

EPISODE #23: Reena Esmail

Listening to Ladies

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

[excerpt of *I Rise* plays]

ECB: That was the 2nd movement of a five-movement piece called *I Rise*, by composer Reena Esmail. For this piece, she set five texts written by women.

RE: Two by Maya Angelou, one by Emily Dickinson, one by Eleanor Roosevelt, and then one by a poet, like a modern poet, Arlene Geller. And in each of these texts, I really tried to address, you know, what is kind of the entirety of a woman's experience and, you know, what does that personally mean to me? The conductor was an amazing woman named Sun Min Lee, she teaches at Lehigh University and she's just a force of nature and she was the one that really pioneered this project and put it together and it was truly because of working with her that I wanted to engage so deeply in the project. There was also this choir of probably upwards of two hundred women of all ages, so people from, you know, 18 to 90 years old were in this choir singing these lines and I think just watching them over the course of this week put this piece together was so amazing, because, you know, there are these lines, especially in the Maya Angelou text, starts with, "you may write me down in history with your bitter twisted lies, you may tread me in the very dirt, but still, like dust, I rise." And when the women began to say that, you know, they started just trying to get the diction right and trying to make sure that the notes were right and you could see that by the end, everyone was really trying to understand what that phrase meant to them and to watch their faces and watch the faces of 18-year-olds, of 30-year-olds, of 50-year-olds, of 90-year-olds, people who had been through history at different times, and people who had very different relationships to those words, it really just, as the person sitting in the audience watching, it was truly, truly amazing.

ECB: The piece was premiered a few days before the 2016 presidential election.

RE: This piece was being premiered kind of on the eve of when we thought that a very different outcome was going to happen and in a way, it was so heartbreaking to get the recording of this piece back, just I could hear in people's voices that they felt that some change was really coming. I mean, looking at it, probably exactly a year later, I've realized, you know, there has been a lot of change and it's not necessarily been because of things, it's been in spite of things, but you know, I think we've all really taken matters into our own hands and a lot of wonderful things are happening.

ECB: As you may have noticed, this interview took place about a year ago.

Reena's parents are both Indian but grew up in the diaspora-her father in Pakistan and her mother in Kenya. They met in the US. Although neither was involved in music, they both loved western classical

music, and as Reena got more and more involved in music, and particularly piano, they were very encouraging.

RE: But it always felt like it was my thing, like I was never forced to practice. Actually, I had a practice curfew, like my father would kick me off the piano at eleven at night every night, so, it was the opposite.

ECB: However, she suffered from terrible stage fright whenever she performed,

RE: And so they were a little concerned, because they thought, well maybe she won't be happy, because she is so terrified every time she gets up onto the stage, how is this gonna be her career, you know?

ECB: When she ultimately switched her focus to composition, her parents felt like it was a great fit, and were super supportive and they remain so. But that switch did not come out of nowhere... she had been composing pretty much all of her life.

RE: I so wish I could find this, but I had this little keyboard and I would make up these compositions and I would tape them and I don't know where these tapes are anymore, but there was just tons and tons of tapes of just little pieces that I made up that were very textural and I would be interested to see what my first compositional ideas were.

ECB: Reena's father is Muslim and her mother is Catholic. She was raised Catholic but also grew up going to Muslim events and being involved in that community. And she remembers even before she got her keyboard and was recording those little songs, she was writing music of a different kind.

RE: When I was very young, I thought that every person had their own personal religion, because my parents each had their religion, so I mean, I thought I have to just find my own religion, which is in a way maybe true on a very broad level, but I remember trying to create my own little religion and to create little songs that were like hymns that went along with that religion and I think that was when I was like four or five and that was maybe the first time you could say I really composed, because I realized like the value of music as part of like a spiritual practice.

ECB: As a preteen and teen, she really pushed her piano career, but then she had a theory teacher who saw her aptitude for composing, and encouraged her to sign up for a composition class there at the high school.

RE: And the composition teacher there, I think immediately saw, you know, he sat me down and said, "Look, you know, I know you are just doing this for fun, but you could really be a professional composer." It was the first time I had ever heard it, so there was a part of me that was like, ah thanks, but no thanks, I am very into being a pianist. But he said, "You know what, why don't you just put in applications at schools, you know, why don't you just see?" So I said "Ok, I am already applying for piano for everything, why don't I just also apply for composition, who's it gonna hurt?" And I started getting calls for composition way before I started getting calls for piano and I started seeing that my work had some resonance that I had never experienced with piano before. And once I started seeing that, you know, and I mean basically after having just really been writing music seriously for a year, I was actually accepted as a freshman at Julliard and that was, I mean, I still look back at that as this moment where I just don't know how on earth I got to that place that fast, but that was kind of a turning point in my life where I said, "Ok, well if Juilliard wants me to come and study there, then this must be something," and it was, it was.

[excerpt of *The Love Between Us* plays]

ECB: This piece, *This Love Between Us*, it was an oratorio commissioned by the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. Written during the months just before and just after the 2016 US Presidential election, Reena felt drawn to emphasize religious unity. It was performed by Yale Schola Cantorum (Yale's Choir) and Juilliard's Baroque orchestra, Juilliard 415.

RE: And these two groups were gonna go on tour to India, so they had a sitar and a tabla player, who were from India who came for the US part of the tour and then we all went over there for the India part of the tour. So each piece is one major Indian religion and I went through the canonical texts of those religion and really tried to see where they talk about unity and where they talked about, you know, being good to one another and I mean I guess the kind of unspoken thesis statement of the piece is, "If you are any one of these religions and if you are not treating people with care and respect, it's not based on the dictate of your religion, that's really on you, your religion mandates that you treat people with respect and care."

[excerpt of *The Love Between Us* plays]

RE: It's a really important piece for me on that philosophical level, but then on the practical level, it allowed me to bring Indian and Western musicians together and kind of engineer these spaces where they were really comfortable with one another. And one of my favorite stories at the end of this oratorio, at the end of this very long tour, you know, obviously we all got to know each other very well, and there was a timpani player who was playing as part of this piece and at the very end the tabla player, the tabla is like an Indian drum, and the tabla player gave the timpani player his tablas and said, "You know, I am giving these to you as a gift and like I hope, you know, you'll eventually learn to play the tabla," and it was this beautiful exchange that had taken place because they had played together in my piece and to me that's what I hope will happen. I'm not a musical purist in the sense that I believe that everything is gonna happen just in the context of the notes and rhythm, I believe in bringing different people to the table and letting them have a chance to interact with each other in a way that really values each of their traditions and allows them to show the best sides of themselves to one another and then to establish a relationship from there. And so, when I see things like that, I think, this is why I am a musician, I am a musician to create this kind of resonance in whatever way I can in the world.

[excerpt of *The Love Between Us* plays]

ECB: I asked her about her experiences of sexism in the field.

RE: What's interesting is that sexism has gotten so much more subtle than it used to be and there are definitely like remarks that some people in the field, composers, et cetera, would make to me, but you know, every woman I am sure has experienced this where there were men who maybe wanted to be close to me or whatever, just because I had long hair. Someone once told me, they were like, "Well you know, it really doesn't matter what you compose, why don't you just marry someone rich and then you can write whatever you want." You know, these are just comments that were made to me and of course I just want to be so intentional about saying, you know, the culture was different at that time and I'm now starting to see that many of the men who have said things like this are also becoming very self aware that like they said things that, you know, a culture kind of told them it was ok to say and they're regretting it now and I mean I really believe in offering everyone a pathway back and back into the community and back into harmony with each other. So I certainly don't wanna be in a situation where I am just calling out people and saying, "these people are completely morally reprehensible." I think there's a way to heal our society and it's not by doing that.

ECB: At the same time, she pointed out that when she got her doctorate from Yale, it was difficult going through the history of Western Music for her oral examinations.

RE: That is a history that up until, I would say, I don't know, 30 or 40 years ago, would have definitely excluded me. Like if I had been born that much earlier than I was, like I really don't know that I would have been able to even do what I am doing now and I became aware of that. You know, every single page of history I would read, I would just think, gosh, there was no place for me, I don't see anyone who looks like me, you know, it's very hard for me to do that. And I think sometimes people who are not in that position really underestimate that. So, there are these kind of benedictions that are issued, like Haydn said to Mozart's father, "You'll be the next great thing," and then Schumann wrote these things about Berlioz and about Chopin. And so from male to male, these benedictions are issued like, you will be the next great person in the line of me, right. I just can't help but think, I mean, people like Fanny Mendelssohn, people like Clara Schumann, these are people who are literally standing by the side of an amazing composer and must have heard these benedictions issued onto their husbands or their partners or you know, in the case of Mozart, their brothers and they were just sidelined. And I am saying that that exact same thing happens today. I've many times been sitting right next to a man and some amazing composer will look at us both and just be talking to the man about they will be great and I am like completely invisible. And so, I think we just need to be aware of things like that, because that is how sexism seems to manifest itself, in a way that seems innocuous, but is very, very damaging to women.

ECB: Later in our conversation, she went on to point out an important way we might reframe one of the prevailing ways we often think about the process of encouraging women and minorities.

RE: We say so often that we want people who are minorities or women or people who are just in some kind of minority position, we want to see representatives of those minorities in high places because then it proves to us that being in those high places is possible, like we want to see women of color who are composers at the highest level because then young women feel that that's possible. And I just want to kind of add in an addendum to that, and instead it's not that an eighteen year old woman feels that she can't compose, there's no kid who's like, "Oh, because of my skin color, I am less talented than someone else", that would never occur to us and if it does, it's only because that idea has been put into our head by who knows what, but what it is is that young women, young people of color are looking to the world to say, "Ok, however good I am, is the world really gonna accept me, I mean I could be amazing and no one would care, right?" And so when we start seeing people in the media, in our field, who are really successful at that thing, it tells us that the world is ready for us, not that we are capable of it, but that the world is ready for us.

[excerpt of *String Quartet* plays]

ECB: This piece is called, simply, *String Quartet*.

[excerpt of *String Quartet* plays]

ECB: She told me a story about this piece's west coast premiere, at a women's prison, as part of her first performance with an organization called Street Symphony.

RE: I really was not confident about singing, so what I would do is sometimes just sing a few phrases of one of my pieces before people would perform it. So when we went into this women's jail, I sang a couple phrases and then people performed the piece and then we had a little Q and A. And in the Q and A, one of the women who was in the jail, asked me, she was like, "Will you sing more for us? Like we would love to hear you sing." And at that point, I am a professional musician and I thought, oh my gosh, I can't open my mouth, I am not prepared, I haven't practiced, whatever. But the women were so intent on hearing me sing, that I thought, ok, whatever, I'll just sing something. And the moment I started to sing, they started to kind of like clap along with me and really deeply support me, because they so wanted to hear me sing

and that moment really changed me, because I thought, it's not about me being perfect, it's not about having all the answers, it's not about me identifying as an Indian singer or not, it's just about using my voice in a way that makes people happy and that allows me to engage with people.

[excerpt of *String Quartet* plays]

ECB: I found her active engagement with people outside the music community to be remarkable, and I asked her to talk more about that.

RE: It's so important for us to not only be performing for just other professional musicians, because it gives us a very warped sense of what we do. I always love being like the one musician among non musicians and you know, really engaging musically with people who don't have a music education, because ultimately that's what we're going for, we want to engage a larger public and it gives me such a sense, you know, when I'm engaging, and especially when I'm engaging with people who are either experiencing homelessness or incarceration, because these are people who so, music isn't just like they're going to have a little bit of entertainment, music is like their lifeline, it's their way of expression and you learn so much about how to engage in a very different way with people who truly rely on music for their sustenance.

ECB: Reena is a mentor in a program called Luna Composition Lab, which was begun by Missy Mazzoli and Ellen Reid, and which seeks to encourage girls and young women to compose.

RE: It was born out of this need that we've all felt as women composers, that we don't really have women mentors, we don't have a lot of mentors to choose from.

ECB: She says that in her life she's studied with 7 composition teachers, and that only one was a woman. That one was Susan Botti.

RE: And it was a really different experience studying with Susan versus studying with anyone I had up until that point. Not only, I mean, yes because she was a woman, but also just because in many ways she understood parts of me that no one had understood before. And because I think, I always felt that when I went into her studio and when I engaged with her, she was so so so happy to have me there and I had never felt that before, like I had never felt that a teacher was just so excited to see me or so deeply wanted to know what I was gonna write or cared for me just so much.

ECB: She studied with Susan when she was in her mid 20s and experiencing significant self-doubt about her career path.

RE: And I mean, she didn't realize it, but I went to her almost as a last-ditch effort to say, "Ok, if Susan can't see anything in me, I need to give up." And Susan turned my life around, I mean, she really did. I would not be a composer today, if I had not studied with Susan.

ECB: And they maintain a close relationship to this day.

RE: So I mean, what would have happened if I had had Susan when I was thirteen years old? Like how would that have changed my life, to be able to engage with a really amazingly successful professional woman composer who cared so much for me. And I think, Missy and Ellen were asking those same questions. I think, I mean, all of us who are women composers who are working professionally, we really ask that question. And so we created Luna Lab as a way to address that issue.

ECB: In addition to mentoring and teaching, she's also invested time in online outreach.

RE: So kind of in light of my care about trying to find a way to bring in people who I feel need to be brought into composition, I just got this DMA from Yale and it really made me think so much about where are the points where young women and young people of color are getting dissuaded from being composers. And I think it's actually like much further before the time when they would decide to go to college, you know. Sometimes it's when they are very young and so I was really trying to think, what can I do to actually broaden our field and include some of these voices that are getting lost right at the beginning?

ECB: She pointed out that there are many podcasts and video series that focus on interview with composers or on practical career advice...

RE: But I really wanted this to be about me just kind of sitting in my studio and saying these are the things that are really difficult for me and these are the, just you know, in whatever way, like this is how I kind of begin to deal with them. So that video log is called Resonant Space.

ECB: She began the series after a young vocalist in India reached out to her after seeing her in an interview in the press there.

RE: She came to me and she said this thing where she was like, "Oh my gosh, I watched this interview of you and I just felt like, oh my gosh, like one day I can do those things, but then I had a second thought that, of course Reena is doing these things because she is Reena, like of course she is great, I mean just because she's doing it doesn't mean that I can do it." And I just thought, oh my gosh, she thinks that there's this magical line where you cross over to the other side and it's like the milk and honey, right, and she thinks that I am on that side of the line. And so I suddenly realized that you know, because we are musicians, especially because we have these bios that are just lists and lists of all the successes we've ever had, I mean, believe me, if everyone had to write their failure bios, it would be so much longer than their success bios, and so when I saw the image that I was presenting through these interviews, it was making me feel like, you know, I was actually dissuading the very people I wanted to help by appearing, you know, only sharing these very perfect, like everything that had worked out in my life, so this is kind of a counterpoint to that, just talking about the things that are really difficult, in hopes that people will identify with that and see those things as part of the creative process.

ECB: I asked Reena if she had any particular advice to share.

RE: One thing that I think is so important, is you know, so many people tell you that you should be prepared to fail, you know, you should get good at accepting rejection, and you should get good at just accepting that everything that you do is not gonna go right and whatever, and to me like I think there's a counterpoint to that, because if you're in the arts, you're gonna get very good at failing very fast, because that is a lot of what happens, you know, it's not like you need to practice failing, that's gonna happen in your life. But I think the thing is that you have to be prepared to ultimately have wild success, just be prepared to be extremely successful. Because a lot of times, success is, what it looks like is not one clear upward trajectory. It's like years and years and years of just trying to see if anything can happen and then all of a sudden, there's this one thing that completely will shift your career around. Believe me, if you had said to me five years ago, you are going to be a composer who's primarily just writing from commission to commission and you will be booked for the next two years for commissions, I mean, that would have just seemed completely preposterous to me. And yet, that is my life now. I think if someone had told me at that point, this is gonna be your life, I would have really gotten certain things together. You know, I would have tried to make sure that all of my tax rights were worked out, I would have made sure that my website was always updated, and do all these things on the backend, you know, made the relationships with the people that I really wanted to pursue and make relationships with, so that you know, when things

started going well for all of us, I would be ready to like, you know, work on those projects with them. And so, I feel a lot of what I am doing right now is trying to kind of like back pedal and deal with all the things that I didn't deal with, because I was living under the assumption that I would never actually be successful. And I think this really applies a lot to women, especially women of color, because we don't see a lot of people who are successful in our field who are really doing that and making that happen, so we just figure, well ok, well we're in it because we love music and we want to write some music, but you know, we're not expecting much. And what I would say, is just, I think there's a self fulfilling prophecy to feeling like, ok, if I just knew in ten years I was going to be wildly successful, how would I live my life? I think that's really a great thing and then also practically, it works out well.

[excerpt of *I Rise*, movement V plays]

ECB: That was the ending of the fifth movement of *I Rise*.

To find out more about Reena, 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.

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