Episode #4: Augusta Cecconi-Bates
Listening to Ladies
www.listeningtoladies.com
Original release date: October 26, 2016

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Interview: Augusta Cecconi-Bates (**ACB**)

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

ACB: Yeah sure.

ECB:I met Augusta Cecconi-Bates at her farm house in Cape Vincent, New York.

ACB: Oops, come on Panchee

ECB: Come here honey

ACB: Come on, come on. She said, "Really?"

ECB: Not far from the St. Lawrence River and close to the Canadian border. We sat on her front porch because it was a beautiful day in May. She was born about 90 miles away in Syracuse, New York and her parents were Italian immigrants.

ACB: I was born in 1933, so I'm a Depression child and they tell me if you are born between the years of 1928 and 1938, you are a member of the Lost Generation. My mother used to tell us that, so I always thought it was kind of funny.

ECB: She was an only child.

ACB: Depression was kind of difficult, nobody was working and they didn't know how they would support another child so they really didn't have another child. But there were always books and learning, the emphasis was on learning and knowledge in my house.

ECB: Her mother was especially interested in art.

ACB: She had a book of historic paintings and we looked through that every once and awhile and she'd say, "This one's by a woman", you know, she knew to emphasize that women could do things, so, she was way before her time.

ECB: I asked her if she came from a family of musicians.

ACB: No, but my mother, they loved Italian opera and every time they could get a recording, they bought one, so I grew up with probably great music. We weren't too much into symphonies, but Italians really aren't anyway, they really like to sing.

ECB: Augusta never took voice lessons though, just piano, which she started at age 6.

ACB: Problem was when I was playing piano stuff, I'd rather play it the way I figured it had to go rather than the way it was written. She said, "You're not composing yet", and I said, "Well...".

ECB: So when she was a kid, had she heard of any women composers?

ACB: There was one back in the Middle Ages named Caccini.

ECB: Here she is talking about Francesca Caccini, who lived from 1587 to around 1645. She was an Italian composer of the Baroque era.

ACB: And somehow, I used to think we were somehow descended, because Cecconi and Caccini could be very similar, but my mother said no, because they were from Florence and we were from Rome, but I was amazed that she wrote music, you know.

ECB:S he also heard the Clara Schumann Piano Concerto and she thought...

ACB: Wow, this is a woman that wrote this you know.

[excerpt of **Spring Peepers** plays]

ACB: So by the time I was eight or nine or ten, I was beginning to think, maybe I could do that.

[excerpt of **Spring Peepers** plays]

ECB: That was from Spring Peepers, the final movement in the Tug Hill Suite. The Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust protects the land around Watertown, New York.

ACB: And the conservancy, the idea is to make sure that land still remains land and they don't build high rises all over the place and stuff, I mean they want to keep some wildlife and it's a very, very fine organization.

ECB: They were celebrating their ten year anniversary in 2005 and they commissioned a chamber orchestral piece from Augusta for the celebration.

[excerpt of **Gaggle of Geese** plays]

ECB: That was Gaggle of Geese, the first movement of the Tug Hill Suite.

She was the Valedictorian of her class and she went on to attend Syracuse University. She wanted to study piano, but according to her she wasn't good enough. So she did a program in humanities, which was in effect music history and even though she wasn't majoring in composition, she was still taking lessons and classes.

ACB: I really began writing music when I was at Syracuse University and I had two or three pieces performed there.

ECB: One of her teachers was organist, Joseph McGraph. She studied both organ and composition from him.

ACB: Wrote a couple of masses, you know, he was Catholic, you write a mass, you know? And then I wrote a few hymns and stuff like that, but you know, that wasn't really, they were really not what I really wanted to do, you know. McGraph said to me one day, "Why don't you try writing a string quartet?" I said, "I don't know enough about strings to put in a bucket." And he said, "Just write it."

ECB: So she did.

ACB: And in '77 I entered my string quartet in a competition out of Vermont and I won it and I thought, hmm, must be I am doing something right.

ECB: Composing was something that came very naturally to her.

ACB: You know, I remember one time I saw a film about Cole Porter and he said that he could read the newspaper and hear a melody and I thought, gee, that's the problem I have, you know. I mean I really liked setting words to music. Pure music was a little more esoteric for me. For me to write a string quartet, I had to think in terms of words first and then I'd have a melody and work from there.

ECB: I asked her about those texts. She said she used E.E. Cummings and Stephen Crane. She also used Crane's poems later on when she was writing vocal works. He actually went to Syracuse University too for a little while in the 1890's.

ACB: He was a very sarcastic poet. He wrote, "War is Kind". Well war isn't kind, but that's the sardonic meaning of that and I set that, that I put.....

ECB: She related an interesting story of having a piece on a program alongside another composer who was also a woman. After the concert, she was approached by the composer, who said...

ACB: "Your music is so strong."

[excerpt of **Settlers and Loggers** plays]

ACB: That was always the comment that women and men would make about the music I wrote, it was strong, very defined. And I said, "Well, I like it loud and I like it bombastic and I like it fighting."

[excerpt of **Settlers and Loggers** plays]

ECB: You were just listening to Settlers and Loggers, the second movement of her suite, Essences of the North Country. The third movement is titled Aurora Borealis.

ACB: Over the Tug Hill, if you are ever there, you can see, the Northern Lights are just phenomenal, it's almost like being in Alaska, they are just so beautiful at night.

[excerpt of **Aurora Borealis** plays]

ECB: The final movement is called Music of the Plateau. For this one, she brought in eight local fiddlers.

ACB: The youngest I think was twelve and the oldest was 80, and these guys played this tune in the middle of the piece and then of course the orchestra goes along with it. So it was really a very, very successful evening and it was beautiful. Unfortunately, when they recorded it, you can't hear the fiddle, I don't know what happened, everything else is beautiful, but that fiddle tune isn't clear.

[excerpt of **Music of the Plateau** plays]

ECB: When she was in her 40s, she decided to she wanted to some more studying of composition, but she didn't necessarily want her doctorate. She eventually went to Cornell and worked with teachers there, but first she worked with Brian Israel at Syracuse University. He was a young professor, about 28 when she met him.

ACB: See he was like I am, I could look at a piece of music and hear it and so could he. And we performed at Cornell University in a recital and Karel Husa was there, his students were performing....

ECB: Karel Husa is a Czech born classical composer and conductor, who was born in 1921 and who won the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for music.

ACB: But at the end of the evening, he came all the way across the auditorium to me and he said, "Such beautiful Italian music, congratulations." So that was the next step up I guess.

[excerpt of **Simonetta's Song** plays]

ECB: That was Simonetta's Song from the series Nei Giardini Medici, In the Medici Gardens, in which she set texts by the fifteenth century poet Angelo Poliziano.

ACB: So when Brian died at 35 of leukemia, killed him dead, and he was brilliant.

ECB: He was also a staunch defender of his student. She was related a time when she, Brian Israel, and another composer were sitting after a concert in which one of her pieces had been performed...

ACB: We were seated at a table and Brian said, "Congratulations, the songs went beautifully," and he said to her, "What do you think?" And she said, "They're so tonal", looking really down her nose at that and he just looked at her and he said, "No", he said, "They're cosmic, and if you can't hear that, I have nothing more to say", and he got up and left and I'm sitting here. I was embarrassed really, because here I am sitting here, he's just defended me, so I kind of sat there for a minute or two and then I excused myself and got a cup of coffee or something, but...

ECB: Our conversation later came back around to her feelings about atonality and the ways music changed in the Twentieth Century.

But first, I'm gonna pause for 45 seconds and suggest two free and easy ways you can help this podcast. First, share it, on Facebook, Twitter, email your students or your mother. The other quick easy and free supportive action you can take is to look us up on iTunes and leave a review. It's a small gesture that we'd really appreciate. I also want to thank Dave Martin and Tom Howes for their generous donations to our Patreon fundraiser. If you are able to give, donations help support us so that we can continue to put in the time it takes to produce this podcast. Donations start at just one dollar a month. Just visit

patreon.com/listeningtoladies. Ok, now back to my conversation with Augusta Cecconi-Bates and the question of her feelings about twentieth century music.

ACB: You know, I don't know what they did in the later twentieth century, they really massacred music. They just destroyed it. It had to be non-melodic, non-tonal, non-metric. It had to be, well as one person said to me, "Yeah, they want us to step on a coke can underneath the chair and make noise with that, and that's music. I'm thinking, boy, you people have got your taste in your feet. Well, they caught on to what music is and what the arts are. The arts are a forum for a political statement. They always have been. But they can't be just that, that can't be the only reason for their existence, that's not enough.

ECB: I asked her if there was any atonal music she did enjoy.

ACB: There are some very, very good things now. There are a couple of operas that are atonal that are really quite nice, Wozzeck and Lulu, those two I think are really worthwhile. No, atonal it has merit, but you have to make sense, it has to make sense to the human ear. If the human ear can't accept it then you've missed the whole point.

ECB: She spoke passionately about this and in particular about how writing for voice takes a great deal of care.

ACB: Since I like opera and since I like vocal music, I want the voice to sound good and I want the listener to hear it and say, "There is something there that's good." I want the singer to feel that he or she has got the message across with the voice. You can produce angry stuff with the voice, but you don't have to destroy the voice to do it. You know, Italian music is so melodic and it comes so from the heart and it's welcomed by the ear, whether it's a folk song or a crazy song, even the popular songs they have today are tuneful. And I had one conductor one time say to me, "If you are gonna write an opera," he said, "put lots of tunes in it." I said, "You're a conductor, you mean that?" He said, "Of course," he said, I want the audience, they should walk away thinking about one of the tunes they heard or maybe more, even if they can't repeat them at that moment, but they'd like to hear them again," he said, "you don't have to write folk tunes, but it has to be melodic." But again, to hear the voice scream and to reach a high note there and then come way down to one here and then somewhere in the middle, just jumping like geometric gymnastics, it's just, it's not satisfying, it's disturbing.

[excerpt of **Departure** plays]

ECB: Augusta is also a musician and she used to do a lot of touring. She told me a story of a time when she crossed the border from Hungary into Austria in about 1982. She was touring with a concert band at the time.

ACB: And when we got to Vienna, I thought, oh boy, I'd just love to go over to Hungary to see where Bela Bartok worked.

ECB: So she got a visa and she got on a bus to Budapest.

ACB: I spoke German enough I had a nice conversation with the driver, and I said, "Well, when will we be back?" And he said, "Oh we should be back to your hotel probably about midnight." I said, "That's good because the groups five o'clock tomorrow morning for the next city."

ECB: She made it there without a hitch and she had a wonderful day.

ACB: On the way back, the guard comes on the bus and says in German, "Everybody out." So you get out, and everybody has to hand your papers to the guard. Well, the American Embassy tells you when you have a passport, you cannot separate yourself from your passport, it must always be on your person. This guy is six foot tall and he's got a great big gun, I mean, I'm not gonna argue with him, here's my passport, go. But we had to stand there, we stood there for two hours and you couldn't sit down, you couldn't ask for a drink of water, you couldn't go to the bathroom, you couldn't smoke, you weren't even supposed to talk. So we just stood there for the two hours and finally the guy comes back out and I'm thinking, I'm never gonna get home. Nobody even knows I am here, which I had told nobody that I was going to this thing. Anyway, the guy comes back out and says, "Here's your papers, and as I call your name you can get on the bus." I was the last one they called, I really thought I was gonna be there forever, I didn't think I was going to go home. And finally I get back on, so I said to the driver, "Ok, so now are we going?" He said, "Well, we gotta cross the no man's land." There's about a two mile distant between this border and the next border and in the middle of it is a fence that is guarded by a man in a tower and if he raises the fence, you can go through, and if he doesn't raise it, you gotta stay there. So anyway, the guard comes down from the tower and he starts talking with the driver and the driver gives him a cigarette and he steps outside the bus and he smokes a cigarette. And I said, "Are we gonna go now?" And he said, "No, I don't think so because I made a mistake." And I said, "What mistake?" He said, "I got a pack of cigarettes still sitting on the dash here," and he said, "I know he saw it and he is gonna want that." So anyway the guard comes back down, they have a few more words and finally he gives him the pack of cigarettes and we go on our way. When we get to the Austrian border, the guards there have got two cars absolutely torn apart, I mean the wheels are off inside, the seats are someplace else, and they are dragging these guys off in handcuffs. They were apparently either smuggling guns or drugs, we are not sure which. But anyway, we get through it and we get back to Vienna, and I got back to my hotel about 3:30, and we were leaving at 5.

ECB: Did you tell them?

No, I never told anybody in that group that I had done this. They were kind of a stodgy bunch, they didn't like going to Italy and they didn't like, they just thought, I don't know, they weren't really travelers, they were just seniors who had the money to do it.

ECB: Augusta is a prolific composer-in addition to the chamber and orchestral works and art songs you've heard in this episode, she has written a great many operas-one about Joseph Smith, one about the Jelinek family who escaped from Czechoslovakia to Canada in 1948. One focuses on Molly Brandt, a Native American who sided with Britain during the Revolutionary War. I encourage you to check out our show notes page to learn more.

The last question I posed to her was whether she had any advice for women embarking on a composition career.

ACB: If you wanna write, write, but if you want to make money, don't try that. No don't quit your day job, make sure you are doing something else, because there's no, unless the world has changed very, very, very much, and I'm sure it's hasn't, even men composers aren't really making it. There's just no money in this, because we come from society that believes, you know, musicians are there to entertain. And you can go to so many free things that nobody even gets paid for. A lot of musicians don't even get paid for some of the stuff they do, let alone the composer, so no, just don't give up your day job, but don't quit writing. And don't sacrifice yourself thinking you are going to get ahead that way, because the world out there is

pretty nasty. It's not going to respect you, so you got to respect yourself all the way through. Just keep writing, I mean, there's a lot of music there that has to be written yet, it ain't all written yet, and the world needs music. Music is the great hope of everything. It's the cure all.

[excerpt of **Finale** plays]

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 will also find Soundcloud links and links to some of the people and organizations mentioned in this episode.

[excerpt of **Finale** plays]

ECB: I'm Elisabeth Blair. Thanks for listening.