structure of the piece? What is the purpose of each movement? SOUND What topics / characteristics does the composer portray in each movement? What do you hear? What *don't* you hear?	
WHEN	When was this piece written? revised? When was each woman active?	
WHERE	Where was each woman active? (place of employment? geographical locale?) Where can you learn more about each of the women?	

Inspiration: Movements 1, 2, 3

Before listening to Valerie Coleman's Phenomenal Women, take a moment to consider what you already know about the women portrayed musically in the piece. A few hints are provided below to get you started.

BIG QUESTION	1. Maya Angelou	2. Katherine Johnson	3. Serena Williams
WHO			Serena Williams is a professional tennis player.
WHAT			
WHEN	In 1993, Maya Angelou delivered a poem at President Bill Clinton's inauguration.		
WHERE		Katherine Johnson worked for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and its predecessor, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA).	

Inspiration: Movements 4, 5, 6

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BIG QUESTION	4. Caravans of Immigrant Women	5. Michelle Obama	6. Claressa Shields
WHO		Michelle Obama was First Lady of the United States.	
WHAT	These women are traveling in search of a better life.		
WHEN			
WHERE			Claressa Shields is from Flint, Michigan.

Movement 1: Maya

Featured instrument(s): full woodwind quintet

Time Stamp	Score clue: “what you see”	Musical clue: “what you hear”	Learn more
0:00	Still I Rise	Movement opens in low strings (cellos and basses); gradually, instruments join in at higher registers	Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise” * appeared in her 1978 anthology And Still I Rise .
1:54	Phenomenal Woman	Calypso-like rhythm	Maya Angelou was the featured singer on the 1957 album Miss Calypso . Her poem “Phenomenal Woman” * also appeared in And Still I Rise .
3:54	Caged Bird Sings	Quintet soloists take turns with soulful melodies; Beginning at 5:11, flute plays several trills in a high register, imitating bird	Maya Angelou issued her autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings in 1969. She later narrated an abridged version of the work.

What else do you hear?

*Full text available through Poetry Foundation.

Movement 2: Katherine

Featured instrument(s): oboe

Time Stamp	Score clue: “what you see”	Musical clue: “what you hear”	Learn more
7:50	[Oboe solo]	In the opening oboe solo, sixty-eight notes are played---but only two pitches (and two durations are used), evoking the beeps associated with Morse Code*	Katherine Johnson one of the mathematicians featured in Margot Lee Shetterly’s book Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians who Helped Win the Space Race and the subsequent film based on the book.
10:41	Deliberately Paced, a homestyle family with old fashioned charm.	Smooth oboe melody accompanied by crisp strikes in percussion, pizzicato (plucking) in strings; staccato in winds; oboe becomes increasingly frenetic, but sensuous melody returns	In this interview conducted by Renee Poussaint, Katherine Johnson discusses her childhood memories and raising her own family. She also reflects on the racism and sexism she faced during her career at NASA.
12:42	[layers of low notes in left hand of piano, cellos, basses, and bassoon]	Low instruments evoke concept of vastness, perhaps in recognition of space exploration	In 1977, the interstellar spacecraft Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 were launched into space carrying The Sounds of Earth , whose contents were selected, in part, by former American Folklife Center staff member Alan Lomax. Read the letter Lomax received from Carl Sagan here.
13:19	[sudden thinning of writing]	Brief entry of piccolo and triangle	

*Consult a [Morse Code translator](#) to determine the message embedded in the oboe solo.
Hint: be mindful of the duration of each note and the placement of each rest.

Movement 3: Serena*

Featured instrument(s): bassoon (Serena); temple blocks (tennis ball)

Time Stamp	Score clue: “what you see”	Musical clue: “what you hear”	Learn more
13:37 / 14:12 / 14:45	Imitating a bouncing tennis ball right before serving it across the net	Percussionist strikes temple blocks, slowly at first, then faster	Learn how to search for articles about tennis in the Library of Congress’s newspaper database Chronicling America .
14:01	Running down the tennis ball, coming to the net	Bassoon imitates tennis player’s steps in uneven stride	Throughout the history of the sport, tennis has been enjoyed by siblings, such as May and Florence Sutton and Venus and Serena Williams .
14:10-14:11 / 14:42-14:43	arco	Notes sliding up and back down, possibly evoking “oohs” and “aahs” of the crowd or the rippling net after being hit by a ball	Learn more about tennis facilities, courts, nets, and lighting in Tennis Courts: A Construction & Maintenance Manual .
14:54	[Bassoon solo]	Virtuosic playing	Serena Williams has regularly credited tennis star Althea Gibson with paving the way for African-American women to succeed in the sport.

Where and how does Coleman portray “serving” and “volleying”?

*At the very end of this movement, the following statement is printed in the score: “To be continued by Serena!” What do you think Coleman means?

Movement 4: Caravana To Immigrant Mothers

Featured instrument(s): flute

Time Stamp	Score clue: “what you see”	Musical clue: “what you hear”	Learn more
18:05	Lullaby	In the opening flute solo, you will hear three notes that have been borrowed from one of the most famous lullabies in Western music, “Wiegenlied” (“Cradle Song”) by Johannes Brahms. Do you recognize this tune?	Consider Coleman’s use of “Wiegenlied” and compare it to early twentieth-century recordings of “Wiegenlied” made available through the Library of Congress’s National Jukebox.
20:13	Scream with anguish that only a parent could feel	Shrill, high-pitched trilling in the flute	Listen to a variety of lullabies available through the American Folklife Center and the Library of Congress’s National Jukebox.
20:46	Wailing	Flute hovers in its highest register (on a B-natural) for nine beats, then at 20:46, it moves a half-step higher to a C, only to return immediately to the B-natural, conveying a sense of anguish	The American Folklife Center’s Occupational Folklife Project contains dozens of interviews with immigrants who are working in the United States. You can hear their stories here.

What emotions and sentiments are depicted in this movement? How can you tell?

Movement 5: Michelle

Featured instrument(s): French horn

Time Stamp	Score clue: "what you see"	Musical clue: "what you hear"	Learn more
21:26	With Hope	Bold horn solo	The Library of Congress holds several books by and about Michelle Obama , including American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America and Becoming .
24:23	Maestoso (majestic)	Brass, drum set, and trilling piccolo evoke a sense of celebration	The Inauguration 2009 Sermons and Orations Project collection includes manuscripts (letters, sermons, orations, church programs, etc.), audio and video recordings, photographs, and other graphic materials created by the public in response to the 2009 election and inauguration of President Barack Obama and collected by the American Folklife Center. Includes submissions from over 300 individuals, religious and secular organizations, from 39 states and the District of Columbia, and from Nairobi, Kenya and Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, recorded January 16-25, 2009.

Describe the opening and closing French horn solos. What type of message do these solos convey?

Movement 6: Claressa

Featured instrument(s): clarinet

Time Stamp	Score clue: “what you see”	Musical clue: “what you hear”	Learn more
25:35	FLINT. Corrosive Water dripping	Drip....drip.....drip....	The water crisis in Flint, Michigan , has been analyzed in several books available at the Library of Congress.
26:48	Flint River Flowing	Steady, even pacing in the piano	These three images of Flint River were taken in 2019 by photographer Carol Highsmith and are held in the Library of Congress’s Prints and Photographs Division.
27:38	Lead entering water	Slippery, slithery slides	Highsmith also took this picture, which shows a water tower in Flint, Michigan .
28:15; 28:27	A desperate and angry wail for help; With desperation	Intense clarinet solo, accompanied by strings	Learn more about the historical expansion of Flint, Michigan, by viewing these maps .
29:02	Claressa steps into the ring	Clarinet rumbles in low register, then suddenly ascends to its higher register several times in succession	The Library of Congress has a set of four 100-year-old stereograph cards depicting female boxers . Learn more about the stereograph here .
29:29	Claressa--Like a champion	Hear the “announcement” in the clarinet, French horn, and trumpet	In 2024, Malissa Smith’s book The Promise of Women’s Boxing: A Momentous New Era for the Sweet Science will include a foreword by Claressa Shields.

How does this movement bring the entire piece [Phenomenal Women](#) to a close?

Review and Assessment: Valerie Coleman's Phenomenal Women

TOPIC	Specific questions	Your Comments, Reflections, Observations
Concerto	How did the quintet members interact with each other and with the orchestra?	
Program music	In what ways does Coleman portray non-musical ideas through music?	
Inspiration	What did you learn about the women portrayed?	
Lasting thoughts		