

EPISODE #24: Alondra Vega-Zaldivar

Listening to Ladies

www.listeningtoladies.com

Original release date: January 26, 2019

Host: Elisabeth C Blair (**ECB**)

Interviewee: Alondra Vega-Zaldivar (**AVZ**)

ECB: This episode is supported in part by the Irving S. Gilmore Foundation, in partnership with 102.1 WMUK, and by the International Alliance for Women in Music. Learn more and explore membership at www.iawm.org.

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

[excerpt of *Two Cardinals* plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of a piece called *Two Cardinals*, by composer Alondra Vega-Zaldivar.

AVZ: I was really inspired by this cardinal couple that would come into a tree that I had by my window and they would always perch by the tree so I could see them from the window and it was great. And since then, I've fallen in love with cardinals.

[excerpt of *Two Cardinals* plays]

AVZ: I thought of this story of, what if it's the male cardinal first mating? So this is the first time he's seen this female right? And it's just this ecstasies of birds.

[excerpt of *Two Cardinals* plays]

ECB: Alondra grew up in Cuba, where—as she explained—

AVZ: One of your better paths for education, at that point, was going into music or going into sports. Those are the best schools in Cuba, which is funny, because here is kind of the opposite.

ECB: “Here” meaning Canada, where she lives today.

AVZ: I was eleven years old and my mom said, "Let's get you into music and let's see if you have aptitude," and I was like, "Alright, ok." It didn't really matter to me. And so I did some auditions with a teacher and she said, "Well, yes, she has aptitude, but she's late," because kids in Cuba start music when they are, depending on your instrument, like the latest ones start when they are ten years old and I was already going to turn twelve. So she was like, "So in one year we have to teach her like two years worth of what kids learn." So it started as an intensive in piano, solfege singing and ear training, and music appreciation and music history. So I think I was seeing three teachers a week, one of each. It was like every week, one hour each, the three hours of my week it was like music intensive lessons. So this is all getting me ready to audition for a music school out of nothing.

ECB: That summer before 7th grade, she passed the audition and got into the music school.

AVZ: I did always receive very much a lot of support from my parents and they always really pushed me to practice when I was younger and I didn't know better. And then once I decided, yes this is what I want to do and I want to pursue music forever, my mom always asked me, "Well are you sure? Should you have some option Bs just in case?" But as soon as she knew, like she saw like, no, this is it, this is music or nothing, then she's always been very supportive.

ECB: I asked her about any early composing.

AVZ: It's funny that you mention that, because I recently got a box from my parents full of thing and I found some of my earlier pieces and I was playing through them, and of course they are very raw and they are a little, they're weirdly organized, but I can still see like the earlier explorations of sounds that I'm still interested in right now.

[excerpt of *Rise of the Cuban Cicadas* plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt from a piece called *Rise of the Cuban Cicadas*—which she actually wrote in Croatia.

AVZ: And it was actually Croatian cicadas that I heard there and they were everywhere and they would even wake me up in my dreams. I would wake up with this "ch ch ch ch ch" and it was insane, I really really loved that.

[excerpt of *Rise of the Cuban Cicadas* plays]

AVZ: So I got really inspired by that, but then I also wanted to use Cuban rhythms, so it ended up being a merge of my Croatian experience with me trying to find some Cuban and exploring that.

[excerpt of *Rise of the Cuban Cicadas* plays]

ECB: In Cuba, if you want to be a musician, after 9th grade you go to a conservatory for four years - 10, 11, 12, 13. And then?

AVZ: Basically in Cuba, if you finish the conservatory of music, you are a professional musician. So like before university, you are prepared as a professional musician.

ECB: Not only do people start young and finish their training young, but also, she says the level of musicianship in Cuba is extremely high and that people take it very seriously.

AVZ: Yeah, more seriously than here I think. Even when I was in university, I never felt like people were that pressured or stressed or even that the level of materials that I was receiving at university, never got up to the level that I left in Cuba, and I didn't even finish the conservatory.

ECB: She moved to Canada when she was 17, and when she went to university, she studied composition. And it was only then, that she first heard a piece of music by a woman.

AVZ: My eyes were kind of opened to that, you know? It was for me, it was kind of like, huh, yeah, I guess I've never really listened to anything by a woman. And it was in first year university when my Intro to Composition teacher was, you know, very avid into introducing us well to contemporary women composers, especially Canadian women composers.

ECB: And the preponderance of men in the field did not intimidate her.

AVZ: I honestly never thought that me being a woman would ever hinder me and it never really has affected me that way, in a way that I would feel so defeated as to not try. Even in moments where I found, maybe people that are, you know, more leaning towards a male person than me, I kind of just brush it off, and it's like, well ok, let's go to the next person and let's continue doing my best.

[excerpt of *A Haunted Tableau* plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of a piece called *A Haunted Tableau*.

AVZ: That was the game changer piece for myself, because that was the first time I wrote a piece that I performed and I found how much I loved it. Since then, every piece that I've written for voice has been for myself.

[excerpt of *A Haunted Tableau* plays]

ECB: She made this piece as part of a program called Opera From Scratch, based in Halifax, Nova Scotia. One of the requirements was that the piece somehow incorporate something about Halifax.

AVZ: And of course, one of the bigger things in Halifax is the ghosts. So I definitely wanted to do something about a ghost, but I like the humor in the pieces, so I knew I didn't want to make it too dramatic and so I was like, what if it's a ghost in the 21st century and she feels all alone because nobody believes in ghosts anymore.

[excerpt of *A Haunted Tableau* plays]

AVZ: And she meets this fifteen-year-old teenage girl who is also all alone and everybody forgot about her birthday, and this ghost and this girl kind of, you know, try to talk to each other and realize they both feel the same.

[excerpt of *A Haunted Tableau* plays]

AVZ: So yeah, it's a dialogue between and those two, but it's for one soprano and piano.

ECB: To differentiate between the two characters, since there was only one singer, she used slightly different music for each character-for the ghost, it was more waltzy and dancy and for the girl it was more mellow.

AVZ: But then the differences are mostly in the performance. So the ghost, I'm always standing up and then for the girl, I had a chair so I would sit down. So the visual aspect really helped as well.

[excerpt of *A Haunted Tableau* plays]

ECB: I couldn't help but notice Alondra uses narrative and storytelling a lot in her works, and I asked her about that.

AVZ: I think the storytelling really comes from, I always, always love to write. I used to write stories all the time, since I was a little kid. And in Cuba, I would have a folder full of stories that I would write and a lot of them were unfinished, they would be just one chapter, but I just love, love, loved to write. And then I came to Canada and I remember that for like seventeen years old, I had a very big vocabulary, I loved to write, I loved to read, so whenever I wrote, I had all these flourishing words that I could use, all these

adjectives. And then I came to Canada, and everything was in English, and my whole life had to switch from being from Spanish to English and I tried writing and it just wasn't the same, because I didn't have all these words at the tip of my fingers and everything I wrote kind of sounded very plain and simple. And even I followed that through high school, and you know, the struggles of being in a whole other country and a whole other language and having to think and do school and all that, but then in University I think composition, became I think, hey you know this other language that is not words, but you have been at it for a long time, so this is a whole other world of painting stories.

ECB: It has been my own personal experience that in academia, narrative music is not perhaps always seen as favorably as more abstract music, or what is termed “absolute” music. I asked her if she felt pressure to write such music. She said she did, and that she did dutifully make music like that, when she was at university...

AVZ: But I'll tell you this, except for one song, every other piece that I've written without a story in mind, or without this idea, I hated, I absolutely hated. Every piece that I've written just for the musical, it's just, I mean, I feel that now, I feel these doubts constantly like that my music is not avant-garde enough, or maybe is not of this time enough, or I am too simple, or I should be doing this, I should be doing that, but every time I've tried something like that, it just doesn't feel like me, it doesn't really feel true to myself, right? So I think at one point I realized, yes there are all these people that like music one way and like things one way, but music is so vast that you don't have to stick to one category, right? You can be you.

ECB: For several years now, Alondra has run the Art Song Collaborative Project. This is where she draws together musicians and composers from around the world to create an opera together, each of them writing one part of it, and she sets themes for the operas. Last year the theme was immigrant and refugee experiences. This year it will be environmentalism. I asked her to talk a bit about what drives her to work within themes like these.

AVZ: One of the things I am interested in is exploring all the issues that affect our world from inequality of human beings and racism and why do we think that certain people are lesser if we are all the same and we are built the same? And even to the issues of us killing our own planet where we live. Musicians and composers, we are the philosophers of, you know, our world, really and we see the worlds so different and actually artists, artists in general, we see the world very different. And a lot of the time, we don't have the tools to change the world, but we have the ability to open the eyes of people who do have the tools and do have the means and might be able to change the world. It is our duty to inspire and open the eyes of people and talk about the issues, try and create a better world, because it's our duty as humans to make our world better for everybody.

[excerpt of *Lyra* plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of a piece called *Lyra*. It's named after the constellation. It was composed through a very specific process.

AVZ: I drew the constellation and I drew the points where the stars were in the constellation and I knew one star was Vega and that's my last name, so I knew for sure that was why I chose *Lyra*, and then I drew the dots and then I put a music paper on top of it and then I just put the dots where they belong on the staff and those notes became the motif of the piece. I actually have an idea for a sequel for it and it's how Vega goes supernova.

[excerpt of *Lyra* plays]

AVZ: There have been points in my career, where you know, I started as a low grade and then some people would be doubting, like, "Oh I don't know if you are good enough, like maybe you should switch." But I've always had it in me, that it's like, you know what, no, I don't want to switch, if I don't do music, I am not doing anything and I'm gonna work as hard as I can until I do it.

The biggest thing that I've learned from myself and my life is that there's always gonna be people that doubt you. You are always gonna be doubting yourself for sure, that's part of being a human, is to doubt yourself and everything you do. But at the end, if to the core, you know this is your passion and you know that this is something that you need to do, and this is how I feel with not just composition, but with music in general, it's not my job, it's not something I do, it's something I need to do. And with some of my pieces, it's something I need to say, and maybe it might not be the best way to say it, but I just need to say it, however it comes. And so just take that need and that passion that you have and hang onto that. And whenever you're doubting yourself and everybody's doubting, just hang on to that strong need and strong passion and know that, if you feel that way, then you should be doing it and no matter what, hang in there, be strong, take a deep breath and power through.

[excerpt of *Lyra* plays]

ECB: To find out more about Alondra, or anything mentioned in this episode, and to listen to full streaming tracks of the music excerpted here, just visit the show notes page at www.listeningtoladies.com. If you'd like to help me out with this podcast, I make it myself—I have no team—and I'm very grateful for every contribution I receive from my listeners. Just go to patreon.com/listeningtoladies, and subscription donations start at just a dollar a month.

As ever, thank you for listening.