

EPISODE #12: Marga Richter
Listening to Ladies
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Interviewee: Marga Richter (**MR**)

ECB: This episode of Listening To Ladies 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.

MR: My name is Marga Richter.

[excerpt of **Quantum Quirks of a Quick Quaint Quark** plays]

MR: And I'm a composer.

[excerpt of **Quantum Quirks of a Quick Quaint Quark** plays]

ECB: You're listening to a piece called...

MR: Quantum Quirks of a Quick Quaint Quark

ECB: If you didn't quite catch that, it's Quantum Quirks of a Quick Quaint Quark.

MR: This is a silly, silly piece that I wrote for the Long Island Philharmonic with Marin Alsop conducting and I had to do it really fast.

[excerpt of **Quantum Quirks of a Quick Quaint Quark** plays]

ECB: Really fast means she wrote it in 23 days.

[excerpt of **Quantum Quirks of a Quick Quaint Quark** plays]

MR: I took a shine to Antonio Soler's Fandango so I put some of that in there plus a couple of old ballet scores that a modern dance or whatever I could lay my hands on sort of a patchwork quilt.

[excerpt of **Quantum Quirks of a Quick Quaint Quark** plays]

ECB: I spoke with Marga Richter at her home in Long Island in December 2016. She told me that her family was very supportive when she was a child. Her mother was an opera singer and her dad came from a musical family.

MR: My sister was already taking piano lessons and I was about three years old and she played a wrong note and I sang the right note and the family said, "Ah, maybe we should pay attention to her". So I started taking piano lessons when I was four years old. The house was full of music. We had recitals and you know, my mother sang and my father played the piano for her and she had quite a career in Europe and then she just became a church musician and a singer, and you know, a teacher. And she sang one of my first songs at her concert in Minneapolis, so yes, lots of support. Nothing but support, not pressure, just support.

ECB: That song of hers that her mother performed was actually recorded on a 78 record.

MR: And I went to take it to my music teacher at school, who taught music and algebra, and I wanted to bring him this recording, and I slipped on the ice on the way out of my house and broke it and we never thought to make another one, it's just too damn bad because it was good. I did make one recording with my mother when she was way past her prime. We did some Brahms and some hymns and that's another story for later on if we get to Dusseldorf.

ECB: Hopefully we get to Dusseldorf!

Our wonderful conversation went many places, but I'm sorry to say, we never did reach Dusseldorf. I did ask her more about her mother.

MR: Well she went to Europe, as people did in those days, and she had a thriving career as an opera singer in small opera houses near Berlin, Göttingen was the name of the place she had most of her career in. She told us stories about this, this was during World War I, like three women living together and having one can of soup for dinner and you know, stuff like that. Unfortunately, I don't know why, but we didn't spend a lot of time talking about her life. She would tell us things when it was raining or snowing and we couldn't get anywhere, but the rest of the time we were all very busy.

ECB: To really underline the immense support her parents gave her to pursue music, Marga told another story. It began with her first piano teacher.

MR: And she was OK, the piano teacher, but she wasn't really very musical. So at one point, her teacher, who's name was Countess Morstein, came from New York to give master classes in Minneapolis, so I enrolled, I got a scholarship the first year and she came back a second year and convinced my parents that I should go to New York, but I wasn't out of high school yet. So get this, they never said anything, I don't remember them coming to me and saying, "Would you like to do this?". I don't remember the conversation at all, but they sold the house and the business and all moved to New York with my brother, who was three years younger than me and the piano and the dog. Unbelievable, the kind of faith they had that I was going to be something special, but if they'd had any brains, they'd know I wasn't gonna be that good of pianist. But so I studied with this teacher for two years and then my family had another late night conference to themselves and decided that I should go to Juilliard, because they could see that she wasn't gonna be good enough to get me any place. So I immediately went to Juilliard and I studied with Tureck for one year. After that, she wanted to leave the school and said she would take two students, myself and one other person, and I wanted to continue to study with her, but I also wanted to stay at Juilliard. By that time, I had written some, I didn't know people wrote music, I just wrote music. I'd written a few little stupid little pieces. I said, "Well, I'll be a composer", it was just as easy as that. It just almost self preordained, you know, the way it happened. And in those days, you could get into Juilliard by writing

stupid little pieces, today you have to probably write a symphony on the computer before they, you know, people are so much, have so much more technique and know more stuff to do.

ECB: At one point early in her career she had a piece performed, and in an interview with a reviewer, she told them about her trajectory through school. They ended up beginning their article about her with the following statement:

MR: When Marga Richter entered the Juilliard School, the faculty fled.

ECB: So when did Marga first hear about women who composed music?

MR: Well there was somebody named Chaminade that everybody knew. She was some French lady who wrote salon music and it was sort of a joke, that was just around the house.

ECB: Cecile Chaminade has been mentioned in this podcast before, but just as a refresher, she was a composer and pianist who lived from 1857 to 1944.

MR: And there was a person at Juilliard whose name escapes me now, here first name started with an M, I think, wrote music and I went to her once to get some advice on what to do, but she never became anything special. I did know that women could write music but I didn't know that there were thousands of us hiding in the woodwork.

ECB: I asked her to explain why Chaminade was considered a joke.

MR: Oh because her music was so flimsy, you know.

ECB: That was the general view at the time by her contemporaries. For example, she told me about a review she received, which said, quote, "It seems impossible to believe that this pungent and virile score is the work of a woman. No Chaminade is she!"

And at first, she took this as a compliment.

MR: Later on I thought, what the hell are you saying, you know that women can't write music, so if it sounds like a man it's good, but you know, it was good to have them say these things. You know, at Juilliard, I was the only woman composer. We used to have a composers forum every Tuesday, let's say, and we'd all go to the bar, and I had never had a glass of beer in my life, so I had a half of glass and I was high, the guys liked that. But it was all men you know.

ECB: And they said things to her that were very similar to what the reviewer had said, but with a lot more crassness, basically asserting...

MR: That if you were good, you were like a man, instead of just good. I mean it was nice to be accepted that way, but it was sort of a dumb thing to say, but I guess they never, well let's face it, I'm a force.

[excerpt of **Out of the Shadows and Solitude** plays]

ECB: This is a piece called Out of Shadows and Solitude and she wrote it while her husband was extremely ill.

MR: But while my husband was dying in the hospital, I had to correct the parts because the performance was coming up and my son said, "Don't worry, Dad would want you to do that". So I am in his room you know, working on my music, while this man is ... it's very trying. So we dedicated the performance to him, but he never got to hear it.

[excerpt of **Out of the Shadows and Solitude** plays]

ECB: I asked Marga to describe, if she wished, a time when she felt her gender had directly affected her career, and she told me about an orchestra reading she had had - and in case you're not familiar with this term, it's when an orchestra is presented with your music for the first time and plays it, in a workshop setting, by simply sight reading it.

MR: The conductor, my piece is very long and very complicated and I felt that they gave it a very short cursory of reading and I complained. And the conductor, like in school, had me come to his office and dress me down because I was making a fuss about this and I'm like, who do you think you are that you, I can't remember, but it was very demeaning and I thought they wouldn't do that to a guy. And there's things like that that you just know they wouldn't do. But he was nobody and you know, but it was embarrassing and I just felt that he wasn't give me as much time as other people, and he didn't take the most difficult part of the piece either, you know. I think they had a concert then in night, they played parts of pieces, it was a terrible experience, but I mean you don't know about other people who said things to people, you don't know if that's the reason they don't play them, I try not to dwell on that too much.

[excerpt of **Fandango Fantasy** plays]

MR: I don't have any plan when I write a piece, I just sit down and write what comes to me that day and it has to go from beginning to end. It has to build on itself, I can't think about it in advance.

[excerpt of **Fandango Fantasy** plays]

MR: I don't know about you, but when I write a good note or something, I could get up and start running around the house, saying, "Oh my God! Oh I love it! Oh that's fantastic!"

[excerpt of **Fandango Fantasy** plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of a piece called Fandango Fantasy.

MR: There's a composer called Soler who wrote a piece called Fandango and it's a 20 minute piano piece, which I learned to play and it's just fabulous. I borrowed from it three time in different pieces. So interwoven in this whole piece is some of the Soler Fandango.

ECB: I asked Marga where she felt her music came from.

MR: Where do I think it comes from? I am not a religious person, but sometimes you have to wonder, it just comes out of the ether, it just comes out from something so deep in you. It's fun, it's frustrating, but when you get a few people who love your music then it's worth it. It doesn't have to be everybody. It'd be nice if it was everybody, but...

ECB: During the course of our conversation she touched a few times on disappointments in her career, feeling like she had reached a peak in certain decades, which she was not able to match in later decades, but-she has never allowed the inherent unreliability of a creative career to discourage her from continuing to write.

MR: But when you find just the right note, which you don't know is coming, you are going along and suddenly, oh my God, it's just fantastic! So why quit just because they're not playing music your music at the Philharmonic, you know. As my husband used to say when I would get upset, "Aristotle said you have to do the thing for the thing itself". And I can't stop, I can't help myself, that's what I do.

ECB: Marga wrote a 1-hour long chamber opera called *Riders to the Sea*. It's based on a play by John Synge, which she noted was also set by English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams in the early 20th century.

MR: And it's the sounds of the sea and it's a very tragic opera, everybody dies, you know all the sons go to sea and they drown and everything. I'm drawn to cheerful, don't get this, I mean I am so cheerful, but when you hear the music it's like [gasp]. So mine is written for a chamber group, five strings, a flute, Irish drums, Irish harp, and accordion. And it's fabulous.

[excerpt of **Riders to the Sea** plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt from *Riders to the Sea*, called "Where is she?"-and here is another excerpt, called "The stick Michael brought from Connemara"

[excerpt of **Riders to the Sea** plays]

MR: I tried to write music that sounds kind of Irish and it's very intimate and rather than being a big orchestra.

[excerpt of **Riders to the Sea** plays]

ECB: I asked Marga if she had any advice for those who want to become composers.

MR: If you have to do it, go for it. If you can't help yourself, you know, advice isn't helpful, you just have to write the music that you have to write and then if you can get conformist fine and the rest becomes or it doesn't, but if you are doing it for fame and money, then forget it. If you are doing it because you can't help it, then do it. My son once said to me when I was writing this concerto, the *Landscapes of the Mind* I, he said, "How many measures did you write today?" and I said "four". And he said, "How many did you take out?" and I said, "Too many!". And he said, "Are you writing for fame and money or for the art form?" and I said, "I am writing for fame and money". Then he said, "Then you better write a little faster". Wise guy.

[excerpt of **Riders to the Sea** plays]

ECB: That was excerpt from *Riders to the Sea*, called, "Ah, Nora, isn't it a bitter thing to think of him floating that way?"

Show notes for this episode can be found by going to www.listeningtoladies.com and clicking on the link to this episode. There you'll find more information about Marga, links to things that were mentioned, and full streaming tracks of the music excerpted in this episode.

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