

EPISODE #11: Aftab Darvishi

Listening To Ladies

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Interviewee: Aftab Darvishi (**AD**)

ECB: OK, so let's just count to five together so that I can have it synced up, so...

ECB&AD: One two three four five

ECB: Ok, alright, that'll make it easier.

I'm Elisabeth Blair and this is Listening to Ladies.

Hey just a quick heads up. This interview was conducted in February of 2016 via video chat.

AD: Yeah, my name is Aftab Darvishi. I come from Iran. I've been living in the Netherlands for the last six years. I came here to study composition and I've graduated a couple of months ago and now I am working here as a freelance composer.

ECB: I started the interview off in my usual way, asking about support during childhood to pursue music. Did she have it? Did she not?

AD: Yeah, I was quite lucky, because I was born in a musical family actually. My father is a composer as well. He's a composer and scholar. He has written lots of music for film and he has a lot of books also, mainly about Iranian instruments, because he travelled, you know, thirty something years ago in different parts of Iran to make these books happen. And my mom is a lawyer, but as a side job, she was also teaching music to children. So yeah, I was always very motivated from when I was a child.

[excerpt of **And The World Stopped, Lacking You** plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt from her piece, *And The World Stopped*.

AD: I started playing violin when I was five, then I switched some instruments. I switched to kamancheh for a while and kamancheh is an Iranian instrument.

ECB: I wasn't familiar with the kamancheh, so I asked her to describe it.

AD: Ok, kamancheh is a bowed string Iranian instrument. It's also used in Turkey and Kurdish music and in Azerbaijani also, but they are not exactly the same, but the whole thing is very similar. It used to have only three strings made from silk, but nowadays they are from metal, not silk anymore. I've played this instrument for a short amount of time. But yeah, I love the voice. It's close to violin but it has another warmth and quality, so I use it in my works quite often.

ECB: Ok, back to what she was learning as a child. She started with violin, switched to kamancheh, and then...

AD: ...And then I chose piano, classical piano, and I continued it more professionally. But writing music, I think I started writing music from when I was nineteen, twenty.

ECB: At the time that she went to the university, there was no option to major in music composition, just music performance. So she did. She studied piano performance.

AD: But by the end of my studies, I realized, that ok this is not really what I want to do professionally, like playing as a concert piano. So I switched a little bit, like my thesis on these things were composition, but like my degree was music performance.

ECB: Had she heard of any women composers before university?

AD: No, I didn't. The thing is, even today in Iran, we don't have so many women composers. We have a lot of women performers, we have a lot of cellists, pianists, guitarists, whatever, but I can't really remember a woman who is living and composing in Iran.

ECB: So she had a different kind of role model.

AD: When I came to the Netherlands to study composition, I started studying composing for film. And that's a really different area than like composing contemporary music, which is what I am doing at the moment mostly. So what I had in mind, because my father was, I could see like that he manages and how he composes for films and theater, at the time, I didn't really think about the fact that, ok, I'm a girl or a boy, I just thought, Ok, I like this thing so I am gonna do it.

[excerpt of **That's How it Happened** plays]

ECB: That brief piece is called, That's How it Happened. And it's the ending music for a short animation called, Game, directed by Jamal Rahmati.

AD: That portrays a disabled boy playing in a park with his mom, having difficulties, and in the end they are both killed in a mine attack. So the animation is talking about war and the effects, but it doesn't come to any specific part of the world, because this boy could be from anywhere, this war could be anywhere, you know. So what I did was, I also mixed everything. We have two singers, one is singing in Western style like an operatic voice and the other singer is singing in Iranian style and the same logic goes for instrumentation. So I have piano and I have kamancheh, an Iranian instrument also. So they are all mixed because the animation is showing something really powerful without pointing any identity or nationality. So that was my approach to it.

ECB: You can check out this animation on the show notes page for this episode.

I asked Aftab what caused her to switch her focus from film music to contemporary music.

AD: By the time I was graduating, of course living in Amsterdam for three years, it confronts you with a lot of different kinds of music, which before I didn't have the chance to listen in Iran. Also meeting

different people, you know, going to different concerts, I was realizing that, ok, I like this but I need something more. Well, in Holland there are a lot of female composers.

ECB: Since graduating, Aftab has spent some time in Tehran teaching and I asked her to speak about the difference between the Netherlands and Iran as far as being a woman and a composer.

AD: Well to tell you the truth, in the Netherlands, I think it was even a bonus that I was a bonus that I was a woman, especially the fact that I was an Iranian woman, because this doesn't happen every day, you know somebody comes from Iran all the way to study composition here. In Iran, it was again a bonus, because there I was really the only one, especially the only one who has both of the experiences, so composing for film and composing contemporary music. But the thing in Iran is, the problems are even bigger than sexism. In Iran, such a thing as contemporary music doesn't exist the same way it exists in Europe or America. So like the problems are a bit more fundamental if you really want to work as a composer, find an ensemble, finding people, getting budgets, all these things come really like before considering you are a girl or a boy.

ECB: Okay so thinking I was leaving the subject of being a woman composer, for the moment, I asked her how she would describe her music.

AD: It's very hard to describe your own music, but I can say what other people say about my music, does it count?

ECB: Yeah sure

AD: Because you can describe how you do it but you cannot really label yourself, it's difficult, because you are inside something. But lots of people have described me as a very lyrical composer.

ECB: She also said that people often say to her that they can tell that her music was written by a woman.

AD: So I think sexism is a big part of it, without wanting it, it's just I write the piece, of course you never think about you know other stuff, but I've heard it quite a lot.

ECB: From critics, friends, men, women

AD: From men and women, from my colleagues to my professors or the people like dancers or choreographers that I have worked with, or the performers I've been working with that this music is very feminine or we could say that a guy couldn't write it down. I don't know if it's true or not, I don't know to tell you the truth, what is the difference? But that's what I've just heard a lot. The thing is, I really like compose from my heart, I don't really look at it as a, anything that I write and that's one of the reason that usually I write the text myself. First of all, the inspiration comes from my personal life, so the stages I'm going through and what I am experiencing and seeing all these through a woman eye. So probably that makes a kind of music that a woman has experienced it and a woman is writing it. So I don't get happy but I don't get you know, offended with it, it's just what it is.

[excerpt of **Lethe** plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of a piece called Lethe, which in ancient Greek means forgetfulness.

[excerpt of **Lethe** plays]

ECB: While Aftab was studying composition in Amsterdam, she was also studying Carnatic music, which is a music tradition from south India, and which she explained is very rich in complex rhythms and different composition techniques.

AD: These are techniques that coming from east, which are completely different that Iranian music I would say. Iranian music is not that complex in rhythm at all. So I have that in some of my work or maybe in all of my work. Then we come to my background which is I am coming from Iran and I've been listening to loads of Iranian music from when I was a child, I have also played Iranian music, so if I want it or I don't want it, it's in back of my mind, I can't do anything about it. Anywhere I go if I introduce myself, I say I am an Iranian composer, I am not only a composer, because this background is not something that I do it consciously, so it's not like a melody that I take or put it in my music, but it's a kind of color, so when I started to find my voice kind of in writing music, this is just what came out and it shows itself in different ways, you know. Sometimes it's the harmonies, sometimes it's just the changing moods, sometimes it's a singing, sometimes it's the tech, but it's in different ways, but it is there all the time.

ECB: As I was listening to Aftab's music, I noticed that she frequently writes for voice.

AD: One of the reasons, if you have noticed, I also write only for female voice. I've never really worked with a male singer, not that I don't like that, but it's just I really like using female voices. I've been asking these questions from myself a lot of what I am so interested, and one of the answers came to me, you know in Iran it's forbidden to write for female voices. They cannot sing solo in a public concert, they should be in a choir or mixed with a male voice or singing groups. So yeah having this should not all the time, I think it put this need in me to do it. So whenever I have a chance, if I'm working for something that I can use a singer, I do it, and if not sometimes, I even make the instrumentalists sing this stuff. So yeah, and no, there's a lot of singers in Iran and some of them are really, really good and it's a pity that they can't actually show it in public. But if you go a little bit in underground music in Iran, you find amazing stuff.

ECB: I had noticed that her pieces seem to often be in different languages and I asked about that.

AD: In a lot of my pieces, I write the text myself, so when I write it myself, it's usually in Persian. Well here, I don't always have the chance to find an Iranian singer. We always have this process of you know, rehearsing the text a lot with the singers. I record it for them and they listen to it. So sometimes it's in Persian, sometimes it's in English, sometimes I even like mix different things and I ask the singer if, like I had a Hungarian singer once, or I had another one Mexican, and I asked them you know, to do it even in their own language.

[excerpt of **Here I live** plays]

ECB: This is a piece called Here I live.

[excerpt of **Here I live** plays]

ECB: I asked Aftab about her priorities when she is composing. Is she thinking more about the audience, about experimentation, or something else or all of these things.

AD: I do think about audience a lot. So I care about how much I can actually relate to the audience who are sitting there and I like to have a wide range of audience. I don't like to have only you know, small group of intellectual people who are up for contemporary music, nothing is wrong with that of course, but that's just not my attitude. Another important thing is that I like people from all over the world to be able to relate to my music. It doesn't matter if they are from west or east or Europe or Iran or America. What I'm always considering in my music is creating an international platform from every background people can relate to it, even if they don't understand the text, I think that doesn't even matter so much, because we are all listening to a lot of songs that we actually don't know what the singer says, but we have our own interpretation.

ECB: I asked Aftab if she had advice for people wanting to become composers.

AD: Being a composer is not easy. It needs a lot of sacrifice in every way and the only philosophy that I can define for myself is, loving what I do and believing in it. Of course, there are obstacles and you know difficulties, everything on the way, but every time you get piece, stuck with everything, you know, you listen to your music, the love is so much there that makes you, every kind of sacrifice possible, so I could say like the only philosophy that I follow is loving what I do.

[excerpt of **Lethe** plays]

AD: It's a rewarding job but at the same time it's very hard. Especially when you are still young, you are not famous, making a living with composing is not easy.

[excerpt of **Lethe** plays]

AD: Just be aware of what kind of path you are going to step into. You should really, really be in love with it in order to stay in the path, otherwise, it's impossible I would say.

[excerpt of **Lethe** plays]

ECB: Show notes for this episode can be found by going to www.listeningtoladies.com and clicking on the link to this episode. There you'll find more information about Aftab, check out links to things that were mentioned, and you can listen to full streaming tracks of the music excerpted in this episode.

I want to take a moment to thank the new Patreon subscribers Katrin Gann and Carolyn Crocker - thanks so much to you both and to everyone who has both had the resources to be a paying subscriber and who has made the decision to do so. I really appreciate it. If you have an extra dollar a month you could put toward the production of this podcast, I would be very grateful. Just go to www.patreon.com/listeningtoladies. If you don't have any money to spare, leaving a review is a free and easy way to really help me out. I want to thank Rain Worthington-she left a review this week, and that's the first one since March (and I'm recording this in July)-so I am guessing leaving reviews is not a popular activity, but in this case at least, every review makes a big difference. Okay, that's all I have for now. As ever, thank you for listening.