

EPISODE #25: Kaley Lane Eaton

Listening to Ladies

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

Interviewee: Kaley Lane Eaton (**KLE**)

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

[excerpt of *Lily* plays]

ECB: You're listening to an excerpt from *Lily*, an electroacoustic opera by composer and vocalist Kaley Lane Eaton. It was inspired by her great-grandmother Lily Bunny, who grew up in an orphanage outside of London.

[excerpt of *Lily* plays]

KLE: She was like not really an orphan, her family was just too poor, so they sold her to indentured servitude.

ECB: When she was 20, she left the orphanage and moved to London...

KLE: ...to do, nobody really knows, she was a young woman who had to make her own living, so, you can sort of fill in the blank.

ECB: During WWI, she decided to go to the United States.

KLE: But she didn't just go to Ellis Island and get off the boat, she decided to take a boat to Montreal and then she got on a train and just took it to where the tracks stopped in the middle of nowhere in Washington state, which was in 1915, absolutely nothing.

[excerpt of *Lily* plays]

KLE: The opera imagines what she might have experienced her first night, trying to fall asleep in this new landscape. This is like right in the middle of the mountains, that she came to this cabin and was just like so wild and so imposing, so unlike anything she would have ever known in England and I just always wondering, what would that be like? The fear that she must have felt, and also the fact that she was fleeing World War I and so she had all this kind of like, her brother died in the trenches and so there's all this sort of trauma that she is trying to escape and what it would be like to be so far away from that, in this like wild landscape where you are seemingly free now to do whatever, because there's nobody there, but also just being aware that your family is being murdered in this war that is so far away that you could never go back.

[excerpt of *Lily* plays]

ECB: Kaley's mom noticed she loved music, and started her on music lessons before the age of 2. This was despite the fact that there really wasn't much music in the house.

KLE: My mom was a lawyer and my dad's a scientist.

ECB: But she says they were open to many different ways of experiencing reality-in her words, "hippy parents."

KLE: My mom was very very artistic, but growing up in her generation was not really encouraged to pursue that, because she wouldn't be able to get a job. Both of my parents grew up in rural Montana, so there was like a very like Protestant work ethic, like get a job kind of ethos.

ECB: So she went to law school, but...

KLE: She really hated being a lawyer even though she was really really great at it and was the only woman in her law firm, but she really hated it, because she was really kind of an artist at heart, she was a writer, she really loved writing and was a beautiful, I kind of think of her as a poet. So she just always was very bitter about how miserable she was, because she had to do this job that she didn't want to do and really just wanted to do something artistic, so she really encouraged my brother and I to just do whatever that thing was, even if we didn't make any money.

ECB: Kaley says that her parents really had no idea what was involved in learning piano, such as how much she should practice, and her teacher stepped in and told her parents Kaley should practice 2 hours a day.

KLE: And I didn't, like I really did not practice as much as I should..

ECB: But she didn't want to disappoint her teacher, so when it came down to it, when there was a competition or performance or deadline,

KLE: I would just like cram it and it always came together which was like a horrible lesson for myself to learn as a kid, that like you don't have to practice, but if you cram it and make yourself miserable two weeks before, you are gonna have an amazing performance.

ECB: And she says that actually, practicing gets at the essence of why she became a composer.

KLE: Because, it's not necessarily like a very creative act, right, like it can be kind of miserable and tedious, as it should be, like you should do a lot of repetition and like technique is like a thing that's different than creativity in certain ways, and so I think that my disdain for doing that is why I was not a great practicer as a kid and why I did have this kind of procrastinating pattern and also that drove me to write music, because it was like, oh, if I write music, every time I am engaged in the act of writing music, it's creative, there's not the tedium that's involved in practicing. I had the skill and sort of the talent as much as I hate the idea of talent, but to be like a good pianist, I went to college as a piano performance and vocal performance major, if I practiced enough, I could have had a life there, but the tedium of that and the stress of preparing for a performance is just like so unbearable that I think I decided that composing was better for my personality.

[excerpt of *Subtle Energy* plays]

ECB: You're listening to an excerpt of a piece called *Subtle Energy*.

[excerpt of *Subtle Energy* plays]

ECB: An important moment for Kaley came when she took a class taught by Dr. Susan Pickett.

KLE: She taught this course called "Women as Composers" that I took, I think my junior year of college and it was just so weird, it was like, oh yeah, I was raised by this bra burning feminist who was totally a trailblazer for women in law and I never even thought about women as composers.

ECB: She says the lack of role models was one of the reasons why she hadn't seriously pursued composing before that time.

KLE: You know, and then I took this course and I was like, "Oh this is amazing, like maybe I should compose", and then I noticed that my composition colloquium at my college was all men and I was like, "well that's really stupid, I should join that class." I'd never written anything that I had considered like a composition and so I joined that and then it just clicked, I was like, "This is totally what I should do." Another reason why I think at that point in my life I turned to inner creative work even more, my mom actually died when I was a junior in college and so it was this huge crazy life altering horrible, but weirdly sort of beautiful and transformative experience and going inward and doing something creative where I could really really express authentically, without having to put myself as a performer on the line, was really important as sort of a coping process for me. So it all just coalesced and then there was no going back once I found this wonderful world of being a composer.

ECB: Although Kaley's childhood was full of learning classical music, she came at her composition career from a different direction. In high school, she wanted to be a rock star, and wrote songs with her guitar...

KLE: And some of the songs that I wrote were pretty good...

ECB: ...and then when she started college she was in a band, and although she got into college on a music performance scholarship, she wasn't sure that's what she wanted to major in, but her experience in this band, writing songs and performing, made it clear to her that yes, she did want to be a music major.

KLE: So it was through a totally non classical, non academic approach to music that I found that music is really what I was supposed to do. So that features heavily I think in my composing now, I am very conscious of my influences from like rock and pop music that I've loved for so long. I think now kids have more role models of powerful creative women in pop music than I certainly did as a kid. God, what I would do to have a Beyonce when I was young. I feel like I really didn't have somebody who was like so creatively empowered and also business minded, like Beyonce is the CEO of her own company and all these kinds of things. And I think kids have those really great influences now, but not in classical music, so I think there's this empowerment going on in this other realm of music, that's really really good and rich and classical music hasn't really embraced that yet. I will say though, that I think I am overly optimistic about how women that are in college and high school now, have better role models than I had, because I am astounded at how hungry they are for a role model like me, you know, that is close-ish to their age, so can identify with their life a little bit, but also older enough that I've like experienced things that they haven't experienced yet. And every time a mentee comes into my life, I'm like, "Oh my God! You are starved for this, like you have been surrounded by just these old dudes who like don't even know how to talk to you."

ECB: Kaley went on to talk about how sexist ways of thinking have an effect on young musicians.

KLE: A lot of really creative, brilliantly talented young female musicians, I think are pushed through a lot of different mechanisms in our society, into being these performers, because they get to be on a stage and they get to be cute and they get to be sexy and people notice them, which is like what we tell young women, that that is what's important about being a woman, right, just being sexy and being noticed. And I think that, that is like why I went into singing and opera and musical theater, I really think, like I clearly now in my adult life, I still sing, I do weird shit as a singer, so it like kind of avoids a lot of the traditional singing baggage, at least I am consciously trying to avoid that now as a singer, but clearly, that was like not me, I am a creative person, I am a maker, I am a creator and that is what I am supposed to be doing and I just so went in a different direction than that. And I think that's like the biggest experience of sexism that cannot be attributed to any person, that is just sort of how it is for young girls a lot. In my master's thesis when I was doing my education degree, I tried to kind of unpack that a little bit, you know, because there tends to be like a lot of female role models that are creative role models for young women, tend to be hyper sexualized and there's a lot there because it's like, well, you know, young women shouldn't be ashamed of their sexuality, this is good, like we should not shame them for this at all, but then there's also a lot of pressure to be on display, which isn't good.

ECB: When I asked Kaley about her experiences of sexism in higher education, she spoke about supportive and feminist environments in her undergraduate and Master's programs. Her doctorate, however, was a little different.

KLE: In the doctorate, I was sort of having to wade through like a more kind of old school approach to the idea of a composer, to the idea of composition, less stylistically open minded, which also tends to be less open minded to how we think of gender in composition and it's tough to talk about, because I don't want anyone that I worked with in my doctorate to feel like, "Oh my God, she's saying that we were all sexist towards her", because it was not a problem necessarily with individuals saying things to me or doing things, it was just like a distinct feeling of being different, being not welcome in certain ways, so there was a lot of unpleasantness in those three years of my life, relating to that, that I really had to work on and digest and exercise after it was over. I will say, there was one time, when at the very beginning of my degree, where we were in like a seminar setting with all the composers and I was sharing my opinions a lot, it was sort of the first time that we'd all been together for the academic year and it was the first year of my degree, so like nobody knew me yet. And I was sharing stuff, I was like making claims and like, you know, raising my hand and doing all these things that I had done in my master's degree, that I had done in my undergraduate degree and like I said, those were really incredibly feminist supportive environments, so I never felt odd about being that vocal. And after that seminar, one of the faculty said to one of the other faculty, "Like, oh wow, she's pretty feisty, we are gonna have to figure out how to reign her in," you know, and I was just like, "What? Feisty, are we saying feisty about female composers that are sharing opinions now, is that something we are doing?" So there was a lot of kind of stuff like that, that was really problematic, and really like got in my head, you know. And I think that the getting in my head was more damaging than the actual thing being said.

[excerpt of *Lung* plays]

ECB: You're listening to an excerpt of a piece called *Lung*, an immersive work for loudspeakers, live electronics, dance, and mixed ensemble.

KLE: This work was co-conceived with Karin Stevens and Karin is a movement artist and she also has a very deep relationship with traditional Chinese medicine. We came up with this together. I made the sounds and she made the movement, but it really feels like we both have total ownership of this piece, and as such, it doesn't really exist on its own without dance.

ECB: For that reason, please go check out the show notes page on listeningtoladies.com for this episode, where you'll find a link to a video of this piece.

KLE: So we had this idea to create this piece that explored how grief is stored in the lungs and what that means about people breathing and speaking and being heard. You know, there's just so much there, like with singing, there's so much emotion that's held in the voice. There's also this idea when you make music with other people, when you are doing chamber music or something like that, that when you breathe together, your heart rate sort of sync, and you are able to sort of telepathically communicate with one another when you breathe together, this phenomenon has been documented in all sorts of different groups of people.

[excerpt of *Lung* plays]

ECB: Kaley also spoke about rampant sexism in the music technology world...

KLE: Ugh, yeah, I've had multiple experiences in my life recently, where I am doing like a gig where I'm using technology and there's just somebody there who assumes that I don't know how my own stuff works. You know, like one time I did this gig where I was performing a piece for voice and live electronics and I had my boyfriend there who is also an audio engineer, riding the mains on the mixer, just to make sure things didn't clip, and this dude, after the performance, he like goes up to Ryan and he's like, "Hey man, great job, great piece!" And Ryan was like, "I didn't do anything, I was just sitting there like manning the volume." You know, that kind of thing has happened, like one time I was doing this other gig, where I was working in a studio and having to kind of learn how the studio works and Ryan came along because he's really interested in studio technology and just kind of wanted to see what was up, and the guy that was running the place, even though I was the one with the gig, and having to learn about what was going on there, he just only talked to Ryan, like only made eye contact with Ryan the whole time when they were talking about gear, it was like I wasn't even there and I was like this is literally like my job right now, this is ridiculous. So that kind of stuff is so festering and unbelievably horrendously still just awful in music technology. I know that that kind of thing is also happening in composition, but there's just something about the way I've been able to like move through my life with certain people that have come into my life that I haven't necessarily had to deal with that face to face and just composing, but definitely in music technology.

ECB: Kaley is currently the director of music technology at Cornish College of the Arts, where she's also on the faculty and teaches composition and music technology. During the course of our conversation, I mentioned to her that even though I produce this podcast, as well as all of my own electroacoustic and singer/songwriter music, I still often feel like I'm a big, know-nothing fake, as far as electronics go. And she said...

KLE: I'm director of music technology at an arts school, and I still feel illegitimate. It's just imposter syndrome, you can't really shake it sometimes.

ECB: Imposter syndrome is the experience of doubting our accomplishments, our abilities, or our cred, so to speak, and fearing that we'll be exposed as some kind of fraud who claims to know what they're doing but is secretly a bumbling fool. It's quite common.

KLE: I really struggle with this. Sometimes I leave work feeling like I don't know what I'm doing and I don't know anything about music technology, because I come at it from a different angle and such a different background as an electric composer performing my own work with laptop, that's very different than like getting an audio engineering degree, right? I intellectually know that that's ridiculous, but I still feel it very deeply.

[excerpt from *Wilderness* plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt from a piece called *Wilderness*. The piece has two incarnations-one is an installation for nine speakers, and the other is a version for headphones, for 3D binaural sound, that serves as a simulation of a walk through the installation. That's the version you're listening to now.

To make this piece, Kaley looked at a lot of data on protected wilderness in the United States.

KLE: And so I used those numbers, the acreage of protected wilderness to synthesize sounds that we're able to kind of sonify and represent that data accurately and then I played these sounds out through speakers that are arranged as the United States. So the experience of walking through the installation, is that when you are in an area where there is a lot of protected wilderness, there's like much louder richer wider spectra of sounds happening, and then when you are walking into places where there is not protected wilderness, it's very dead and you don't really hear anything. The headphone version curates a walk from the Pacific Northwest down through California and then through middle America and then to the East coast and essentially the experience of that is that you are going from very rich dense wilderness, so rich dense sound, to kind of dead sound.

ECB: If you listen to the full piece-which will be posted on the show notes page-you should be aware that there are gunshot sounds in the piece.

[excerpt of *Wilderness* plays]

ECB: I asked Kaley if she had any advice and she told me about a student she recently spoke with.

KLE: And he was this very earnest, very wonderful student, he is a cello performance major, and he was like, I really want to get into composing, but I don't really know how, like should I apply for this degree, like I really like making music, but I don't know what to do. And I was like, dude just be an amazing cellist and write whatever music that you want, like don't have a teacher, just write it, write for your friends, write for yourself. I think it's really important for people to pursue degrees in composition if that's what they like, but when you are really young, when you have a teacher and you are pursuing a degree, that means you have to like show your composition to a jury and a lot of times, that jury is gonna be made of people that don't look like you and it's gonna be really hard to take their feedback when you're really young, right? So, just do whatever you want, for a long time, before you enter into that situation. That's my advice. Because I did that and I really feel like I had a strong voice as a composer by the time I started asking people what they thought, and if they thought what I was doing was good, I had a very strong sense of self and I just felt more equipped to take feedback, so that's my advice for people who don't look like the people on the panels, do whatever you want for a long time before you start talking to them.

[excerpt of *Wilderness* plays]

ECB: To find out more about Kaley, or anything mentioned in this episode, and to listen to full streaming tracks of the music excerpted here, just visit the show notes page at www.listeningtoladies.com. If you'd like to help me out with this podcast, I make it by myself and I'm very grateful for every contribution I receive from my listeners. Just go to www.patreon.com/listeningtoladies, where subscription donations start at just a dollar a month.

As ever, thank you for listening.