

**EPISODE #19: Sakari Dixon Vanderveer**

Listening to Ladies

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

[excerpt of **El príncipe sombrío y los recuerdos de su niñez** plays]

This is an excerpt of a piece called El príncipe sombrío y los recuerdos de su niñez by composer Sakari Dixon Vanderveer.

She wrote it for herself to perform.

**SDV:** I was thinking of a prince, it's someone who has kind of a disillusion kind of perspective of what's going on. He kind of thinks back to his childhood and he grew up in a more humbler state and so there's a part in the middle where it has kind of a little bit of a pastoral feel.

[excerpt of **El príncipe sombrío y los recuerdos de su niñez** plays]

**SDV:** When I was in fourth grade, I started the violin.

**ECB:** A few years before that, she had heard children playing violin in an orchestra at school and it had struck her as something she would like to do.

**SDV:** But at the time, I definitely didn't think of it as a career option. The funny thing was, when I started violin, my dad actually wanted me to play saxophone, because he was really into jazz and that was kind of where he was.

**ECB:** It was middle school when she really started getting into composing and thinking about it as a possible career.

**SDV:** And I had a lot of support from teachers.

**ECB:** She wrote a lot of violin duets.

**SDV:** My friend Maynard and I used to play together often and so I'd write something for us to play together. I think we actually did perform at a few school concerts.

**ECB:** So how did she jump from playing violin to composing? She credits her fifth grade teacher for introducing her to the idea.

**SVD:** It was a little assignment where she just gave us some staff paper and was like, "You can put notes down" and there was not really any restrictions or anything. We did it in class as well, we were doing it on a wipe board where one student picked a note and another one picked the next, and that was my first introduction. When I got to middle school, in sixth grade, we teamed up with the visual arts program and we paired up students from orchestra with a couple students from visual arts class. And as a group of 4, we got together and we made a painting. I don't remember what my group did that first year, but we made a painting and then we put together a composition to go with it. And I did that for a few years and that was really when I started thinking, oh, I could do this too.

**ECB:** She also had access to great software.

**SVD:** At the time I was in the afterschool program, and we had a period of time to do homework and after that we were pretty much free. And so staying after school for like two and a half to three extra hours, I had plenty of time to sit in the library and mess around, I think at the time it was Finale Allegra, so just playing with notes on the page and getting into music like that. That's where I wrote most of my duets.

**ECB:** And although she wasn't taking any composition lessons, she had plenty of music teachers who were willing to take extra time to give her feedback.

**SVD:** I would take my compositions to, you know, my orchestra teacher or the guy I was taking violin lessons from. I didn't actually start doing private lessons until I think it was sophomore year in high school, so pretty late. So I just took compositions to whichever teacher would look at them really and get feedback here and there, so that was pretty helpful.

**ECB:** When Sakari went to college, she majored in composition.

**SVD:** One thing I liked about the music department at the University of Redlands was, at least to me, it felt more diverse than the rest of the campus in a way and in our composition studio specifically, we actually had quite a few women at the time I was there. I think it was maybe 30-50% girls at one point in our class.

**ECB:** In addition to composition, she also still pursued performance. By now she was playing viola rather than violin. And her viola teacher introduced her to the works of early twentieth century composer Rebecca Clarke. She also attended a summer composition program where she studied with composer Kristin Kuster.

**SVD:** She just has an amazing personality and I think one of the things that stuck with me the most from her is how much she encouraged us to be confident in, you have good ideas, just own them. And even if you decide that something doesn't belong in a piece, you don't have to feel degraded about it.

**ECB:** When Sakari composes, she is very drawn to storytelling, or creating a narrative with the music.

**SVD:** Or at least an image, as you might be able to tell from my titles, often there is some image there. It's not always a program in the sense of, you know, this happens, then that, then that. But it might be like snippets of a story or just a moment in time that kind of thing. I probably won't write something called Symphony No. 2, I can't really picture it coming from me. I guess part of the reason why I like to associate stories or images with my work is because, not only do that naturally, but I do think it helps audiences. I like to perform and have my music played for children or people in the community who might not necessarily be drawn to contemporary music. I think that it's helpful to have some image that they can kind of hold onto, even if you are not explaining every detail.

[excerpt of **Bailando en la sombra de locura** plays]

**SVD:** I guess in my mind, the image that I get is of a child dancing and no one's watching and they are just kind of in their own world.

**ECB:** The title of this piece, *Bailando en la sombra de locura*, translates...

**SVD:** ...loosely to like dancing in the shadows of madness, or kind of in their own world imagining something going on.

[excerpt of **Bailando en la sombra de locura** plays]

**ECB:** Sakari offers private lessons to students.

**SVD:** One of the reasons why I teach is because I feel like it's one of the ways that I continue to learn and I like that saying "to teach is to learn twice", because I definitely learn new things from my students as well and just new ways of looking at things.

**ECB:** Even when she is just teaching viola or violin, she doesn't limit it to that.

**SVD:** Sometimes I try to slip in little composition activities here and there. For example, if they are a beginner, usually they learn what happens through the notes of a D Major scale and so I'll tell them, "Oh, let's see if you can come up with a melody on the notes that you know".

**ECB:** For one project, Sakari wrote a piece called...

**SVD:** *Silken Brass/Scruffing Feathers*

**ECB:** She wrote it for a tone poem contest put on by a film festival. She wrote the piece and then it was handed to a filmmaker who made a short film based on the music. Her piece was called *Silken Brass*, but film maker's film was called *Scruffing Feathers*.

**SVD:** In my mind, I was kind of thinking of this like a discovery of some sort. It was interesting, the film I got back, the guy had taken a film of doves, if I remember correctly, and it was kind of this mysterious kind of dark nighttime setting and he had kind of set it to their movements, which is interesting, because watching the video, it almost seems like they are dancing to it. So it was kind of an interesting, you know,

to see what's in my mind versus what's in someone else's mind. It was kind of fun to put it together that way.

[excerpt of **Silk Brass/Scruffing Feathers** plays]

**ECB:** You can find a link to the video on the show notes page for this episode.

Sakari read an article called Ageism in Composer Opportunities by Bill Doerrfeld. It's about the problem composers begin to face in their 30s. Many opportunities actually explicitly state that composers older than a certain age - usually 30 but sometimes 35 or 40 - are not eligible to apply.

**SVD:** And it was super spontaneous, I was literally reading the article at work like on a ten minute break or something and I'm like, you know, I'm gonna do something about this. And so I just, on my blog, I'm like, ok, send me your pieces.

**ECB:** So she put up a call for scores for composers over age 40.

**SVD:** There wasn't much planning going into it at the time. It was just like, I wanna see people's pieces and then we will work with it from there. I think the coolest part of doing that call for scores was the discussion that came from it. Quite a few people commented on my blog, many were happy about it, a few weren't because, they were like this is still ageism, which I guess technically it is. But I do think it's important to provide opportunities for when you see underrepresented groups, if not a lot of people are doing anything about it, it's perfectly ok to have a CD of women composers or something like that. I don't think there is anything wrong with that. And I think that the discussion was probably the most beneficial. I'm obviously not against composers who are younger and I had to reiterate that. I'm like, I don't even qualify for my own call for scores.

I guess, you know, being a composer who still looks at other opportunities to enter, I think the part that irritates me the most is one, thinking like oh my gosh, I need to enter because I am running out of time, even though I am really young. And two, I mean I can kind of see why sometimes people might want to narrow it down to maybe like a geographical region or something like that, that doesn't bother me so much, but a lot of times you will see opportunities out there and they'll put, "oh I want someone who's in college plus they have to be under 25". And it's like, why do you need to do both. For the most part, if they are in undergrad they are going to be a certain age group anyway, but even if they are not, if they are 40 and just came back to school to learn to compose, I think they should still have the same opportunities. So that's what I'm still seeing and I wish that would change quite a bit.

**ECB:** She ended up receiving about 90 scores, from which she chose three to perform at future recitals.

**SVD:** It was disappointing to see how few were women and I think part of that might be reflective of, you know, so many generations of people being discouraged from doing music. Out of all of the submissions, I think less than five were female, so I was actually shocked. I didn't expect it to be that bad.

**ECB:** On the subject of how to diversify the classical music world as a whole, she has some ideas.

**SVD:** I feel like if organizations give new music a chance more, they will automatically have more diversity. Because, you know, we have the canon of classical composers, however that formed, and if people are steady choosing, not that it's not good music of course, I love it too, but if people always choosing music from dead weight composers, then they won't continue to reinforce that issue. But I think if orchestras and other performing organizations continue to, you know, maybe feature a contemporary piece on every concert or something, I think a lot of that will slowly fade away, or at least hopefully.

[excerpt of **feRaL** plays]

**ECB:** This is a piece called feRaL.

[excerpt of **feRaL** plays]

**ECB:** It has an intriguing origin story.

**SVD:** I had put a poster in the music department. And it was literally like a wanted sign with kind of a shadow or silhouette and I was basically just saying, you know, I want any performers interested in new music because I wanted to write something for, and not just for my senior recital, but also someone who was willing to carry the music on.

**ECB:** The first person to respond to her ad was Kelsey Broersma.

**SVD:** She's a saxophonist who also lives in this area and she went to the University of Redlands as well.

[excerpt of **feRaL** plays]

**SVD:** I just had in my mind, like the image of some, you know, like half wild animal and for some reason I kind of associated it that with the saxophone because it's a super common instrument, but if you were to put it in an orchestra, it doesn't really fit in. And even when you put it in with other band instruments, it's just something that stands out all the time and it can make all these, you know, weird sounds and things like that. So that's what I ran with.

[excerpt of **feRaL** plays]

**ECB:** So Sakari's advice...

**SVD:** What I would say is don't be afraid to identify as a musician or identify as a composer. I think that's one of the things that I struggled with, even in just the few years that I've been out of school. You know, someone asks you what you do and the first thing you say is your day job. And that starts to kind of get to you psychologically, because you are like, ah, I'm not good enough, I'm not a real composer. And I think that the more we say, "oh you know what, I'm a musician, I compose, or I perform", then other people will kind of come out as well and say, "Oh I also do those things". Or like, "what are you doing, can I come to your concerts or can we play together", or something like that. I think that would definitely help, because there are women out there, there's people of color out there performing and composing, they are there. I just think we kind of keep hiding, so to speak. I think part of it has to do with, you know, if you go to a concert and you see the list of who's being performed or who's performing, or like I said when we were

talking about the opportunities, you know, you see who's won, and they all kind of fall into a certain category and you start to sense or reinforce that lack of confidence that maybe I could be there. And so, for me when I go around the community or I go to a concert and meet other people and they say, "This is what I do", then it's like, oh cool, maybe I could do that too, or maybe I wanna see more of what you are doing or maybe, you know, can get involved. So I think there's a lot of that. People don't see themselves reflected, so they're not identifying.

[excerpt of **feRal** plays]

**ECB:** To find out more about Sakari or anything mentioned in this episode or to listen to full streaming tracks of the music excerpted here, just visit the show notes page at [www.listeningtoladies.com](http://www.listeningtoladies.com). While you are at the website, you can click on the help tab and check out all the ways that you can help me make this podcast. Some of them are monetary, some of them aren't. Check it out. As ever, thank you for listening.