

EPISODE #18: Bobbie-Jane Gardner

Listening to Ladies

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

[excerpt of **Chef Concertino** plays]

BJG: When I was 15, and I got into all these ensembles and things, I was having like an hour and a half piano lessons and stuff, cause I needed pocket money, so I begged my uncle, he is a chef, for a part time job so I could get some cash and look good and get a boyfriend hopefully.

[excerpt of **Chef Concertino** plays]

BJG: So this piece was like kind of celebrating my love of food and music. And so I actually got my uncle Urban Thompson to do this kind of cook-off.

[excerpt of **Chef Concertino** plays]

BJG: In the UK, there's loads of like food programs, and Bake Off, and Gordon Ramsay, and Ready Steady Cook. And I love them. I do, it's what you call my passion. So I decided that with this piece, the chef was in competition with the orchestra and he had to finish preparing the meal from scratch before the orchestra finished playing their material.

[excerpt of **Chef Concertino** plays]

ECB: The material came from Urban's "desert island discs," or what he would bring to a desert island - Mozart, George Benson, and Bob Marley.

BJG: And then he had to kind of talk his way through it, it was quite crazy.

[excerpt of **Chef Concertino** plays]

BJG: At the end of the performance, he gave the food to the audience to eat.

ECB: Bobbie-Jane Gardner is a composer based in Birmingham, England.

BJG: I grew up mostly, most of my childhood was in a part of Birmingham called Acocks green, which is like, there's two parts to it, there's a part that is quite well to do with like beautiful Victorian houses and it used to be called Snob's Green back in the day, and then there's another part where they were like post second world war council houses built. And I lived in one of those with my family for a long time.

ECB: When she was 10, her mom found an ad for singing lessons.

BJG: And it transpired that I really didn't like the songs that I was singing. It was like Andrew Lloyd Webber.

ECB: She says at that age, she wasn't really ready to sing about such deep feelings. So she switched to piano.

BJG: And from that I just got really into playing the piano at school, was a proper geek, would practice for hours and do all the grades and things.

ECB: She also started learning clarinet.

BJG: I think just as a result of playing the piano, I could just noodle and then make up melodies and things.

ECB: As a teenager, she listened to a lot of classical music, but she also listened to other stuff.

BJG: I was also, at home, my dad was really into like reggae and calypso, so I had been listening to that sort of music. And then my friends at school were goths, so I'd listen to lots of rock music as well.

ECB: Around age 14 or 15, she started composing.

BJG: But you know what? I can still remember the first piece that I was really proud of, I can still, in g minor, and I sent it to a composer at the time and he said it was really beautiful and really encouraged me to pursue a career in it.

[excerpt of **Tick** plays]

ECB: This piece is called Tick. It's part of a two piece set, the other one is called Tapeworm.

BJG: The Parasite Suite I call them. They were inspired by me reading Noam Chomsky's **Occupy**. I copied it on the train journey, and there was a section, I'm talking about, the plutonomy and the precariat, something like that. And about how 99.9% and not .1% is, and there's a really quite horrible comment about casting the precariat adrift.

[excerpt of **Tick** plays]

BJG: So I wrote this piece, kind of slightly out of anger, and felt that this behavior was quite, it was like animalistic, and like predatory almost. And so I had these two objects, musical objects: one which symbolizes the haves, and one that symbolizes the have-nots. And so one idea, having all these constraints

and limited palette, I can only move in seconds, or whatever and just the material was very small, and then the other one can just kind of start small and just grows and morphs into some kind of dark and crazy.

[excerpt of **Tapeworm** plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of Tapeworm.

[excerpt of **Tapeworm** plays]

ECB: Bobbie-Jane's mother has been very supportive, although in the past she has worried about whether music was a lucrative direction to go in.

BJG: And even now, my mom she does worry about my career choices and that I lead a precarious existence. And I think the nature of being self employed, I'm working in the arts and culture, it's difficult. And although I hear from friends that people look to the UK as like having a really great model in terms of public provision and funding for the arts, the amount of money coming this way is decreasing, and there's a lot of us chasing scraps, so it's really competitive.

ECB: So, like many composers, one of the ways she makes a living is by teaching.

BJG: I absolutely love teaching and I love my ... I teach mostly beginners, intermediate level piano, and I do workshops and things. But it's a two way thing, it's a dialogue, and even when I'm teaching beginners piano, just the way I, just finding creative ways to share and pass on that knowledge is ... I love it. Or when students are composing, you know, trying to help them and instill in them confidence to persevere. And even if the piece starts off quite pastiche, you know, like encouraging them to find their own voice eventually. And so, yeah, I love it. Especially when you are a composer, it's so easy to be stuck in a room with a packet of biscuits, you know, and just staring at a screen or manuscript paper. But this, it's great. I really enjoy being with my students. We just have a laugh, it's just like fun, and I get paid to do it.

[excerpt of **Bournville Chimes** plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt from a piece called Bournville Chimes.

So, when did Bobbie-Jane first hear of a piece by a woman composer?

BJG: Oh my goodness, maybe Clara Schumann, in like an anthology of great, you know, Western classical music greats, but I didn't really, you know, I wasn't that interested. It felt very much like, well, I didn't even challenge or question or reflect on it, it was just that people who wrote music, art music, were this particular type of person. I didn't really start to think more deeply about it until much later. What I have found is that the environment in which certain contemporary classical music is presented, is quite a homogenized kind of culture for me I've found. And even as a young person playing clarinet in Birmingham School Symphony Orchestra and things, it wasn't very diverse. It was, you know, it didn't feel like I belonged, in a way, it didn't feel like there were very many people like me, I felt quite special,

and sometimes a bit of an outsider. So for example, when I played clarinet in the symphony orchestra as a kid and hung out with the brasses, because they were always a bit kind of cheeky chappies and things.

ECB: As an adult, one of the ways this feeling of being different is perpetuated, is through people responding differently to her because of her race.

BJG: What I have felt and observed is that, when I'm in this environment, people don't necessarily know how to be with me, so they'll either try and talk a bit more street, or they will kind of modify themselves a little bit. Maybe they're doing it ... I'm sure it's coming from a good place, but it's like, just be you, continue to be you, and I'll be me, and we'll just find this meeting place. But sometimes I feel like people aren't quite sure how to behave.

ECB: She also says that, in the UK as in the US...

BJG: There's a lot of talk, especially in art circles and art organizations, to really increase diversity in these circles, when not necessarily being successful at that. And so, I sometimes worry that if I'm selected for work, is it a box ticking exercise? Yeah, I think I haven't received sexism, no, not as a composer, but just maybe people looking quite quick to kind of pigeonhole me as, "Oh, you're the person who does the community stuff", or that sort of thing I would say.

[excerpt of **11 and a half years** plays]

ECB: This piece is called 11 and a half years.

[excerpt of **11 and a half years** plays]

BJG: I remember when I was at nursery, we used to have milk and then we stopped having milk. And there was a comment, like, "Oh, Margaret Thatcher, it's her fault".

[excerpt of **11 and a half years** plays]

ECB: The piece is in as many sections as years that Margaret Thatcher was in power.

[excerpt of **11 and a half years** plays]

BJG: And just hearing just how challenging she was in terms of politics and what it meant for working people. But then, in the piece, it kind of, I tried to not make it like a scathing attack, but just look at key moments in her eleven and a half year reign.

[excerpt of **11 and a half years** plays]

BJG: And there's, I think the last one is more like, is thinking of her as just a human being and a woman that died. And so the last movement is kind of more melancholy, just about loss.

[excerpt of **11 and a half years** plays]

ECB: I asked Bobbie-Jane to speak more about her writing process and how she conceives of the audience when she is composing.

BJG: When I'm writing these pieces, if I think about the audience too much, it could be debilitating, and I can try and write music that appeases an audience whereas, obviously, I want people to enjoy what I am writing, but I think also because I've been a Dj and so you've got like three and a half minutes to assess if someone likes what you are doing. Otherwise, I've been alright at Djing and kind of reading a crowd. And I suppose a part of that is trusting my own ear. So for me, I felt like if I like it a lot, then I think people will also like it a lot, so I've kind of judged the success of the piece by me getting goosebumps, and me going, "Oh that bit, I love that bit!" and normally others will connect to that part that I love as well, not all, but... So I'm starting to trust myself and write music that is all killer and no filler.

[excerpt of **Coming Back to Balsall Heath** plays]

BJG: The story behind the for-Wards project is I basically learned that Birmingham has, geographically, has 40 electoral wards and it's not something that's really mentioned or sign posted. Whereas in London, everywhere you go, it's mentioned that you are in, you know about the 32 boroughs, which is the geographical makeup of the city, and the signs, you know you are in Hackney, you are in the borough of Islington. So with this knowledge, we see a knowledge about Birmingham having 40 wards, I thought, "Oh, wouldn't it be cool to write a piece of music about the 40 wards of Birmingham," and then I thought, "Hang on a minute, that could be quite difficult."

ECB: She mentioned Sufjan Stevens who set out to do an album about each of the 50 U.S. states, but only completed Michigan and Illinois, before he pursued other projects.

BJG: Yeah, so I thought, hmm, maybe I won't do that. And so I then thought, hang on a minute, what right do I have to write music about my hometown and all these wards, when I've only lived in about, I don't know, four, three wards.

[excerpt of **Coming Back to Balsall Heath** plays]

ECB: She had done a lot of work in education and participatory arts, so she decided to work with communities to make the pieces and to source sounds from each locale. The program now involves ten composers and forty community groups. On our show notes page, you'll find a link to this project, so you can explore a map and a list of composers and much more.

[excerpt of **Coming Back to Balsall Heath** plays]

ECB: So, advice from Bobbie-Jane?

BJG: To be true to yourself. So if this is something that you love and wish to do, then trust your inner compass. Like if this is... you know it's not easy, there's hardly any money in it or anything like that, so if this is for you, then like enjoy it, and don't be swayed by your environment and feeling like an alien. I would just think, especially with internet, find women out there who can encourage you and find a community of like minded people who will champion you and support you to keep going and be honest with you as well, I would say that. And I think it's part of the game that, in terms of the arts and culture,

it's about being friends with musicians and people and networking, it may sound quite greasy and formal and business like, but networking is just befriending people. So yeah go out and go to gigs and listen to stuff and chat to people with no agenda, just talk to people and just research. If you feel that you don't belong, then it's for you to challenge that insecurity and look it in the face, because there obviously has to be some tension between that, because you want to do it, but you feel like you're an imposter, but you want to do it. So you got to go with that.

[excerpt of **Coming Back to Balsall Heath** plays]

ECB: To find out more about Bobbie Jane Gardner and anything mentioned in this episode, or to listen to full streaming tracks of the pieces excerpted here, just go to www.listeningtoladies.com and click on the link to this episode. If you'd like to help support the podcast financially, just click on Help when you are on our website. You will find a couple ways there to give. You can also support the podcast simply by spreading the word, share your favorite episode on Twitter or Facebook, or leave a review on iTunes.

[excerpt of **Coming Back to Balsall Heath** plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt from Coming Back to Balsall Heath.

As ever, thanks for listening.