

EPISODE #14: Dganit Elyakim

Listening to Ladies

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ECB: This episode is supported in part by the Irving S. Gilmore Foundation, in partnership with 102.1 WMUK.

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

[excerpt of **Dogma I am God** plays]

ECB: I spoke with Dganit Elyakim over Skype. She is an Israeli-based composer, sound artist, performer, net artist, and teacher.

[excerpt of **Dogma I am God** plays]

ECB: This is a piece called Dogma I Am God, which is an aria from a web operetta she created. The title, if you didn't notice, is a palindrome-whether you read it forwards or backwards, it's the same.

DE: And my restriction through the entire piece is that all my musical sentences are based on palindromes.

[excerpt of **Dogma I am God** plays]

ECB: You can check out the full web operetta, Laws of Reflection, online. I've linked to it on this episode's show notes page at listeningtoladies.com

DE: As a young kid, I did get all the support, but as a teenager it was already obvious that my parents have different plans for me than what I had in mind. They wanted me to be a doctor, a lawyer, an accountant, or an architect, four choices. I mean music was not included on the list, that's for sure. I remember as a teenager, my mom used to walk into my room when I was practicing and playing the piano and say, "Music is just a hobby, keep it in mind". And we went through some terrible years during that time, I mean, they had a very serious difficulty separating themselves and their wishes and life choices from mine. And it got very bad when I decided not to serve the Israeli army and eventually I left home when I was still in high school. But you know, we found our way through life and today we have a very supportive and much more understanding relationship. They even attend some of my concerts and they really do their best to support me and be helpful as much as they can.

ECB: But when she eventually enrolled in a school of music, she found a lot more support. And after having been there for a while, she felt like she really needed a mentor.

DE: And then I met Professor Arik Shapira, who became my composition teacher and I think I will never forget our first meeting. I came to see him for an hour or two, and the meeting lasted for five hours and I played him my music, he played me his, and I felt like I found like a mentor, what I was looking for. And I remember that in a certain point, he said, "Artistically, you are an orphan, and I am willing to adopt you".

ECB: So she became his student and she moved to Haifa University to work with him. Sadly, in recent years he passed away. She says she and his many former students really miss him.

DE: He was a key figure in the Israeli avant garde scene and he was this fusion of modernist and punk and very political, and a very prolific composer.

ECB: While Dganit was at Haifa University, she connected with the university's dance ensemble, Eskesta.

DE: And it was comprised of Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia and it integrated folk Ethiopian dances with modern dance. And I had the honor, honestly, of getting to know this group of amazing students and people. If you ask me what is a bachelor's degree, I did it in Philosophy and Music, and in philosophy lessons I had to attend some of them. But if you ask me mostly, what is a bachelor's degree, I'd tell you it's a van with eleven dancers and me, travelling, I mean we were constantly on tours.

ECB: The ensemble would divide up-some would dance and some would perform vocally, and they would switch up. She was a conductor, and an occasional composer for them. In fact one of her pieces, called Old Skool, works with recordings she made of the ensemble improvising.

[excerpt of **Old Skool** plays]

DE: The piece is rooted in the Amharic alphabet and the way they teach it in school. They have this very easy tune with which they teach the kids to go through the alphabetic letters.

[excerpt of **Old Skool** plays]

DE: It's like ha hu hi ha he h ho, le lu li la l lo, me mu mi ma me m(ə) mo

[excerpt of **Old Skool** plays]

DE: But they also have some letters that we don't have in either English or in Hebrew, like Koe, which is different from Kah, they have K and Kay and some really interesting sounds and it was fascinating.

[excerpt of **Old Skool** plays]

ECB: When Dganit was at Haifa university, she was the only woman composer. These days she teaches experimental music at Shenkar Arts Academy, and...

DE: In my class right now, it's a small group because you can not have too many. It's like we actually perform compositions together, so it's a twelve or thirteen students class. Ten are females. And the first three lessons this semester were dedicated to Pauline Oliveros techniques. So by the time this course ends, all my students are going to know very well who is Pauline Oliveros, to start with. There are some other

female composers I am going to introduce during the semester. And I believe that a very important part of my job as a composer is keeping the memory of our spiritual mothers, introducing their art to new students and setting a sensation of belonging among the female artists and composers, like the new generation.

[excerpt of **One on 1.1** plays]

ECB: Her piece One on 1.1 is a guided improvisation which involves someone playing an acoustic instrument while she performs with a controller using code she wrote beforehand.

[excerpt of **One on 1.1** plays]

ECB: She had done research on Ethiopian Jewish liturgical music, which she says is disappearing, partly because when Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel, they were informed their liturgical traditions were not approved by the Israeli Rabbinat.

DE: And it's a very special liturgical music because they start studying it from the age of 16. And what they do there is called syntonization. They have these boxes of small phrases and what they do is just like improvise by connecting different boxes. It's like they built their own Lego all the time. So what I did is actually, the performer gets a kind of boxes, like Lego boxes and he makes up his own tunes.

[excerpt of **One on 1.1** plays]

DE: That's another thing which was very interesting in the liturgical music, it's called "roofing".

ECB: Essentially, roofing is when the different voices overlap like roof tiles - one voice comes after the next, instead of all voices coming in all at the same time.

DE: So I also found this very beautiful and fascinating. So in a major part of the piece, I'm just having these delay lines that are varied in time.

[excerpt of **One on 1.1** plays]

ECB: Hey, Elisabeth here. I'm a freelance artist and I make and produce this podcast from start to finish by myself. There's no way I could continue producing this podcast without the generous help I've been getting from my Patreon donors. Thank you especially to recent donors, Erin Given, Justin Green, Christine Bush, Rosemarie Deroshae, and Steven Snowden. If you'd like to support the podcast, subscription donations start at just a dollar a month at www.patreon.com/listeningtoladies. If you don't have money to spare, then tweeting about your favorite episode, telling a friend or colleague, or leaving a review on iTunes would all be super valuable to me. Ok, back to the episode.

In 2014 the prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, gave a speech in which he accused Iran of building a military rather than a peaceful nuclear program. He said, quote, "If it looks like a duck, if it walks like a duck, if it quacks like a duck, then what is it? Well, it ain't a chicken, and it's certainly not a dove. It's still a nuclear duck."

[excerpt of **I Can Walk** plays]

DE: By the end of his speech, the entire crowd was on their feet clapping hands like "idiot on stage", so embarrassing for me. And I was very angry and all I could think to myself was, when wanna about ducks, I can talk about ducks too, you know?

[excerpt of **I Can Walk** plays]

DE: The piece incorporates fragments from Truman's speech after throwing the atom bomb on the Hiroshima.

[excerpt of **I Can Walk** plays]

DE: The guy sounds like he thinks he is Santa Claus, who just did the most amazing marvelous thing in the history of humankind.

[excerpt of **I Can Walk** plays]

DE: He really sounds like a Hallmark card.

[excerpt of **I Can Walk** plays]

DE: And then Benjamin Netanyahu was getting in there and they start a dialogue and you got comments from the Marx brothers, for example, it's from the movie, Duck Soup.

ECB: You can listen to the piece in its entirety on the show notes page. It goes on to reference Dr. Strangelove, and a 1950s informational film advising school children to quote duck and cover unquote in the event of a nuclear attack.

DE: It's one of those association games, you know, and it dialogues with the remix culture, and it's a fun piece.

[excerpt of **I Can Walk** plays]

ECB: I was curious about how Dganit incorporates the idea of an audience into her composition process.

DE: Usually when I write a piece, in the process itself, I think of a specific person and everything I write is, for me, love songs. I mean, even if it has never dealt with love as the issue itself or ... but it is for me to a certain extent, a love song. And once you have that image in your mind, you are trying to make yourself coherent to that person. I mean, it changes, this person may vary within time, within different pieces, and it wasn't always the case. I mean, when I was younger, I used to compose just for myself, I mean, not for myself, but of course I always wanted my piece to be performed, but I didn't have the audience as, I didn't think about it at all. It grew within time. I think I am mellowing out. I'm becoming a softie.

ECB: I asked Dganit to speak about any difficulties she had encountered in this field, due to her gender.

DE: I think that the toughest as a female composer is actually when it comes to money. And this is why usually I apply to places where it's a fixed price for everybody, it doesn't matter whether you are male or female. If you are in, it depends on your degrees, on this and that, this is your salary or this is the income

you are going to make from this. When it comes to bargaining about money, I think that females know less how to do it properly and by now I get help with this, I have a manager who does it for me. I mean because honestly, I am so naive in that sense. And I must say, it's not like she's pushing, she's very elegant and she just has her way of saying, "Oh, it can't be done for less than this, I mean you do understand that it includes this work, that work and this, it might include this and that too, I mean I don't understand how you want it to be for less". And she smiles and she has this very elegant, she is not shouting, she does it very elegantly. But I do believe it's a part of our training which is missing and also the fact that it should be bargained. It's something which is kind of awkward in a way. The fact that this is the way it is, I think this is where it starts being problematic.

[excerpt of **Stasimon-Agnus Dei** plays]

ECB: This is a piece titled Stasimon-Agnus Dei.

[excerpt of **Stasimon-Agnus Dei** plays]

DE: What this piece focuses on is this chain that starts from Agnus Dei, the victim, and goes to Peccata, which is the sin, which brings up the aggressive, which brings the Agnus Dei, which brings the Peccata. So it's like this endless chain.

[excerpt of **Stasimon-Agnus Dei** plays]

DE: Basically it's a sort of criticism on all religions, it's not specifically on Christianity or anything like that. I mean Christianity is rooted in Judaism, which has basically the very same ideas about idealizing the good and trying to condemn the bad.

[excerpt of **Stasimon-Agnus Dei** plays]

DE: These systems of this transcendental God, very abusive towards us as humanity.

[excerpt of **Stasimon-Agnus Dei** plays]

ECB: I asked Dganit if she had any advice for composers - and she said her main advice is to follow your passion, what you actually care about.

DE: The thing is, once you do the things you love, at least I believe it so, you find your way, you just find your way to make it happen. And waking up with a smile is a very important aspect of having like, your career is what you are going to do most in your daytime most of your life, so if that's where your passion is, just do it. And also another very important, for me, advice, especially for women, is don't compare yourself with others, don't judge your own success or failures with others, just follow your course and it's a path and it has it's ups and downs, and the downs sometimes are just as important as the ups, sometimes they are even more important. Sometimes getting a no from some place is the best thing you can have, because you were not supposed to be there or because it's going to make you even more enthusiastic about getting in there and you are gonna find your way. It's just like, surf on life.

[excerpt of **I Can Walk** plays]

ECB: If you want to find out more about Dganit, her music, or anything mentioned in this episode, or listen to full streaming tracks of the music excerpted in this episode, just visit the show notes page at www.listeningtoladies.com.

As ever, thanks for listening.