

Episode #3: Anna Höstman
Listening To Ladies
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Host: Elisabeth C Blair (**ECB**)
Interviewee: Anna Höstman (**AH**)

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

AH: I grew up in a small town on the West coast of B.C., British Columbia and my parents were both involved in the little theater guild and my mom sang and played guitar, she had a voice kind of like Joan Baez, so she sang a lot of kinds of folk music and folk pop music at coffee houses and things like that. She had a very beautiful voice. And my dad also sang and he sang as a young boy and he did public speaking as a young boy. So both were very active in the community so I just grew up with music around me all the time. My mom played the piano but she didn't read music, she just improvised and so I grew up sitting next to her playing Chopsticks duets and things like that and then I started piano when I was 5. I guess there was never a point of encouragement, it was just in the air.

[excerpt of **Moths Drink Tears** plays]

ECB: This is her piece Moths drink the tears of sleeping birds, which was inspired by a study published in New Scientist.

AH: You know, you're just reading something and all of a sudden you feel this shiver go through you and you think, what? How is that even possible?

[excerpt of **Moths Drink Tears** plays]

AH: The title, my title of my string quartet, is the title of the Scientific Report, Moths Drink the Tears of Sleeping Birds. And there are these Madagascar moths that, while birds are awake they can't get anywhere near, but as soon as the birds fall asleep, these moths just attach themselves, they insert these harpoon like proboscis under their eyelids and they just hang out there for the night and drink their tears and they don't know if there is a kind of an anesthetic that makes the bird not wake up, because you would imagine that that would be quite irritating to the bird.

[excerpt of **Moths Drink Tears** plays]

AH: And actually I think that image jumped out at me because I was going through a particularly hard time and I thought, yeah, that's kind of what it feels like, it kind of feels like I'm asleep and there's a giant moth on my eyelid and it's just drinking my tears, you know, I think it was partially cathartic.

[excerpt of **Moths Drink Tears** plays]

AH: It's extraordinary and nature is just extraordinary, but it's these little quite things going on in the world. I was largely involved with creating the meeting place between noise and pitch.

[excerpt of **Moths Drink Tears** plays]

AH: And then leaning pretty heavily into the noise part of that and just very, very quiet, very long tones that were just essentially noise and little pulses, so kind of organic heart beat of the bird, but these long sections of noise that were very quiet, just like the insertion of the proboscis.

[excerpt of **Moths Drink Tears** plays]

ECB: Anna debuted her first composition at age 12, with a piece she wrote for flute and piano called Song for Peace.

AH: And it was mostly just doubling flute and piano, but it was an expression of my heart for sure, I really felt the entire piece and I performed it as well and I remember being very, feeling like I was on a river when I was playing it, it was just like setting a boat on a river and I just started floating downstream and it was a wonderful experience. And I never really looked back, I just started writing kind of all the time at that point.

ECB: In those early years, she mostly composed for piano.

AH: It was just sort of a natural extension of what I was already doing. I spent a lot of time playing the piano. I loved to play the piano, I didn't do a lot of practicing of my pieces from my piano lessons, but I just played endlessly. And because we lived in a small town, we didn't have access to a lot of music books, so when my parents would go on a trip to Vancouver which was 650 miles away, they would bring back a book for me and I would just play it. I would play it from beginning to end and I would just replay the songs and replay the songs. So, for example, a book of Beethoven Sonatas and so then I just inhabited all of those pieces, because that's all I had that year, was this book of Beethoven Sonatas. Yeah, I would just breathe that music and then the next year it might be something different, something popular, so yeah, it was kind of an interesting way to approach playing, whatever you have around you is what you play. I was very good at sight reading and I just loved to pick up anything and everything around me and just play it, just kind of inhaled it I think.

ECB: So when did she become aware of women composers?

AH: I think probably I learned about Canadian women composers first. When I was doing my master's degree in Victoria, I came out to Toronto, because I wanted to meet some composers.

ECB: And she did-she met Linda Smith, Alison Cameron, Linda Bouchard, Juliet Palmer.

AH: I don't think I ever really thought of them as women composers, I just met them as composers. It was just, oh, these are people I would like to meet, because I like their music. I'd like to say I had more of an awareness of it, but I really didn't. I really didn't think of myself as a female composer and I never really was raised with a dialogue around it and when I studied with various composition teachers, nobody pointed it out, nobody talked about it. So I really was oblivious. We just sort of all felt like composers and when I think back now in hindsight, yeah there were very few when I was an undergraduate student, but actually I studied at the University of Victoria for my undergraduate degree and my master's degree and

there was a healthy number of female composers at the school. It was actually a very good school for women composers, because the faculty, who are male, there was a particular sensitivity to teaching, it was a highly sensitive environment, very encouraging, very supportive, very experimental, and you really were just talked to as a person interested in art. The conversation was always about art. Yeah, so I guess maybe I'm lucky and that's sort of been my general, I mean I've carried that from then into now as well. And so it is more of a dawning awareness now, but it was a long time coming.

ECB: I asked her what she thinks has brought about this “dawning awareness.”

AH: I think I am aware of it more now, because I want young female composers to find role models and we're lucky here in Toronto certainly, because there are very strong female composer role models, you know, we have Ann Southam and we have Linda Smith and we have Alison Cameron and they have a compositional voice that's absolutely unique and they are very articulate about their compositional process and they are very supportive of the surrounding community and they are very visible. And I would like to see even more of that. I think that would be really healthy for the community. So I think a little bit more work would be really helpful to kind of bring about a sense of more of a parity between the genders.

[excerpt of **Pine Trees and Blue Skies** plays]

ECB: This is a piece called Pine Trees and Blue Sky, and it's based on a 1930s painting by artist Emily Carr.

[excerpt of **Pine Trees and Blue Skies** plays]

AH: Emily Carr is a really brilliant painter from the West coast of Canada from British Columbia and she went away to study, but she came back and began to paint the coastal communities, the coastal villages up and down British Columbia as well as the forests, she would go off into the forests and just stay there and paint. I've always found her paintings incredibly moving.

[excerpt of **Pine Trees and Blue Skies** plays]

AH: They have the life of the forest in them, you just feel it when you look at them, and so that particular piece is about one of her paintings called Pine Trees and Blue Skies.

[excerpt of **Pine Trees and Blue Skies** plays]

ECB: I am gonna pause this episode for just 60 seconds. Right now Listening to Ladies consists of myself, a grad student and Krystee, a singer songwriter, and together we spend around 40 hours each week working on this project. Right now through Patreon, our only funding source, we so far gathered subscription donations totaling about \$50 a month. If you are able to, donations can be made at patreon.com/listeningtoladies and they start at just a dollar a month. So if you can give, great, and if you can't, I completely understand. It's equally vital and equally helpful to just spread the word about the podcast. This week I'd love to thank Susanna Hood for her generous donation. Ok back to episode 3.

When I asked her if she had ever had an experience in which she felt her gender prohibited her from an opportunity, she answered immediately, without hesitation.

AH: Never, no, I've never experienced that. As a member of the Canadian League of Composers, I see that there are discrepancies between the numbers of female and male composers that are active in the community and I see that it's a problem, and yet I've never felt it as a problem personally. And yet I think, you know, so much of how we move through our world as we are drawn to things that we are drawn to, and we are not drawn to things that we are not drawn to, and so if the only thing I ever wanted to do was write orchestra music for example, because that institution is particularly conventional, it takes a lot longer, I think, for change to happen because there is so much money tied into it and it's such a large and kind of historical creature and it's very hard for the symphony to turn a quick corner, so perhaps if that was my dream, that all I wanted to have was a piece premiered by the Toronto Symphony for example, then perhaps, I would come up against, you know, more instances of feeling myself not able to have that. But the thing is, there's so many opportunities for composers in Toronto, and perhaps this is just how I was taught as well, my most significant teacher never allowed us to wait around for people to give us commissions, he just said, "Well, what are you going to do? What are you going to make? How are you going to create your own ensemble? What's your ensemble going to do?" It was always about continuously being active and if you don't see an opening there, what opening are you going to create and I think that Toronto, and perhaps Canada, is incredibly active and a lot of that is of people's own doing. It's just forming, you know, very small ensembles, very small composer collectives, collaborations with performers, getting out into interdisciplinary settings and I think as long as you are busy and you are active, you don't wonder why you are not getting commissions. You don't wonder about those other institutions, you are just busy and active and you are quite happy doing what you are doing because you are expressing yourself as an artist. So it's just a different way in and it's sort of the only way I've kind of always known.

[excerpt of **Water Walking** plays]

ECB: This piece is called Water Walking, and it was inspired by a story she heard on CBC, the Canadian public radio.

[excerpt of **Water Walking** plays]

AH: It was about a group of Anishinabe activists and they had walked from Quebec to Wisconsin in order to bring awareness as to how much we need to respect the water of the Great Lakes. They carried a bowl of water and never set it down over this two month journey and I was just incredibly moved by this story because I just imagined this bowl of water being held for two months and it was never put down and it was never suspended from movement, so it was just always continuously in movement and I imagined the kind of energy that that brings into the world, that kind of dedication and absolute devotion to water, to this little cup of water. And so I really wanted to write a piece about it.

[excerpt of **Water Walking** plays]

ECB: She wrote the piece to be played behind the left hand fingers on the violin, over the fingerboard. This means the fingering is backwards, so Mira Benjamin, the violinist for whom it was written, had to go through the difficult process of learning new fingering.

AH: So normally you play the violin and you bow, you know, over the sound board, or over the resonant part of the violin, but in this case, she is bowing on the other side, so she is bowing up near the scroll of the violin. And so to do so, she is actually going to hold it in her lap, so that it almost looks cello

[excerpt of **Water Walking** plays]

AH: And so this was a kind of metaphor for the endurance and the duration and a kind of reflection of the devotion that these walkers took upon themselves. So it was my way of kind of coming to that, and it also creates a very sort of haunting, plaintiff sound. It's very, very difficult for example to play any vibrato on the strings, so it's a kind of much less resonant sound.

[excerpt of **Water Walking** plays]

AH: And sounds a lot like a folk instrument, like quite an ancient folk instrument in a way. And interjected with that is just whistling, and so it's a kind of counterpoint between bowing and she finds pitches that she whistles as well.

[excerpt of **Water Walking** plays]

AH: So the piece will have a very sort of sotto voce, very intimate quality, almost as though a person is walking and just with their own thoughts.

[excerpt of **Water Walking** plays]

ECB: Anna's pieces are often collaborative efforts, involving artist from many other disciplines.

AH: I think collaboration brings me out of myself, which is what I love about it the most. It just allows for a mixing of ideas and allowing something greater to come about and so I like that process of just opening to possibility and other people's imaginations.

ECB: I asked her if she seeks out any particular kind of collaborators, such as those who make text-based work, or visual work...

AH: I think I am just open to possibility and so when people suggest things, I usually don't have any reason to say no, it always sounds interesting, so yeah, I think I just sort of take delight in that and because then my music, it forms a counterpoint to other people's imaginations and their world and their focus, which is very much outside of my own focus.

ECB: One such piece is *Singing the Earth*.

[excerpt of **Singing the Earth** plays]

AH: *Singing the Earth* was a wonderful project and it came about because my friend Dylan Robinson, who is somebody who I have collaborated with for years in the Intermission Ensemble, he's recently, I would say in the last decade, he's become more aware of his background as a Stó:lō First Nation, and as this unfolding of his awareness of his background kind of snowballed, he became more and more interested in doing projects that would explore what that might mean in an installation setting.

[excerpt of **Singing the Earth** plays]

AH: And so he came to me and said, "I'd like to do something and what can we do?" And for myself being not a First Nations ancestry, I was a little worried, and I said, "Well, I'm not First Nations and I don't

feel like I can do a piece about First Nations culture, because what would I have to say about it, you know?" And it felt uncomfortable.

[excerpt of **Singing the Earth** plays]

AH: And so we talked about it more and in our talking I realized, well I actually grew up in a Norwegian immigrant community in Bella Coola and in that community, the Norwegians and the New Hawk First Nations community co-existed since the late 1800s.

ECB: The community had about 2000 people and was quite isolated.

AH: And so it had its own microcosm, it had created its own ecosystem and maybe we could talk about that, maybe we could explore that and so it seemed like a way that we could go into this together and come up with something. And so then it became an anthropological project, really.

[excerpt of **Singing the Earth** plays]

AH: And as a composer, I was really interested in exploring the place where I grew up, trying to explore the tensions that were there that I never understood as a child, because I didn't have any kind of awareness. But coming back years later, I might be able to explore those stories and reveal them a little bit in my own way.

[excerpt of **Singing the Earth** plays]

ECB: Singing the Earth took several years to create. Eleven different pieces of music make up the audio portion. One was a piece that used a Norwegian folk song, one was about the forest, one was about the political side of the logging industry. Another piece was about a small Japanese community that had existed in the area before their internment during World War II. Some are First Nation stories she obtained permission to set to music. And there was also one about a time in the late 1800s when New Hawk dancers went to Germany for a year and performed there.

[excerpt of **Singing the Earth** plays]

ECB: At the end of our interview, she offered some advice for those embarking on a career in composition.

AH: I think if you need to compose, then you need to compose and you just make your own story. You have to make your own story, and that's whether you want to be a composer or anything, whatever your dream is, you're the only person that will have your voice, you know. Because of the life you've lived, you have a unique perspective and the world needs it. You're the only person who can give that to the world. It's absolutely singular, so just tell your story and don't think about anything else, but what is your story.

ECB: Details for each of the recordings featured in this episode can be found on the show notes page at listeningtoladies.com-just click on the link to the podcast. You'll also find videos, music, and links to some of the people, places and things Anna mentioned.

I'm Elisabeth Blair. Thanks again for listening.