EPISODE #9: Mari Kimura
Listening To Ladies
www.listeningtoladies.com
Original release date: April 30, 2017

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Interviewee: Mari Kimura (**MK**)

ECB: Don't give me a metronome, we could have a metronome the whole time. I forgot to mention that you have to speak to the beat the whole time.

MK: Yeah, rapid. When I was a child....

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

MK: I am a daughter of two academics and my mother is a Japanese law professor. Her area of specialty is women's labor law. My father is an architect. He is a specialist in solar energy, so he built one of the first Japanese solar house, experimental house, which I grew up in.

ECB: So from a very young age, Mari Kimura was literally surrounded by experimentation.

MK: So that was sort of in me and I don't think of experiment as something unusual, that's the norm, because it was a daily thing, he would be taking measurements. So we didn't have oil or gas in the house. In the late 70s during the oil crisis, he got really famous and Japanese TV came to our house and you know, my mother had to wash dishes on the camera.

ECB: Her parents came to the states because they both received Fulbrights and they got married in Boston.

MK: So I'm sort of in a very unusual brand of Japanese. I don't feel fair for me to speak as a Japanese person who came to the states, it's not like that, because I had so much that was given to me from my parents generation.

ECB: And then there was her grandmother.

MK: She was a counselor for battered women before like 1920s, 30s, when women were allowed to divorce in Japan. So they would go into a Buddhist temple for protection, like battered wives, you know, so that was the only way to escape from their husbands. So my mother's mother was counseling these women.

ECB: So what about musical influences in the family?

MK: My mom originally wanted to become a pianist. She won a regional competition and she wanted to go to the best conservatory in Tokyo, but then she would be practicing the piano, and in the next room

there were women crying with her mom. And she thought to herself, well, so she became more socially aware early on. So that's why she went into sociology and law.

ECB: Mari's mother did teach her a little bit of piano when Mari was very young. And then her father got a research position in Ottawa in Canada. And she lived there from age four to age six and a half. And that was where she started learning to play violin.

[excerpt of **Voyage Apollonian** plays]

MK: First I guess my mom, you know made me practice, but they went in the smart way saying, "Oh you can quit any time you want". It's like no! It's like go the other way right. It didn't work for my kids. I said, "You can quit". "Ok I quit."

[excerpt of **Voyage Apollonian** plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt from Voyage Apollonian for augmented violin and interactive computer.

When I asked Mari about role models when she was a child, she immediately mentioned one of her teachers.

MK: You know, he was my everything, like a church, Pope, whatever. And any day that he is really personally angry or not in a good mood, my week was destroyed. I really had a hard time. I mean he was such a gigantic figure for me. His name was Toshiyo Eto and he studied here, he studied with Efrem Zimbalist at Curtis, and he is the one, I think the first Japanese to make a Carnegie Hall debut as a violinist. Eugene Ormandy wanted him to be the concertmaster of the philharmonic of Philadelphia but he said no. And he went back and he became like the don of a Japanese violin school. So he produced a lot a lot of violinists.

ECB: He was not the only teacher she had, there were several, all of whom have passed away.

MK: The last one to go was Roman Totenberg, who died two years ago at 102. He was teaching on the day of his passing or something. Somebody played for him and he said something, “What Mr. Totenberg?” “That D was too low,” I heard he was too ... That's a really nice way to go I think. I'll be like that, I'll be like, “This Moog synthesizer is not working.”

[excerpt of Six **Caprices for Subharmonics** #4 plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt from Caprice #4, from Six Caprices for Solo Violin in Subharmonics. Subharmonics are tones that can be played that fall below the normal range of the instrument. So the excerpt we just listened to, used a subharmonic octave in the double stops, that is, the parts where are there are two notes playing at the same time. Mari has worked for years developing a mastery over these subharmonics. She first presented them publicly at a concert in 1994.

MK: I actually did it already in 1992, but I didn't show it in public until I was very sure to introduce it as a an element of music, rather than just a novelty, because it is a novelty. I'm sure it's been done for 120 years, you know, violin has been around for that long, so but not really incorporated in a piece of work as an actual tool to do something. I mean, people like George Coran and other people have done like a pedal

tone or something like that, but it's never been really written out as a note to get this pitch, that pitch precisely, which I was able to get.

ECB: The New York Times reviewed this concert in glowing terms, calling Mari a virtuoso playing at the edge. And as it turned out, this review actually came in handy in an unexpected way.

MK: A month later from that review, I was performing in a jazz improvisation festival up in Canada, just before I graduated. So I went there for two days and tried to come back in Montreal, and I got stopped by the US immigration, and they said, "Ooh, you are a student at Julliard and you are graduating, do you have your ticket back to Japan?" So I was like, what? At that time I was applying for a Green Card and you are not supposed to exit the country when you are applying for a Green Card, which I forgot, didn't know, ignorant, so they put the big cross on my passport, nope you are not going to come back in.

ECB: So she was stuck at a motel at the airport for a week and she hired a lawyer over the phone.

MK: So my lawyer faxed that review, it had been a few weeks with my picture, and I got paroled. So you are technically interviewing a parolee paroled on humanitarian reasons. I still kept my old passport, humanitarian reasons.

[excerpt of **Six Caprices for Subharmonics #3 plays**]

ECB: That was an excerpt from Caprice #3, from Six Caprices for Solo Violin in Subharmonics, and it featured a subharmonic third.

Mari had stated elsewhere that violin playing in the past was more creative than it is now, and I asked her to explain what she meant by this.

MK: In terms of a violin world since Kreisler, you know, like the 40s on, people stopped composing really that much. Before that it used to be Enestco, everybody, you play, you compose. Sarasate, you know you play, you composer. Paganini, you play, you're composing. You play your own pieces and that was your signature, that's how you were recognized as an artist, as a violinist, as a creator. Then it became more, there's a composer and there's an interpreter who play their piece, and it goes for every list, like Chopin and all that stuff, but there are now a division of labor, but I think it's coming back now that now that people are more creating and I think it's a natural way, I don't know how it became so divided between...if I have a control over anything, if I am writing a conservatory program or something, I'll make it mandatory that the violinist compose. They have to improvise and they have to compose, they have to be able to play scales, to play the classics, but they still have to compose, you know, I would have them invent their own sounds and make a recital program only with your own pieces or something. That would be awesome.

ECB:I asked her to talk a little bit more about improvisation and what it means to her.

MK: It's sort of a way to discover yourself which is really important for composition, because there are lots of different approaches to composition, but my way is to find myself, so it's really important to me that I, and then you know, you do have to do the composition, just to put things together and arranging things, but improvisation is sort of a self discovery process that everybody really should do. I mean Bach, Mozart, everybody improvised really, you can't really do without it.

ECB: Although she's now an avid improviser and composer, that wasn't always the case. She started on this path when she had a conversation with a renowned cognitive scientist.

MK: Oh yeah, Marvin Minsky, yes, I always tell that story because it was just so unexpected and I was hanging in his kitchen, and at that time I was a very, very good violin student in Boston, and I was going to do some chamber music and maybe audition for Boston Symphony and all that stuff. And he suddenly said, "Why, what are you going to do if you lose a hand? You should start composing" and I said, "huh?", what an odd thing to say you know? And then it kind of took away my blinders. Oh so there's a world out there. So that sort of changed everything really. He kind of clipped my blinders off my head and I was suddenly able to look around myself and open me up for everything really. My life changed in the United States, really.

ECB: So, composing had never been suggested to her before?

MK: No, never. But in Japan, I mean, come to think of it, I always had this tendency of doing something else, other than, when I was still in conservatory, I took all the theory classes that only composers take, and I was kind of sitting in there, kind of wondering, and my friends were composers. And funny thing, I had a composer friend who was a mountain climber in Japan and I wanted to go there, but they said, "I'll take you if you play my piece", and I go, "What piece?" And I had to play her piece and then they would take me hiking with them. So I think that got me into a treacherous hike up the mountain, it was really surreal. But that was kind of a bait that I was pulled into playing other people's pieces. And I thought, oh wow, so people write that stuff? So that's how I kind of got introduced to people who compose, I was just violin, violin, violin all my life, so.

ECB: You heard right. It was a woman who was the composer and mountain climber and she wasn't the only one..

MK: They are all girls, all women composers, girl composers. I don’t think there were men even, like four or five girls who were composers, so it didn't occur to me that was, and this was in the 1980s.

ECB: And before that point in time, had she ever learned or performed a piece by a woman?

MK: No, come to think of it, I don't think I learned, I mean aside from my mountain climbing girls, no, there were no established female composer's work that I practice, it's true.

ECB: So going back to Marvin Minsky, I was really curious to know how she met him. And she said it was through her friend Michael Holly, who was one of Minsky's students and who also made quite an impression on her.

MK: He went to Yale in piano and computer and that was like what? That doesn't happen in Japan you know, so I encountered a sort of power of American intellectual who can do everything, you know, it was like a shiny example to me, it was like wow! In this country you can do that? So yes through Mike I met Marvin.

ECB: So after she started composing, how did she then get into working with electronics?

MK: Well it was complete coincidence, because at BU, I went to Boston University where Roman Totenberg taught and I was on a F1 student visa and I had to satisfy a certain credit number and I tested

out of everything and I had nothing else to take, but I had to take something to qualify as a student. So one thing that I didn't know anything about was electronic music, so there was an electronic music studio at BU and I just walked in, and as you said, there were no women, I was the only woman, and everyone was like a communication major, so like journalist majors you know who are doing this kind of recording and stuff like that. The teacher's name was Sam Hendrix, never forget, he was so nice, he was so nice to me, and he just played recording after recording of electronic music that I didn't know existed, like Xenakis, Moog synthesizers, Kurzweil just came out around that time, and you know voltage control, analog synthesizers, lots of cables and tape splicing. And my first piece of work I made for myself was a tape piece, for violin and tape, with a reel to reel tape and I had to splice with a razor blade, I'm not sure you know about this, like a pizzicato is about two feet long. So I had tapes hanging all over the room and made a piece, I still have a reel to reel somewhere.

ECB: During this class, she heard a piece for tape and piano by Mario Davidovsky. It was number six in a twelve part series that would go on to span several decades, called Synchronisms, and it won the 1971 Pulitzer Prize.

MK: Not having the technology we have now, he created sort of interactive things. So you listen to it and you think the electronics is reacting to the piano, but it's actually play along, you know, but the effect was so amazing. Anyways, so the first note goes ding and it continues ding like that, so it's very shocking kind of and I almost fell off the chair. Oh my God! I have to do this, I have to do this with a violin. I have to meet this guy. And that was 1988 or 9 or something and he was in residence at MIT media lab. So I thought, I'm gonna meet him, I'm gonna meet him and I went there and they had a Synchronisms for violin premiere that he was commissioned to make by MIT. So I saw this really tall towering figure and very imposing, and little me thought, oh my God that's him, that's him. I was like a groupie right. And then in the meantime I moved to New York and one thing I knew was that he was at Columbia, so maybe I can get to meet him. So the first year I was just gonna come to New York for a year. I was recruited by Joseph Fuchs, violinists to come here. And I thought, ok, I'm gonna get killed or raped or something. You know it was not a good time in the 80s you know, but I'm just gonna try one year and then go back, go back to Japan or..

ECB: And then she stayed ever since.

MK: And then I had to write a paper, so I said I'm gonna write a paper about Davidovsky so I get to meet him. So basically knocked on his door and I was like, "I'm a big fan, I'm a big fan". So that's how I met him and ended up studying with him for three years, you know, it was amazing.

[excerpt of **Gemini** plays]

ECB: This is a piece for Gemini for solo violin.

[excerpt of **Gemini** plays]

ECB: Mari teaches part time and has chosen not to seek a full time faculty position. She spoke a bit about the balance of work and family life as a woman and she referenced a 2012 article in the Atlantic by Anne-Marie Slaughter entitled "Why Women Can't Have It All".

MK: And it's like that, you have to kind of make a choice. I mean some people do it well, some people do hold full time teaching job, raise children, do it perfectly. But for me, my creative life and my children

and my home and my happiness comes before committee meetings and politicking and networking. So I kind of put the priority on that. But you know, I'm in a very fortunate position where I have a partner who does make a living and it gives my kids health insurance and dental insurance and stuff like that, so there is that.

ECB: Mari has worked extensively with motion sensor technology and live electronics and she's gotten many awards and accolades for this work, including a Guggenheim. She spoke about some of the challenges involved.

MK: Anything to do with electronics or motion sensor, any new technology, I'm basically starting from zero, because for a violin or singing or piano, you know what you have, you have your voice, you have your violin and four strings and everything. I know what the violin is capable of. Technology, you can go to Pluto, you can go to Mars, you know you can go to, I like to think of it as going into a huge shopping mall. I once made a piece called Carrefour, you know the French for shopping mall. So you go in there with a dinner plan, right, so let's say you are going to have a steak, you get the meat, you get the red wine, mushrooms, maybe potatoes and beans, so you know the ingredients, so if you think of electronic music, I'm gonna have this, I'm gonna have a violin, I'm gonna have a delay, I'm gonna have reverb, you just go like that and this, you know what you are gonna use so that's fine. How about if you go in with a little more open scenario, like I'm gonna have a fish tonight, I'm gonna have salmon tonight, and you go there and the fish guy says, "Oh today's catch is tilapia", then salmon with dill sauce goes away, you are not gonna have a dill sauce, you can have, I don't know, butter, you know whatever, garlic, you know chives maybe, right? So ingredients change so that's very much like that. I like to think of it like cooking when I do electronic music, because you kind of have to keep open mind, because you might find a sound that you're absolutely gonna have to make a piece about and then you know, what are you gonna do? I mean all your compositional plan goes out the window and that's fine.

ECB: She's teaching a class at Juilliard right now and in that class....

MK: Some composers have very specific idea, I wanna do this, I wanna do this and I want the electronics to do that, and that's very fine, you will get that, but you won't go beyond that. Other guys come and say, "I want to do this with a drum but I don't know what I am going to do" and then I throw some possibility at him and say, "Oh I like this and I like that, ok so let's do this with that".

ECB: She likens it to life itself. You can't really control it and if you find something good, you have to go with it. And on a related note, she told me a fun story of a time when her computer died on stage after she played the first note of an electronic piece. She rebooted it and it came back and she performed the rest of the concert without any problems, but she talked about how important it is to take care of your audience in moments like those, rather than just take care of yourself.

MK: I think some people who are performers who get really nervous on stage, they don't realize that the audience is as terrified as you are that something would go wrong. So when something do go wrong, it's your responsibility to take care of your audience more than you know panicking for yourself. You don't really have a luxury of panicking, because you have to take care of these people you know, who are as terrified as you are or even more. That's my attitude. It's ok, it's ok! Don't worry, it's gonna be fine!

[excerpt of **JanMaricana** plays]

ECB: This is from a piece called JanMaricana, for solo violin and subharmonics.

[excerpt of **JanMaricana** plays]

ECB: It contains the first ever recorded subharmonic fifth.

[excerpt of **JanMaricana** plays]

ECB: I asked Mari if she had any advice for those who may be considering composition as a career and her answer was pretty familiar.

MK: Go into composing if you really absolutely have to. And if you don't have to, do it on the side, or if you can afford it, your family has money or you have support or something like that, then you can do it, but other than that, it's a hard field. But if you have to do it, you will do it.

[excerpt of **JanMaricana** plays]

ECB: Details for each of the recordings featured in this episode can be found on the show notes page at listeningtoladies.com, just click on the link to the podcast. You'll also find videos, link to the full recordings of the pieces excerpted here, and links to some of the people and things mentioned. You may also find a few surprise extras, a few funny bits that I couldn't fit into the episode as well as some blind contour drawings Mari and I made of each other on the day of the interview, back in December 2015. If you'd like to help me make this podcast, that would be amazing. I have been continuously applying for grants, but have not yet received financial help from any other source except for my Patreon crowdfunding page. So if you feel able to give, it's a subscription donation service and it starts at $1 a month and every dime of that dollar goes towards helping support me to make this podcast, the hours that I need to put in, the equipment, and the travel. So many thanks if you can support me.

I'm Elisabeth Blair. Thank you for listening.