

Episode #10: Beth Anderson

Listening To Ladies

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

Interviewee: Beth Anderson (**BA**)

BA: Here he comes, and here it comes

[excerpt of **Santa Claus is coming to town** plays]

BA: Sit, can you be good? What's the chance? He might be good. This will stop eventually if Rusty leaves the room. Ok, what's the question?

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

[excerpt of **I can't stand it** plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt from an early work by composer Beth Anderson, called **I Can't Stand It**.

I met with Beth in her apartment in Brooklyn in December 2015.

BA: I wanted to move to New York more than anything. I loved the idea of New York. Cage was here, everything was here. But then when I got here, I'm from a small town, I grew up in the country, and when I got here, I didn't go out of the house for three days, I was very scared. And then whenever I did go out I was lost. I did everything in terms of the World Trade Center. If I could see it, I knew where South was and that went on for awhile. Anyways it was very scary and I wrote **I Can't Stand It** about that exciting transition in my life, I can't stand it, I can't stand it, I can't stand it.

ECB: Beth has been involved with music from an early age.

BA: I started taking piano when I was about six or around there and I started taking flute when I was about nine. And I never saw a flute piece by a woman. And when I got to the third year of the John Thompson piano red books, there was a piece by Chaminade, Scarf Dance. And it was thrilling because it was by a woman, who ever heard of such a thing! Certainly nobody had ever suggested to me that women ever wrote music.

ECB: She was about eight or nine years old at this point.

BA: So I started writing. I said, "Woo hoo, I can do this too!" And I was really interested in the overtones and the low notes and I was always fiddling around with things that didn't make any sense to my piano teacher. When I was in college, I had a teachers named Cathy Adkins at UK, she played Steve Reich's album that had come out on one side and Pauline Oliveros' music on the flip side and that was the second woman composer I ever heard of. And I was once again, thrilled, you know **Come Out** is a really

interesting piece. But Pauline Oliveros, my God, this is exciting. And then I met John Cage and I have this image in my mind where I have like a fireplace and over the fireplace there's this mantle and on the mantle there's these two like vases or something, these matching statuettes, and one of them is John Cage and one of them is Pauline Oliveros. And they were very vivid to me that these were my musical parents.

[excerpt of **Torero Piece** plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt of a recording of Torero Piece, another of her early works. This recording of it features Beth's mom telling the story and Beth doing the vocalizing.

BA: The instructions for that piece are to discuss your most dramatic event or relationship in your life, when this piece has been performed other times, people have talked about other things, but my mother chose to talk about her relationship with me. Michael Saul did it and talked about his father dying of prostate cancer. Charlotte Mormon did it with me and talked about playing topless on TV. Allison Knowles did it with me and talked about watching a baseball game in the summer. I don't know what that was about but that was drama for Allison. And then my part is all decoded of a paint by numbers picture of a torero, you know with the bull and the sword and all that business.

ECB: And she used faux names from the name of a performance art group that she admired. Their name was...

BA: Zaj, it's Z-A-J, they were very significant in I think Spain a long time ago and they came to Mills. They did a performance and I just thought they were wonderful. They were like the Peter, Paul, and Mary of performance art in Spain. Anyway, so then I used the sounds in their name and then the sounds in toh-oh-reh-eh-oh, you know, all that stuff for torero.

ECB: Another early piece, this one inspired by her father, is called Ode.

BA: My father was an auctioneer, among other things. And he killed himself in March of 1970. And I went home with my trusty tape recorder and went to one of the tobacco auctions. He wasn't a tobacco auctioneer, he did antiques and things, but he was friends with this guy Speck Edwards, and Speck and him were drinking buddies and carousers and characters. And I went and I asked him if it was ok if I were to record him doing his auctioneering, and he said sure.

[excerpt of **Ode** plays]

BA: Words, words are like percussion instruments, they have all this drive and you can repeat rhythms in them and then they have on top of that, they have meaning, oh my goodness, it's very exciting.

[excerpt of **Ode** plays]

ECB: In high school, Beth wrote a paper for an American history class on American music since 1950.

BA: And I only got a B+ on it because as soon as I found Cage, I focused, and she didn't want me to focus on one guy, she wanted me to look at the whole plethora.

ECB: So she read his books and his essays.

BA: I was just totally enamored, I was just swept away. I read all the footnotes and I found all the books and the people that he mentioned and I was just like crazed.

ECB: And then in 1968, her university, the University of Kentucky, was celebrating it's anniversary and they invited John Cage and Merce Cunningham to campus for a three or four day residency.

BA: You know, dancing and music and performances, Cage was just swell, he was very sweet. He gave me his phone number and whenever I was thinking about something I would just call him up and he would answer the phone, he was a help.

ECB: Then, the next year when she transferred to UC Davis, John Cage was there in residence.

BA: So I just figured it comes from Heaven, you know. And you know, he was there for the whole semester and I took his class, he gave everybody A's. He brought everybody big bags of wild mushrooms that he had picked that everybody was terrified to eat of course. And I just loved him, he was very sweet. Even though our music diverged, John was really funny because he did not come to hear me perform when I was doing anything that was in any way related to his work. But after I stopped, then he came.

[excerpt of **Pennyroyal Swale** plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt from **Pennyroyal Swale**.

Beth's music did undergo some pretty major changes and I asked her to talk to talk about how those changes came about.

BA: Part of it was moving to New York, because in California, I had players that would play scores of mine that were decodings of texts that had typed pitches with rules for uses and things like that. When I moved to New York, I met players who didn't have time to be bothered with that kind of stuff. They wanted to see it on a staff with lots of dynamic markings. And so I stopped doing that kind of music, instead of trying to write out, trying to put my decodings onto the staff and make up six durations, because the whole point of it was, that it was the rhythm was chance and the pitches were specific and like that. I just started doing something else entirely.

ECB: She gave a compelling description of her life in New York City in the early days of her career, trying to make it work.

BA: Teaching at the College of New Rochelle and going to some hospital to do kind of music therapy thing and then going to Alvin Ailey to play two classes. I used to go to New Jersey and upstate and all public transportation in one day, carrying you know, ten record albums and an autoharp and who knows what else to try to make a living in this town, because I was determined to do it making, doing music. And it was hard!

ECB: One of the first jobs she got in New York City was improvising on the piano for dancers. She would end up having this job for over 20 years.

BA: I used to write music while I was playing for dancers, while they taught the next step, I could write down some of what I just played. At the end of the day, I came home with little pieces of paper of stuff I could put in a piece.

ECB: This was one of the reasons she started writing what she calls "swales", which are sort of collaged together pieces.

BA: I did not have this process where you think da da da da, and then you think, what can I do with da da da da. My life experience was that everything happens in little tiny pieces.

ECB: Her grandmother's love of quilting was another influence.

BA: You know, taking many little tiny pieces of things and sticking them together was what she did. And I do that with music, I wrote something called Quilt Music once, before I discovered the word swale, before Swale won the Kentucky Derby in 1984.

ECB: On her website, Beth defines a swale as a meadow or marsh where there is nourishment and moisture and therefore a rich diversity of plant life. And as she also just mentioned, it was also the name of a race horse.

BA: I liked swale better than quilt because it was like an outdoor nature thing and you weren't just limited to the pieces of cloth that you had laying in your house, there was a lot of happenstance, chance, about which plant grew in each different swale.

ECB: John Cage was another inspiration for these swales, specifically a piece of his called Radio Music.

BA: Where he was changing the channel on the radio and if he was in the midwest in the middle of the night doing the concert, he might get a lot of white noise, but if he was in big city, he might get a lot of different kinds of music and he would be switching along between them and that had an influence on me too, that it's possible that you don't need to develop a tiny fragment into the Diabelli Variations or something. You can just switch, like life just switches. You're tromping along and then right next to it, like those wonderful collages from the twenties, there's something completely different, like Monty Python, it's just boom!

[excerpt of New Mexico Swale plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt from a piece called New Mexico Swale.

I asked Beth if she had any advice for composers just starting out and yes, if you've heard this podcast before, you've probably heard this answer before.

BA: Don't do it unless you really have to do it, you know, if you can see yourself doing something else, then you will undoubtedly make more money and have a happier more comfortable satisfying life if you can do something else. But if that's all you want to do, you have to do it. And just tough it out and find some way to stay alive and persists, I think persistence is probably the most important thing. Try not to give up. A lot of people give up, not just women, but it's so hard, or it has been in my experience.

ECB: She spoke about the importance of community building and validation.

BA: Yes and any little thing that you get, like and NEA grant, not that that's little, but you know, it was little money, it says "Yes, you are an American composer". You get into American Composers Alliance,

ah, I am an American composer that wishes to ally myself with other American composers. You get into BMI, I am a broadcast musician! I am! I am a composer. I am a real person, I have lists of works and you know, you have to keep that in mind, because people will take it away from you in affect. Who are you? You know it's like the caterpillar in Alice in Wonderland saying, "Who are you?", trying to get rid of you, "Oh, you're not Stefan Wolpe, alright, you're not Beethoven".

ECB: And for Beth, this discouragement came through loud and clear while she was a student.

BA: When I was at UK, I was told that I could not be a composer because I could not take dictation on Schoenberg in real time, one time through. So therefore I should not be a composer. And I said, "So what can I do besides be a serious composer, maybe I could be a composer of commercials?" So then I set about writing ditties, you know? And I turned those in and I said, "So what do you think?", and basically it was like "no". It was just no, there were just big neon no's all over the place.

ECB: Beth kept studying with a piano focus, rather than composition, but she did switch schools and she ended up at Mills College in California.

BA: I did a performance there March third of '73 with a group of women composer and performers called Hysteresis and Bob Ashley was in the audience...

ECB: Bob Ashley was a composer who lived from 1930 to 2014.

BA: And after he heard my piece, he said, "Tell her to come see me". And so I went, you know, I was very excited you know, somebody in the upstairs department is interested in me and I went to see Bob and he basically said, "Yes Beth, you can be a composer", which was the words I needed to hear. So I stayed at Mills and got a MA in composition after I did my MFA in piano.

ECB: Beth spoke about a struggle between a kind of idealism or ambitiousness and a practicality or quote unquote realism with regards to her music.

BA: When I was younger, I had this expectation of a huge career, I had such enthusiasm that the New York Philharmonic was of course going to commission me and that of course it would be performed in London, Paris, you know Tokyo, whatever, around the world. And now, it seems that it's sort of proven that it's not happening, hasn't happened yet, not that it couldn't, but there's a lot of years on the side of it not likely. So that you stop thinking so grandiose, and you start thinking what can I do? What can I do now? I can do the choral music for four singers, I can do a piano recital, I can do something for my church choir, I can do a piece for my friend the flute player, I can do small things.

ECB: She said she doesn't feel an urgency to write large scale works like symphonies.

BA: Because I don't think, I think they'd be really hard to produce and why am I trying to do this impossible difficult thing? And then I get mad at myself for being too depressive, so you go back and forth, what should you do, what should you do, what should you do, what can you do, what can you bear to do, what ought you to do anyway?

ECB: I asked Beth to speak about feminism and her experience as a woman in this field. Her first answer was a question.

BA: Has anybody ever told you, you don't look like a composer? Because what does a composer look like? Stokowski, Einstein, Moller, you know, something, it doesn't look like a woman. I think that is so upsetting, "You don't look like a composer". What in the world!

ECB: Looking back on this interview, I can see that it was a huge inspiration for the video that I made to promote the podcast, which deals with this idea of what composers look like. If you want to check it out, you can see it on Youtube or on our website and it will also be on the show notes page for this episode.

Beth offered one possible solution to the woeful under representation in U.S. orchestral programming.

BA: Change the law so that orchestras in this country don't get funding unless they perform American women composers. What is this with performing people from everywhere else except here and men instead of women, why should they get public funding?

[excerpt of **Pennyroyal Swale** plays]

BA: I think that the feminism in my music now is just me being a composer trying to survive in the world, I don't have to look any further than that for feminism.

[excerpt of **Pennyroyal Swale** plays]

ECB: You can find links to the people and things mentioned in this episode as well as links to the full pieces excerpted here by going to www.listeningtoladies.com and clicking on the link to the podcast. I want to thank Elliot Cole for becoming the newest Patron of the podcast. If you'd like to become a patron, donation subscription start at just one dollar a month and are extremely helpful to me in covering the cost involved with the one woman operation that is this podcast. Just go to patreon.com/listeningtoladies and as ever, thank you for listening.