

**EPISODE #6: Lainie Fefferman**

Listening To Ladies

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Interviewee: Lainie Fefferman (**LF**)

**ECB:** Alright, I'm recording, will you say something to make sure it's still working?

**LF:** Hello, hello, hello. New music is fantastic, and my name is Lainie Fefferman, hi, hi, hi.

**ECB:** Can you laugh again, I don't know why it's low.

**LF:** Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.

**ECB:** OK

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

This podcast has been more than a year in the making, so some of the interviews are from the early days. This episode features composer Lainie Fefferman, who I met when I went to New York City in December 2015 to do some of my very first interviews.

[bell sound]

**LF:** Ding

**ECB:** We met up in Brooklyn where she works.

**LF:** I can explain, that's my school bell, because I am a teacher, because being a composer in this life means finding a day job and finding a day job at a hip arty place where they understand statements like, "I need to take 3 days off and go on tour" is really a gem, so I am lucky to find a job like that, but it's rough for the folks who don't and I think there are almost no composers I know who do not have an alternate means of making money. I know a couple who, right now, can scrape by on commissions and constant grant writing, but it's scary and that's not a long term life trajectory, and people don't talk about that enough. I know when I was in school, people did not talk about that enough, that, "Oh you wanna be a composer, great, find a different job that you can do and train for it so that you can be a composer".

[excerpt of **Innocent Men** plays]

**ECB:** This is called Innocent Men and it's one of the movements from her doctoral thesis piece, Here I am. It's performed by Newspeak and a trio of singers.

**LF:** Martha Cluver and Melissa Hughes and Caroline Shaw

**ECB:** She had heard them sing at the Bang on the Can Marathon.

**LF:** And my jaw was like on the floor. They didn't have what I call like the plain vanilla singing effect, their voices can blend when they need them to, but they could not be more different. I mean, Martha's got this angel of Heaven high bell like tone. Melissa has this power in all these different registers where it's very declamatory and she can get very smooth and melodic but she can have like rock star power. And then Caroline can sound so natural and speechy and she does not have the high bell tone of Martha Cluver, but she has the like folk ease that I think is so unbelievably rare in a new music singer.

**ECB:** She felt like writing for these three singers was like writing for three different instruments. And there were times she wanted them to blend, but at other times she told them...

**LF:** I want you all to have radically different voices and do what you do and as different and separate away as possible. And there was this one movement I wrote for them where I called, so Martha is the voice of God and then Melissa I wrote epic rock star and Caroline I wrote Folky McFolk Folk, and I really wanted those three sounds and they really do it.

[excerpt of **Innocent Men** plays]

**ECB:** When she was a kid, Lainie's family was very supportive of her interest in music. A great number of family members were involved in math of some kind, and then the other half were involved in music-including her grandmother who was enrolled at Juilliard before, as she says, it was even called Juilliard, in the 1920s. And her mom had a violin career.

She started playing piano around age 3 or 4 and started taking formal lessons at about age 6-and she also wrote music.

**LF:** Kind of the story my parents like to tell, I would rewrite, you know those picardy thirds at the end of Bach pieces, like oh we this gorgeous dramatic minor piece and da da, this little major ending that always pissed me off when I was little, so I'd rewrite the last three or four bars of these Baroque pieces I was learning. And my teacher at the time would go, "You are not a composer, you are a pianist, this is not your job". And then when I stopped playing I thought, well huh, maybe that could be my job.

**ECB:** She stopped playing piano in high school and by the time she got to college it was clear that composing was what she wanted to spend all her time doing.

**LF:** And it's funny, my family really supported me the whole time, but new music wasn't something anyone showed me was on the horizon, you know, they were all musicians in my family but sort of Bartok was the big rebel, "Oh you've heard Bartok, he's crazy! That's wonderful!" So that was kind of the edge of what was in the family consciousness. So yes I would say that I had the support, but it wasn't familiar, it was an unfamiliar trail that they were supporting. But they are lovely people, they are academics and they understand crazy niche obsessions, so they supported my particular crazy niche obsession.

**ECB:** She had a teacher named Randall Bauer. The class was music theory, but he did much more than just theory exercises with them. He encouraged them to write music, he played them 20th century music, and he brought in guest composers to speak to the class. She remembers one particular time in her senior year when she walked up to one of those guests to introduce herself and said,

**LF:** Hello, my name is Lainie Fefferman. I'm a composer. And everyone cracked up, but I felt very sure of myself that that was my identity at 17, or whatever ridiculous age I said that, because it just felt totally natural, it felt less fraught than being a pianist. I didn't feel like I had the stress and pain associated with being a virtuosic classical pianist, but it had the emotional output that I wanted, so it was more playful and more, in mind adventurous, but with that same emotional intensity. I don't know, I just loved it, I totally fell in love with it and I'm kind of goofy and quirky I think in my personal life, so it made sense to filter goofy, quirky into my artistic output, in a way that maybe is tough if you are playing like Hammerklavier to be goofy and quirky, arguably you could do that a bit, but it's a tighter environment, so I think just as a teenager seeing how I could be more of myself in that form of music and I could still get the emotional power out of it, I was hooked.

**ECB:** In high school, she was the only girl in her theory class who was doing composition.

**LF:** But I also did math, my other thing that I did was math. So I was also often the only girl, not the only, but maybe one of two girls in a math class. I felt normal to be doing something that girls didn't do, and I think my family made me aware that it was ok to do things that few other girls did, so it was less that I was looking for a specific female role models and more that I went, well screw it, this is what I want to do, I don't need to find myself in it, I don't need to find a person that looks that me doing it, I'm just gonna do it. So I don't think I identified, I don't think I look at Steve Reich and go, oh that's me, I could be that, or I look at, you know for that matter, like Julie Wolfe and go, oh that's me, I'd love it if that was me, but you know, I don't need to go, I'm gonna make my life into that person, I guess I just had the support to let me know it was ok for me to take on that role. And I know that the way a lot of people get that support is through finding role models, but that maybe wasn't as true for me.

**ECB:** Despite the support and confidence that she did have, there were times when she still felt insecure, like most of us. In her undergrad years they had seminar every week with both the undergrads and grads together, and she spoke of feeling like it was difficult to speak up.

**LF:** You know, it was older people first, I was on the young half of the room, or the young third, it was mostly grad students, the young group and then I was a woman on top of that, when people talk about an unfriendly environment for women, at times I think that correlates, it's not the same thing, but it can correlate with how alright is it to admit vulnerability, I mean that does affect the environment for men as well, but it might affect it more strongly for a demographic that can feel typically disenfranchised, so maybe that's part of it. Yeah again, I feel like the musical emotional landscape as an undergrad, just compared to my grad school which felt so fantastic and supportive and lovely and friendly, it was a little more, competitive is the wrong word, but it felt scary to admit not knowing something, or scary to show any artistic or emotional or career weakness. You wanted to present as the strong competent artist of vision. But yeah, I will say by contrast, my grad school experience was so good. I never felt scared to admit anything I didn't know. I kind of celebrated what I didn't know, I was like alright, you are all gonna teach me everything, and everyone was really friendly and lovely and some magic about the group of students that were all living and working there together and I just felt remarkably comfortable. I mean, I ended up marrying one of them, like that student body is just really, it was really magical and yeah, as a woman, as a pianist who had quit, as a, I don't know, anything that I was, I felt comfortable being.

**ECB:** I asked Lainie about her composing process, and what's on her mind when she's actually creating music.

**LF:** I think I think about me as the audience, I am the audience. I have students now and they are making pieces and I always just talk about controlling boredom. I'm always thinking about, ok if I am in the audience and I've heard this thing, when am I gonna be bored of it, when do I need a surprise? When do I really just need the time to sink into this idea, like, yeah totally I think of the audience, but I think of lots of mes, I don't try and please the word audience. I don't really think there is any one person to please or group to please, but I think of if there were lots of mes in the audience, what would me get excited about?

[excerpt of **Barnacles** plays]

**LF:** I think I used to be a lot more excited about, oh here's this little abstract musical idea, I'm just gonna run with that as much as possible and I'm gonna play with it and I'm not even gonna think really so much, this is terrible, how it sounds, but just like oh I'm playing with this, playing with this, playing with this, then I'm done. And I feel like now when I think about writing a piece it's so much more about guiding attention. Like every musical decision is how do I want to craft this attention, do I want to make people really uncomfortable and feel awkward? Do I want to make people feel really subtle and smooth and calm, it's more questions like that and then I fit musical ideas to those words. But I think also, I'm just getting more theatrical in my older age, so it's maybe going with that same idea of I want lighting that has that same effect and I want movement on stage that all contributes to that. So yeah, I think I'm getting, you know, music is my jam, that's what I do, but I'm using it to get a certain emotional path for the audience.

[excerpt of **Barnacles** plays]

**ECB:** This is a piece called Barnacles. It's one of a series of works which she calls Portrait Pieces. They involve a tape track with highly excerpted bits of an interview that she does with the performer, along with other recordings that she gathers from the performer's daily life, like the sounds of a scrabble game. The tape plays while the live performance takes place.

**LF:** I was thinking about visual art portraiture and how it was so cool that you got to know the subject as well as the artist when you looked at it.

[excerpt of **Barnacles** plays]

**ECB:** She began this series when renowned pianist Kathleen Supove commissioned a piece from her-and she realised she wanted Kathleen as a person to be in it.

**LF:** So hearing her, just talking about these little technical piano things in her warm voice, and then I had these big gestures that are very much what I associate with her playing, just like big all piano consuming slamming the inside of the strings, like going like a maniac to the extreme register. I was hooked, I love doing that, so now I've done...

**ECB:** She's done several of these now, including one for guitarist James Moore, one for Sideband, the laptop ensemble she herself is a member of, and one for string quartet Ethel..

**LF:** And again that was fun because Ethel's membership has changed over the years, so even what it means to do a portrait of an ensemble where the individual members have changed, made me think a lot about what it means to be a group if all your membership keeps changing. So I interviewed current members and a couple past members about what the quartet meant to them, what it still means, what the

word Ethel means, and I interviewed a lot of collaborators. I just decided I wanted, instead of then a portrait of the people..

[excerpt of **The Pirate's Daughter** plays]

**LF:** ...I really did a portrait of what Ethel is to all those people...

[excerpt of **The Pirate's Daughter** plays]

**LF:** ..which was super fun, so that was a tapestry of, I forget, I think in the end I used, I don't know, God, sixteen interviews or something, and I wove the electronic backing track, I wove it together with those interviews.

[excerpt of **The Pirate's Daughter** plays]

**ECB:** I want to take just a brief pause to say thank you to some folks. To Beth Anderson, Ruth McAdams, Patricia Leonard and Nancy Van de Vate, thank you for your donations. And to Alan, thank you for your kind review on iTunes. I create this podcast on my own, and so far don't have help from grants, if you'd like to help, leaving a review on iTunes is a great way and it's free. If you have a dollar to spare, our Patreon page accepts subscription donations starting at just a dollar a month, just go to [www.patreon.com/listeningtoladies](http://www.patreon.com/listeningtoladies). All the money goes directly into supporting the production of this podcast and since each episode takes about 40 hours of work from start to finish, each dollar makes a difference. Ok back to this episode.

Part of the requirement for Lainie's PhD, which she finished in 2015, was to write a large paper. She focused on the idea of recording versus live performance.

**LF:** My advocacy for composer focus shifting from live performance to recordings. I think so much of the pedagogy is about live concert hall, like, "Oh, you can't do a balance like that, you're never gonna hear the vibes over the steel pan," I don't know, whatever, and I'm inclined, now let's start really going, "Great, this means you need a mic on that", or "Great, on the album, you're gonna wanna record them separately and boost that thing". Anyways, that's just coming from a lot of places, but I love listening to music on my own time on good headphones and just listening for its own sake instead of, you know, being in a room, being aware of the people around me and live performance is wonderful, but as a composer, I don't want all of my love and attention to go into this one one hour event that may never happen again. So yes, that was my paper. Yeah, but it was a big piece that I think is really the stronger focus of the degree, so I wrote, and some people don't treat as heavily as I did, but I made it this big evening length giant ten person oratorio and put a lot of emotional retching into like exactly how I wanted it to present, the work I have done in this program, and I treated it very, very seriously. And it's done now. And I am hoping to make an album, because we had one live performance at Princeton and we had one live performance at Roulette, and they were both great, but it's like, oh ok, now what? I have live recordings which are nice, but you know, it's a live recording and you hear a lot of coughing, and you know things go wrong as they do and that's my document, so I am really hoping to make an album and I'll feel more, I think, satisfied with that project when I have an album I can point to and go ha, here's a snapshot of where this piece is right now. I feel really good sharing it and yeah.

**ECB:** I found this idea of a recording being a snapshot of a piece really intriguing. She shared something one of her professors had told her.

**LF:** You know, you don't want to freeze your kid in space and time and be like, "That's my child!", but you'd like to have like a nice photograph of your child on the table and be able to look at that child and go, "Oh, I loved when he was eight, look how cute he was". I want that photo and I don't feel like I have it right now, so.

**ECB:** In the course of our conversation we wandered into the idea of a genius, how it tends to be associated with maleness and how it's a problematic word.

**LF:** That's tragic and interesting, and it's funny because I really hate genius, I really fight hard when I am talking about mathematicians or composers, I use it, but then I immediately catch myself and go, "Ah, I hate that word", because I think it's so much more counterproductive than it is productive. Just as a teacher, I see the second you talk about someone as being a genius, a kid totally separates and goes, "Oh, that's not me, that's completely not something I can do or enter into". Whereas when you go, "Yeah look at what this person did, it's amazing, here's how it works" and you could talk about the work as being fantastic, but you don't place that person in this weird realm of divine inspiration, I think everyone wins. It gives the person more credit, because Beethoven is a genius, that means I don't know what, it's like Planet Krypton is like slammed on him, this amazing super power, versus Beethoven's music is unbelievable and how did his mind work and what experience and work did he bring to it, that feels so much more powerful, a compliment to him, in my mind then, "He's a genius and he can just do it". So maybe it is gendered, because I think there are more women I've talked to about that, I've talked to a lot of people about this, this is a pet peeve of mine, that I think I have found more agreement among women that word genius is counterproductive than I have in men. They go, but there are some geniuses, there are some, you can't deny that there are geniuses and even how you define that I think is so slippery and yeah unproductive.

**ECB:** Lainie has been very fortunate to have been able to work with really great artists such as Caroline Shaw, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2013. She's concerned about the fact that not everybody will be able to secure the contacts and access she has been able to acquire and that this means that a lot of deserving folks won't get the opportunities they need.

**LF:** I've worked with amazing people, but again, I think I'm spoiled, because a lot, I met Caroline at Princeton, like you know, she was a first year when I think I was a third year or something and she came in and it was fun. This was just at the very beginning of her composing career and she's like, "Oh I don't know, like I play, I play fiddle and I like sing a little and stuff, but I really am starting to get into composing". And I can see her at that beginning of her career, because I went to that school and I could, you know, have Missy in my band, because I live in New York and I met her at different concerts and I don't know, I feel, I am really conscious of how, you know, being in this town and being a little, I talk all the time about being introverted, I do feel introverted, but I am also willing to go to a concert where I don't know people and introduce myself and say, "Oh I'd really love to work with you" and, "Can I talk to you about a new project?" and I think that's really hard, not just for women, for people who just aren't comfortable being self promoters, or yeah, entrepreneurs, or who just aren't comfortable promoting themselves, who have unbelievable musical contributions to offer, but who don't have that social skill or who don't have that geographical luck or money to live here. I get scared at who we're not hearing because we're not finding those people or giving the resources to those people. It's unlikely that someone is gonna get to work with Caroline, who hasn't gone to school with her or gotten some place in life where she is likely to find them. And I just want, yeah, I have this Utopian vision of there being better

communication, not so reliant assertive social skill. I know that's kind of wild and very different from the historical precedent for centuries and centuries, but I do kind of wish that were true.

**ECB:** I would argue Lainie does a lot of work toward these idealistic ends. She helps to run the New Music Bake Sale, as well as a fantastic space in Brooklyn called Exapno, which is a New Music community center that you can join for the price of a monthly gym membership. Overall Lainie is just a powerhouse of community building and the embodiment of a warm welcome. And she promised cookies the next time I visit. :)

So advice from Lainie?

**LF:** Always make sure you're trying for things you are pretty sure you can't get and doing things you are pretty sure you won't be able to do, because, especially for those demographics and you know, me, I am solidly early, mid-career, I don't know what I am, but I am constantly thinking, oh I am not gonna get that grant, oh I'm not gonna get that commission, that's ridiculous, I'm not gonna apply for that. And then I, I mean very rarely, but sometimes I get things and it's only because I am married to someone very supportive, I have friends who are very supportive and they go, "No, apply, you just saw that posting, that's so perfect for you, apply for it, if you don't get it, who care, just apply". But even, it's such a freedom to go, "Oh I probably won't get that, great, who cares, I will apply for it, that experience alone will be worth it". And then sometimes, oh my God, you do. And even if you don't, I think often times, just having the experience of applying, is so healthy. Schools, grants, commissions, prizes, I should do way more than I do, but again I am spoiled, because I am making pieces that I like and I don't need the money rolling in from prizes or something, so I am in kind of a privileged position, but especially if you are trying to find more work, find more projects, God, just apply for anything you think you might enjoy. Forget what you think you might get.

[excerpt of **Lot's Daughters** plays]

**ECB:** To learn more about anything mentioned in this episode and to listen to more of Lainie's music, you can visit our show notes page at [listeningtoladies.com/podcast](http://listeningtoladies.com/podcast). You will also find extra tidbits, like goofy drawings I made of Lainie without looking at the paper, some videos, and lots of links and information.

I'm Elisabeth Blair and thanks for listening.

[excerpt of **Lot's Daughters** plays]