

**Episode #29: Eleanor Alberga**  
Listening to Ladies  
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I'm Elisabeth Blair and this is Listening to Ladies.

[excerpt of *Violin Concerto No. 1* plays]

**ECB:** This is an excerpt from the first movement of *Violin Concerto No. 1* by composer Eleanor Alberga. The Scottish Chamber Orchestra commissioned it, and it was composed in 2001 for her husband to perform.

**EA:** I must say that it is a privilege to be married to a wonderful virtuoso violinist, Thomas Bowes. When the opportunity arose to write my first violin concerto for him, I was thrilled. With the violin concerto, I wanted to step away from any sort of clear extra musical idea. I wanted to exploit the drama of the relationship between the solo violin and the orchestra. The violin's natural ability to convey, almost viscerally, human vulnerability was something that attracted me greatly.

[excerpt of *Violin Concerto No. 1* plays]

**EA:** I always feel that deciding upon the moment of which I start to crystallize what is in my imagination, is the most crucial decision of all and I always would like to wait until that moment is right. And with this piece, I could, I had enough time to wait until that moment arrived.

[excerpt of *Violin Concerto No. 1* plays]

**EA:** My mother was an academic who went to university in Canada, which was unusual for her generation and gender. And after university, she founded her own high school back in Jamaica.

**ECB:** She attended her mother's school as well.

**EA:** She strongly believed in the arts and I was always hearing music lessons going on at her school. And I loved playing the piano and sometimes used to practice instead of going out to play, so I think that shows a pretty early obsession with music. I also remember the time, I pretty much decided at age five to be a concert pianist, that was my earliest ambition. And I think there was a gentle pressure from her to go to university and get a proper job, something in law or medicine perhaps.

**ECB:** Nevertheless, they did not stand in her way when she chose to go to music college instead of university.

She says as a child she made up a lot of music that she didn't write down, and so she doesn't really remember it.

**EA:** But the earliest piece, which has stayed with me, was written at age ten about. It was a portrait of my dog Andy and in fact it is being self published and will become part of a book of short piano pieces.

**ECB:** I asked Eleanor to speak about how her gender and race may have affected her experiences as a student of classical music.

**EA:** As a youngster, right into my late twenties, I wasn't very aware of gender. Possibly, the somewhat matriarchal society where I grew up in Jamaica, blinded me to this and also the fact that my mother pretty much ran the household, together with having a full time career as teacher and head mistress of her own school. She single handedly ran both the academic and the business side of the school. When I went to the UK, I was still in blissful ignorance, choosing to see the world in a good light as far as gender bias goes, not really seeing it for what it was at the time. And in some ways, I think this might have helped me, because I just forged ahead with what I wanted to do without having the thought of, "Oh, I can't possibly do this because I am just a girl." In all my years of piano study, I had three women teachers and three men. There was one man particularly I remember, who was inspiring because he was a Jamaican pianist himself and a composer. So, for me, that was probably the first hint that perhaps a black person could write classical music.

**ECB:** When it came time to choose her areas of study in higher education, she didn't choose to focus on composition.

**EA:** It didn't occur to me that I could study to be a composer, probably partly because I didn't come across any female composers and the piano exam syllabus was mostly centuries old European works by men. Also, the early exposure to piano lessons and pianist soloists in concert fed my love for music and for the piano.

**ECB:** She says she did write a handful of pieces of music...

**EA:** But I didn't take it seriously because I didn't think I could aspire to such a thing. I don't think I learned there were women composers until my twenties after I came to the UK.

**ECB:** Along with music lessons as a child, she also took ballet lessons and she also started to earn a little pocket money by playing piano for a couple dance studios, but it was generally reading music, not making it up.

And later on, just at the end of her degree at the Royal Academy of Music, she started doing the same thing...

**EA:** And again, mostly it was set music, but sometimes the exercises happened so quickly that I had to start improvising something. This was my first experience. And what I did was I tried to sound a bit like Chopin or Tchaikovsky and it was very simple. I went from chord I to chord IV and V and back to I and a few other variations, but not much else. I didn't like it because you know it wasn't as good as Chopin or Tchaikovsky. But anyways, I went on and this developed a little bit, but what changed everything was discovering The Place.

**ECB:** The Place is a center for contemporary dance in London.

**EA:** I went there and I discovered that there was this amazing modern dance technique. At The Place it was mostly based on Martha Graham's technique and the counts weren't always on four or eight and you could play something that was slightly dissonant or went a bit wild. So, I found this really exciting.

**ECB:** There was a school at the Place and she was hired to be a pianist there, and then eventually she was hired to be the fulltime pianist for the dance company that The Place housed—the London Contemporary Dance Theatre. And for them, she improvised constantly, every day...

**EA:** And my improvisation grew and grew through this.

**ECB:** And she says this was where she discovered composition in a big way.

**EA:** Before I'd written little things, but because of my improvisation, I was asked by some of the choreographers to write music for one or two of their pieces, which I did. And I became aware of how much I loved doing this and so began to take composition seriously.

[excerpt of *No-Man's-Land Lullaby* plays]

**ECB:** This is an excerpt from a piece called *No-Man's-Land Lullaby*.

**EA:** When I first came on a scholarship to study in the UK and eventually moved there, naturally I became more interested in European and British history in particular. We did study this history in Jamaica because of course Jamaica was a British colony, but this European history was part of my racial heritage. It struck me that World War I seemed to have a huge effect on European life and the British psyche, it was a very important part of history in Britain and how it changed everything afterwards. At the time, I read several books about the first World War, but the one that touched me most was Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Somehow, this book made me try to imagine what it must have been like to be a soldier on the front line and *No-Man's-Land Lullaby* came out of this. I based it on a well known piece of music, I won't say what it is, it's pretty obvious to everyone when you do hear the whole piece, but it's a sort of surprise if you haven't hear the piece before. But this well-known piece of music appears fully at the end and in my mind, this is a comfort to those dying on the field of battle.

[excerpt of *No-Man's-Land Lullaby* plays]

**ECB:** Eleanor spoke about how her cultural identities inform her music.

**EA:** I have a West Indian heritage of mixed cultures, racially, emotionally, and mentally—European, African, Caribbean. I could choose to omit some of it, but don't feel I am being true to myself if I do. The work just doesn't seem to ring true if I am not dipping into one or two of these things. So my work covers the whole gamut of these influences, which appear in different ratios in most of my work. I would say that in the early days, I wrote quite tonal and rhythmic music. For example, there are quite a few piano pieces in my early work which are definitely largely Caribbean based. There has been everything in between since the early days, but at present, I'm leaning more towards the Eurocentric aspect of my influences. For me, composing is equally as intellectual as well as an emotional experience and I don't want to sacrifice my heart for head.

[excerpt of *Succubus Moon* plays]

**ECB:** You're listening to an excerpt from *Succubus Moon*. It was commissioned by the City of London Festival in 2007.

**EA:** So what happened, was we had moved to the depths of the English countryside, not many neighbors around, and absolutely silent, especially at night, just the sounds of wildlife outside. Now, having grown up in Jamaica, with lots of storytelling as a child about ghosts and being scared to death by people, I still have this in my life to some extent. I didn't think about it because we lived in the city for many years, but moving out to the country, somehow, brought these things to the surface and I was terrified at night because my husband used to go away quite often to work for days on end and I was alone in the house in the middle of nowhere, with no sound, no light, completely dark, no street lights or anything and as I said, I was absolutely terrified. Now this went on for months and I thought, "Oh come on, you got to do something about this," and at the same time I was offered this commission, so I thought why don't I try to put this into a piece and see if it will help me somehow to put these feelings on a piece of paper and to sound, which is what I did.

[excerpt of *Succubus Moon* plays]

**EA:** And in fact, it sort of worked as an exorcism, because after I wrote this piece, the fear lifted quite dramatically.

[excerpt of *Succubus Moon* plays]

**ECB:** Hey, Elisabeth here. I want to take just a minute and thank two new supporters who have subscribed through Patreon—David MacDonald and Elizabeth Reid McQuillan! Thank you so much—your contribution makes a big difference to me. And if anyone listening would like to become a patron of the podcast, just check out [patreon.com/listeningtoladies](https://www.patreon.com/listeningtoladies). Subscription donations start at just \$1 a month. Okay, back to the episode.

Both in and outside of the classical music world, Eleanor says she's experienced racial discrimination. Nothing that she really noticed until she left Jamaica and came to the UK.

**EA:** And had some comments passed on the streets from total strangers just walking down the street and I thought, oh right, I am gonna have to deal with this. And my first reaction was, this is their problem, it's not my problem, they have a problem. I think racism actually, in particular, is a form of insanity. I know it's part of our genetics to feel antithetical towards another person who doesn't look like you or who doesn't speak the same language, or who dresses differently or wears different color hair or something, but I still think with our progress, so called progress, with education and the intellect, surely we could have unlearned some of these instinctual things. People are human beings, it's quite obvious, everyone's a human being, we just have different outside things, you know, like color of skin and eyes and hair and all the rest of it, different languages. I know I am a black woman, but I look at myself primarily as a human being. Of course, the perception of the world is completely different, but that's the way I choose to look at things. So, I would say, largely my attitude has been, it's their problem and I self edit, I choose to see what I want to see, so I choose to blank out a lot of these things, because they are quite hurtful and disabling and I feel this attitude that I had really enabled me to get on with my life in a much better way.

**ECB:** In the classical music world, as in the rest of the world, she sees quite large imbalances...

**EA:** There is racism, there is gender bias, and these things need to be redressed and it's a very very difficult situation because I think we do need in some ways to redress the balance by having things like, in the UK they have Women in Music.

**ECB:** Women in Music is a national membership organization in the UK that celebrates women's music making across all genres of music.

**EA:** Yes, it is necessary, I mean for women to get to vote, look what had to happen before that came to be, so in some ways, to try and rebalance things, we need to do quite extreme things and you know, have Women in Music until it's not longer necessary. But what we don't want to do, is to keep those structures and make them so rigid and so strong, that they keep the differences, so that people can look at things and say, oh well, all the black people are doing their own thing with classical music now, we don't need to do anything, they are doing their thing, we will do our thing. We would like to fully integrate things, but need to make people aware of the situation before that can happen.

**ECB:** Eleanor also spoke about the need to address the major gaps in the quote unquote "canon"—the works that are routinely taught in textbooks and classrooms. She gave as an example Le Chevalier de Saint Georges who was a classical composer and virtuoso violinist as well as a conductor of symphony orchestra in Paris in the 18th century—which means he was a contemporary of Mozart (and a colleague). He was also the son of an African slave living in the French colony of Guadelupe.

**EA:** And he's completely disappeared from any sort of general text books that are available to everybody and these are the sort of things that happen, women who were well known, they sort of disappear from the canon of things and this is where maybe in this particular question, we need to rebalance things by making sure these names of women and black people and people of other ethnic origins are kept in the canon.

**ECB:** I asked her if she had any advice for those wanting to become composers.

**EA:** I think you need to really really want to do it. You need to really have to do, you must do it, it's something that is part of you and you have to, because you need that strength of purpose behind you to make it work I think, especially as a woman or as an ethnic minority, you have to really want to do it. And women sometimes, I think we are still, yes we are living in the twenty first century, but women sometimes still hold back, I've had this experience going into one or two universities to work with students there and it's usually the men who really come forward and put themselves forward and put their careers forward and what they can do. And I think women need to do that more, be aware of that, put yourselves forward and just go for it and keep going. There will be many drawbacks and many hurdles, but don't let them stop you. Persistence is a very good word for women composers.

[excerpt of *Arise Athena* plays]

**ECB:** You're listening to an excerpt from *Arise Athena*—it was a commission from the BBC and it opened the last night of the 2015 proms.

**EA:** The theme was given to me as something to do with women and let's have a party. I chose Athena, a most powerful embodiment of womanhood, what could be greater than a goddess, Greek goddess of many things, including heroic endeavor and handicraft. But I was most interested in her as the goddess of wisdom and the arts.

[excerpt of *Arise Athena* plays]

**EA:** At the time, I felt we needed her, with a rise of terrorism and social uncertainty for many people in the world. I feel this still holds true. Our societies could respect and concentrate on wisdom and the arts much more in this age of fast paced technology and materialism and violence, if only that were possible.

[excerpt of *Arise Athena* plays]

**ECB:** If you want to know about anything mentioned in this episode, or to listen to full streaming tracks of the music excerpted here, just go to [www.listeningtoladies.com](http://www.listeningtoladies.com) and click on the link to this episode. And as ever, thank you for listening.