



INTERVIEW WITH JEWEL THOMPSON

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This interview, conducted by Philip Ewell on June 4, 2024, explores the life and career of Jewel Thompson, likely the first African American woman to earn a PhD in music theory (Eastman School of Music, 1982). Thompson discusses her early musical influences, academic journey, and mentorship under Undine Smith Moore. She reflects on racial segregation's impact on her experiences, her pioneering research on Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and her contributions as a professor. Thompson also shares insights on barriers faced by Black scholars in music theory and encourages future generations to pursue their passions despite historical and systemic challenges.

JEWEL Thompson (1935–2025) was the first African American woman to get the PhD in music theory, from the Eastman School of Music, in 1982. And her dissertation, *Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: The Development of His Compositional Style*, was very likely the first music theory dissertation devoted to one African diasporic composer.¹ The first American music theory doctoral degrees only began in the late 1960s, so Thompson was an early PhD student by any measure. Later, she adapted her dissertation into a book, which helped her rise through the ranks to become a full tenured professor.

As fate would have it, Thompson was my colleague at Hunter College in New York City from my arrival in 2009 until her retirement in 2024. I was fortunate to have had her mentorship as she helped me navigate an absurd and bruising tenure battle that I had to endure, from 2014 until 2016, a battle deeply rooted in anti-Blackness.² Jewel understood immediately what was happening, and I'm forever grateful for her sage counsel at the time, and afterward.

1. See Jewel Thompson, *Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: The Development of His Compositional Style* (Scarecrow Press, 1994).

2. I discuss this battle briefly in *On Music Theory, and Making Music More Welcoming for Everyone* (University of Michigan Press, 2023), 8–9.

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Thompson got a Bachelor of Science degree at Virginia State University, which is historically Black, in 1956, was at Eastman from 1958–1960 for her Master of Arts degree, then taught back at Virginia State University (1960–1962), and then West Virginia State College (1967–1968), and West Virginia Institute of Technology (1968–1972). She began teaching at Hunter College as an adjunct assistant professor in 1972. Finally, she was back at Eastman in 1978, completed the PhD dissertation on Coleridge-Taylor in 1981, and that PhD degree was conferred in February 1982.³

I conducted this interview, which has been edited for content and clarity, with Jewel on the phone on June 4, 2024.

Philip Ewell: Please tell us how you got your start in music.

Jewel Thompson: Well, my father was a Baptist minister of a church, and my mother was the music director. And that's how I got my start back in the day.

PE: And where was that?

JT: In Westmoreland County, Virginia. George Washington's county. My mother was a piano teacher, but she didn't teach school. She had six children and, in those days, they didn't get babysitters. They did the babysitting themselves. So she gave private lessons at home. And since we didn't have a sitter, we had to sit in the room and be quiet. So I listened to all those piano lessons and I picked up on that.

PE: And you started studying piano?

JT: I learned first to play by ear. I would play back the pieces that I would hear at the music lessons. And, unfortunately, my mother died when I was eight years old. And we lived in a rural area. There was no one to pick up the music at the church, but I could pick out the pieces and the hymns and all that we sang. So I became the church pianist.

PE: And you were only eight years old?

JT: Yes. And I did that until I went to high school. I hadn't taken piano lessons. I was playing everything by ear. My father married again not long afterwards, about a year later. His new wife had been in the choir in her college. But she

3. See more of Thompson's biography at "Jewel Taylor Thompson," Prabook, accessed September 24, 2025, https://prabook.com/web/jewel_taylor.thompson/383611.

didn't play piano. So I did the accompaniment. And I did that until I went to high school. But it was necessary that I take some piano lessons. So I started taking piano lessons in high school. And that's where I picked up music.

PE: And is that when you started looking to go to Virginia State University for your undergraduate education?

JT: Yes. I was a valedictorian of my class, so I got a scholarship. And of course, I had to choose a major. So since I knew something about music, I picked that as a major. And in high school, my stepmother made sure that I got some piano lessons so that I could pick out the pieces for the choir that she directed. And that's the way it all started.

PE: And so you went to Virginia State, you got a scholarship, and that's when you started studying music more seriously? And you studied with Undine Smith Moore, I think, right?

JT: Yes, she was a theory teacher there.

PE: And what was that like?

JT: It was wonderful. One day in the theory class, she would play things on the piano and ask us what they were. And I had all the questions correct. So she said, "You have talent in music theory, and you should think about that as a career."

PE: Is that when you switched over from piano performance to music theory, when she told you that?

JT: Yes. In the theory classes, she'd give assignments, and I always got mine correct. And then she started playing things on the piano and asked, "Who knows what this is?" And I would answer the questions and give her the pitches and so on. And she said, "You have something special." In those days, they called it "perfect pitch." So she said, "You should think about going further."

PE: Did you ever compose music like Undine Smith Moore?

JT: Yes, I have several arrangements of pieces that I've done. And I have a big piece that I wrote on Dr. Martin Luther King, a musical narrative.

PE: Do you have the sheet music for that?

JT: Yes. But I'm going to tell you the story about that. I wanted to publish it. But in that day and time, it was back in 2003, they wouldn't let me publish it. They said if I did, they would sue me.

PE: Because of the words? Was there a copyright issue?

JT: Yes, his words and all. So I couldn't publish it, but we performed it at the church. And it was an amazing performance. I did it for three or four years every year on the Martin Luther King holiday.

PE: Is it for piano and choir?

JT: Yes.

PE: I'd love to hear it.

JT: I'd love for you to hear it too. So I'm going to try again to see if they'll let me publish it at some point.

PE: So how did you end up getting to the Eastman School of Music? Was it Undine Smith Moore who recommended that you go there?

JT: Yes, she recommended that I go there. She said, "You have talent for music theory." And she knew Allen McHose. And the other teacher there was Robert Gauldin. So she was in contact with him and she told him about me. So they kind of adopted me, you know, to look out for me.

PE: Tell us about your time at Eastman and also about being a Black woman at Eastman. That must have been interesting because there were certainly no other Black women studying music theory at that time at Eastman.

JT: That's right. But in the music department, they were nice to me. Those were the days of intense [racial] segregation. But maybe they felt sorry for this little Black girl. I got along fine with everybody. When it came time to choosing a topic or study for a dissertation or for my thesis, they suggested that I look at Samuel Coleridge-Taylor.

PE: So the Eastman faculty suggested you might be interested in writing about Samuel Coleridge-Taylor?

JT: Yes, that's right. So I wrote the thesis and they liked it very much and helped me to get it published.

PE: You mentioned that the country was very segregated then. How did that racial segregationism impact your life in Rochester and at Eastman?

JT: Not so much at the school itself but in the community it did. I'd walk from the dorm to the school and kids would throw snowballs at me. But there were those who would look out for me. And we would study the theory topics together. I'd go to their room. I stayed in the dorm. But I didn't have a roommate.

PE: You got an MA at Eastman in 1960 and the PhD in 1982. Tell us a little bit about those times.

JT: The two teachers I mentioned [McHose and Gauldin] wrote recommendations for me to go to get my doctorate. And I got a Ford Fellowship, and I went to England. I also went to France.

PE: What was that like, being in England, in France, studying Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's works, in the late 1970s?

JT: It was wonderful. It so happened that I had married and my husband was interested in conducting. So, he got a fellowship to go to Paris to study conducting. But my husband died early.⁴

PE: That must have been an extremely difficult time.

JT: Yes, and I had two little girls to raise.

PE: How long were you able to stay in England and France?

JT: A year.

PE: And then after that, what happened in your career?

JT: Well, I came back to the States and applied for a college position. And I went to Virginia State.

PE: How was it teaching at Virginia State, which is a Historically Black College?

4. Leon Everette Thompson (1928–1983). See his obituary at C. Gerald Fraser, "Leon Thompson," *New York Times*, 55; "Organized Concerts on Black Composers," *New York Times*, June 25, 1983.

JT: That's right. And it's my home college. It was great. And of course, I had that experience of teaching, you know, on a college level. And at the same time, I became a minister of music at the Abyssinian Baptist Church [in Harlem]. And so a lot of recognition came through that. They put together the choir and performed the Martin Luther King piece that I had written. And then the concerts during Black History Month. In general, the music selections that I did attracted both Black and White audiences.

PE: How did you end up then at Hunter College?

JT: Well, I was looking for a job, and I applied for and got it. I was recommended, of course, by Dr. Moore.

PE: Did she have a connection with somebody at Hunter?

JT: Yes. I also went to Juilliard and did some study in orchestral conducting in 1987.

PE: You studied conducting at Juilliard?

JT: Yes, I took a class.

PE: What was that like?

JT: Wonderful and, you know, very stimulating and challenging. And at University of Southern California, my husband was getting his doctorate, so I did some piano study there.

PE: And that was before you arrived at Hunter?

JT: Before Hunter, yes.

PE: How long were you in California with your husband?

JT: A couple of years. Because he got his degree in orchestral conducting.

PE: I was at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Music Theory some years ago and somebody mentioned the Committee on the Status of Women, which started, I think, in 1985. I commented on the White agency that that and other committees have, and someone who was there at the inception said something that often gets said, that "we would have loved to have had women of color at

the inception, but there were none out there,” which is rarely true of course. I immediately thought about you since you’re a woman of color who got a PhD in music theory from Eastman in 1982, and you could have been on the Committee for the Status of Women. Did you have any interactions with music theory societies or committees back then?

JT: I want to tell you about my experiences with those societies. I went to those meetings, you know, when I first got my position. And those were the days of segregation and shortly after that. And nobody would be with me, you know. Nobody would talk with me. I tried to mingle and they walked away. In the meeting itself, if I would try to have something to say they wouldn’t call on me. It was not a good experience. When it was time to eat, you know, you want to sit down and eat together, and they would, you know, block the table.

PE: How did that make you feel?

JT: Awful, just awful. So I stopped going to the conferences. They wouldn’t mingle with me. Wouldn’t call on me. It was not a good experience.

PE: There are currently only about two percent Black tenured professors in the Society for Music Theory. And there are very few in musicology too. Why do you think that is?

JT: I think because of the reception that we’ve received, you know, the treatment. And they’re just coming to recognize us now. Blacks were, you know, just ignored as if we didn’t exist. Now things are beginning, now that people are protesting and so on. Now they’re beginning to recognize us.

PE: And what advice would you have for younger people of color, especially women of color, Black women, who might want to go into music theory or other academic music fields today?

JT: If that is their passion, go for it. It’s much better, I think, studying today than it was when I went through it. Follow their passion, express their passion. Follow it, you know, because they’re more receptive today. They’ll look out for you, trying to make up for past mistakes and mistreatment.

PE: Well Jewel, that was my last question, so thanks so much for today’s conversation.

JT: Thank you, Phil.