

EPISODE #16: Nicole Murphy

Listening to Ladies

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Original release date: March 22, 2018

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

Interviewee: Nicole Murphy (**NM**)

ECB: This episode is supported in part by the Irving S. Gilmore Foundation, in partnership with 102.1 WMUK, and by the International Alliance for Women in Music. Learn more and explore membership at www.iawm.org

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

[excerpt from **Isa(Movement I)** plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of the first movement of a piece called Isa, by Australian composer Nicole Murphy.

[excerpt from **Isa(Movement I)** plays]

ECB: It was written in the town in Outback Queensland called Mount Isa. It's a mining town and right in the center is an imposing lead smelter with smoke billowing out of it.

NM: And it's a place that I've spent a fair amount of time in the last couple of years doing outback residencies, so working with students in isolated communities who don't have any access to, or have very limited access to, music education.

[excerpt from **Isa(Movement I)** plays]

NM: I mean, I do a lot of travel outside of the town to these sort of remote communities. I mean, the landscape is incredible. It's very flat surfaces, very little plant life and you can drive for hours and hours and hours and not see anything. And so the first movement reflects that kind of very spacious sparse landscape.

[excerpt from **Isa(Movement I)** plays]

ECB: In Mount Isa, there are a few musicians who are really proactive in making sure the community is very musical.

NM: So despite being so isolated, they manage to get amazing artists to come through and work with their community ensembles, which are massively thriving. And so the second movement is a lot more lively as a reflection of this really interesting and vibrant little community within this very vast open landscape.

[excerpt from **Isa(Movement II)** plays]

ECB: For a few years, Nicole worked with the Mount Isa School of the Air. The students of this school are isolated on cattle stations, in places so remote that they could drive for a couple of hours and still not reach their neighbor's house. The school began with lessons being given over the radio or the air, but these days the students phone into the school at certain times and the teachers deliver their lessons over the telephone.

NM: Which is crazy for me, someone who comes from the city, to think that you could do your schooling like that. And once a year, the students all come from their stations to communities nearby, when I say nearby it might be sort of a six hour drive from Isa, and they get them together for a week and they all camp together in tents and they sent an artist out each year to work with them. And basically the idea of the workshops, is for students to be able to experience what it is like as a composer, so for them to actually create something. So depending on the situation, the age of the students, their school level, and their resources, which particularly in remote communities, often students have access to no musical instruments. Well often we create our own. The students in those communities are really, really resourceful, because they live, some of them live like a twelve hour drive from the nearest town, which is a tiny place, and so if something breaks on their property, they have to fix it or find a work around. And so they are really very creative and resourceful in that way. You know, often times these workshops, particularly in the remote communities, could be happening under a tree near a river and so you are grabbing seed pods or leaves or sticks, anything that will make sound, or using their voices or body percussion. But basically the idea is for students to be able to create something, with a scaffolded process obviously, and to be aware enough of the process that they can then replicate it later on. That's something that I'm really, it's very important to me, because I think so often the creative process is this big mystery to people who haven't done it before and I think it's really important for students, particularly in these remote communities to be able to replicate that after the artist has left.

ECB: As for herself, Nicole says that when she was a kid learning piano, she didn't know there was a difference between being a composer and a performer.

NM: As I started playing, I would just write. And I'd sit there and notate the pieces very painstakingly in beautiful handwriting that's much nicer than my handwriting now.

ECB: This would have been when she was about nine or ten.

NM: And I remember one day my mom asking me what I was playing at the piano, because she knew it wasn't part of the repertoire I was learning with my teacher. And eventually I admitted that it was something that I'd written and showed her these scores and she took them to my piano teacher the next lesson and showed her, who photocopied them and handed them out to her students and I was horrified. Because to me it was this personal expression that, I mean, it had never occurred to me that I would be writing music for other people, it was purely just things that I was interested in myself. And so that was the first time that I realized that there was a distinction between performer and composer.

ECB: In high school, she had a very supportive music teacher, who was passionate about contemporary music.

NM: She booked a composer to come and work with us during choir, to workshop one of her pieces, and that was the first time that I realized that composers were living people and that it was possible to do that as a career.

ECB: That composer was a woman, Sarah Hopkins. Growing up, Nicole never really gave it a thought to her gender being an impediment to composing music.

NM: It's kind of unusual in the fact that I never really thought about it until the last few years when the conversation about equality has become more prevalent in Australia and I guess elsewhere as well. If I missed an opportunity or was feeling that kind of self doubt, I always put it down to other things, you know, like not being good enough as a composer, that self doubt that everyone has, rather than my gender. And I suppose that I was just lucky to grow up in a household where I never realized that gender was a barrier to anything that you could do. My parents were just sort of very go get it people and I just never grew up thinking or being conscious of that idea that it might be a barrier in any way. So I think I was really lucky in that regard. I have had times, now when I think back to early experiences, where peers or colleagues or sometimes unfortunately teachers, have said things that now I can see are quite sexist, but at the time I just sort of brushed them off without even realizing.

[excerpt of **Bridge** plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt from a piece called Bridge. It's inspired by a novella called the Kamikaze Mind by Sydney based author, Richard James Allen.

NM: It's an alphabetized list of thoughts I suppose, so it's like a dictionary but each definition is by the writer.

[excerpt of **Bridge** plays]

NM: And I had been playing around for awhile with ideas that were a little uncomfortable, so tension that holds for a few seconds longer than you would expect it to, spaces between phrases or gestures being a little bit longer than are comfortable. And then at the same time I was experimenting with these other ideas, it was sort of the opposite of that very lyrical extended phrases, very flowing kind of continuous gestures, that were more expansive. And I was playing around with how I could work these two ideas together and I started flipping through and came across the definition that the writer has put for the word bridge, and I thought it was so beautiful and it really summarized and captured some of the sounds that I had been experimenting with.

ECB: The definition is "the bridge is a construction of regret, the architecture of longing over a river of melancholy".

[excerpt of **Bridge** plays]

ECB: Hey, Elisabeth here. I want to take thirty seconds and especially thank Patreon subscribers Ashley Seward, Bernie Walasavage, and Gabrielle Pitchford for their generosity and support. If you have extra resources that you would be willing to put toward the production of this podcast, just go to www.patreon.com/listeningtoladies. Subscription donations start at just a dollar a month. If you don't have

extra resources, you can always leave a review on iTunes and mention the podcast to friends, colleagues, students, and teachers. Ok, back to the episode.

Nicole says that she often bases her work off of specific texts, but doesn't necessarily always inform the audience of that in the program, because she likes to foster a more open interpretation.

NM: And that's what really excites me about music is the language, you know, it can't tell a narrative so much in the way that ballet can, or a story in the way that literature can, or visual arts can have symbols or text involved in them. You know, music has that sense of ambiguity and a little bit of secrecy that I really enjoy as a composer. And I think I enjoy it as an audience member as well, because I'm allowed to interpret things based on my past experiences, so I think it's a really fun language to play in, in that regard.

ECB: I asked Nicole what the relationship is for her, between her audience and her composition process.

NM: So I guess when I sit down to write, I am trying to communicate something to the audience, but the audience aren't in my concern really. There's a terrific Australian composer and writer, Andrea Ford, who talks about this idea of composing being a sort of selfish endeavor where you write the music that you want to hear and then you hope that other people like it as well. And I think it's a really freeing thought to think, "well this is my personal expression and hopefully people can relate to it and hopefully they enjoy, but primarily I have to write the music that I want to write and that I want hear". There is one little audience that I do keep almost at the forefront of my mind when I am writing, and that's the performers, because they are obviously your audience in the fact that they're witnessing the pieces they are performing. And in the last five or six years, I've been really concerned with writing music or wanting to write music that is very idiomatic for the instruments that I am writing for, that fits well under the hand, that feels comfortable to play, because I know myself that that's what I really enjoy. I mean, you want the right level of something that you have to work towards that's a little bit of a challenge, you know, but the reward is enough to make the challenge worth it. And so that is something that I've been really trying to do, trying to work with each instrument's natural tendencies and capabilities when I am writing, because the performers are the ones, we are completely dependent on the composers, they are bringing your ideas to life, they're your partners in crime in communicating what you are trying to communicate to the audience. And so for them to feel comfortable and to be enjoying playing it is really important to me.

[excerpt of **Stolen(Movement VI)** plays]

ECB: You are listening to an excerpt of the sixth movement of *Stolen*, a 45 minute chamber piece. It came into being after a different piece of hers featuring guitar was performed at Norfolk Chamber Music Festival.

NM: And after the piece premiered and I was leaving the festival, the guitarist there, Solomon Silber, said to me, "Oh we must talk about another project".

[excerpt of **Stolen(Movement VI)** plays]

NM: And so when he called me a week later, I was expecting, "Can you write me a five minute solo guitar piece", which would have been wonderful, but in typical Solomon style he phoned and said, "So I'm thinking about a 45 minute electric guitar concerto with chamber ensemble".

[excerpt of **Stolen(Movement VI)** plays]

NM: So of course I was delighted and definitely on board straight away.

[excerpt of **Stolen(Movement VI)** plays]

ECB: Nicole has been able to work all over the world and I asked her how her experiences have varied from country to country.

NM: One thing I've noticed working in a whole lot of different places, is that there is very little difference between any of the new music communities. And in fact, what's lovely about the new music community globally, is that it is such a small community. I was doing a project in Toronto last month, and within the first two days of being there, I had run into three people that I knew from various parts of the world that I wasn't expecting to see, at concerts and at the music center there. So it was a really lovely reminder that it really is such a small community. And the joke is in Australia and overseas, is that whenever anyone meets they go, "Oh I know this person from Australia, you know so and so". It's kind of the standard joke, because we are a small country population wise, but we are not that small. But the funny thing is, in the new music world is if someone asks you, "Oh do you know this musician or composer from Australia", then chances are you do know them very well, because it is a very small community.

ECB: She also works with others, like choreographers and writers.

NM: Collaboration to me is something that really feeds my creative practice, it often forces you to go in directions you wouldn't have considered otherwise, which is always a wonderful thing because you find things well beyond your own expectations that then have for me become really important parts of my compositional language and things that I have gone on to explore further.

[excerpt of **Water Mirrors** plays]

NM: I suppose my advice for young women entering the field would probably be the same as that for young me, you know just listen as much as you can, develop good work habits, and stick to them. Treat composing like a job, be obsessive about it during the work hours and try to release it somewhat during the other hours, not that I am so good at taking that advice, but I think, like I said, up until recently I have been fairly oblivious to the notion of the female composer, and maybe that would be my footnote of advice to females entering the field, would be to try and be as oblivious as you can and never let it stop you from applying for something, never let your gender get in the way. I think I was really lucky, very fortunate to not have that idea in my head.

[excerpt of **Water Mirrors** plays]

NM: Because there are so many things that you have doubts about when you are creating. It's part of the process to continually question what you are doing. And so I think, you know, one less doubt is a really good thing to have.

[excerpt of **Water Mirrors** plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt of Water Mirrors. To find out more about Nicole 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

And as ever, thank you for listening.