

EPISODE #8: Whitney George

Listening To Ladies

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

Interviewee: Whitney George (**WG**)

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

WG: I always knew I was gonna be in New York, just based on how much black I wore at age 16.

ECB: This is Whitney George, a composer and conductor based in New York City.

WG: So my fascination with the macabre, I mean, true love is awesome, but true love is even better when someone dies at the end of it, right? It's all about the juxtaposition. So I think more than being interested in just all the dark subjects, it's more about juxtaposing issues against one another, which is one reason that....

ECB: She cited as an example the films of Frans Zwartjes, who was born in the Netherlands in 1927.

WG: First off, it's all in black and white, high contrast film, all of the textures tend to be really distinct from one another. There always about opposites, compelling and like repulsing one another, and always like these forces that need to be shown together but also need to be separated from one another.

[excerpt of **Seats Two** plays]

ECB: You're listening to the music she wrote to accompany Zwartjes' 1970 film Seats Two. It features solo piano and electronics.

[excerpt of **Seats Two** plays]

WG: I think there's a lot of sounds in the urban environment that are really, really quite interesting.

[excerpt of **Seats Two** plays]

WG: When I first arrived in New York, I don't think I would do this now, I would joy ride the subway from point A to point B, with a field recorder and headphones, just listen, just listen.

[excerpt of **Seats Two** plays]

ECB: She sees these everyday sounds as a kind of collective memory.

WG: Where there's like bits and pieces of an untold story that kind of acts as a continuo against what we are necessarily watching, so it gives it a little bit more of a context of being real and surreal at the same time, like you recognize these sounds, but all of the sudden they are like morphed into something else or

pushed into something else, or it takes a second to like, I've heard that sound before, where have I heard that sounds before, Oh this is where it is and then once you've made all those associations, like you are sort of entering the piece in a different kind of way.

[excerpt of **Seats Two** plays]

WG: I think that's important, providing enough entry portals to understanding the art as possible.

[excerpt of **Seats Two** plays]

WG: I would say, my entry into music specifically came after my entry into visual arts, like drawing, coloring, big huge outlets for me.

ECB: Then one day when she was in the 4th grade, the middle school music director came to her school and introduced the students to different instruments.

WG: When the flute got picked, I was like, oh it's so beautiful, everyone looks so elegant playing it...

ECB: So she started playing flute and that eventually turned into oboe.

WG: So in terms of the support that I had, I was often sadly told to stop practicing when I was little. Probably because I was, in all fairness, super annoying. I would play the second I got home from school, I would just pick up the flute and just play and play and play and play, and not necessarily even anything that sounded good, I was just interested in making sound.

ECB: Before the flute, she had tried tap dancing, which had been similarly received by her parents.

WG: There wasn't a whole lot of interest, I think, from my parents, which ended up being fine for me, because it was something that was really for me and it ended up being so much more for me as I ended up being a composer.

ECB: Which she became when she was still in high school.

WG: So age 16, we were offered a music theory class, we had an assignment where we were asked to write a fugue, which that is a terrible first assignment to ever give someone, oh just do this seventeenth century counterpoint exercise, it'll be totally easy, very difficult. I failed miserably at it and I would stay after school working on this project, not really being happy with my results. And eventually we turned in the project and I still wasn't happy with the project, so I did the project again. And I wasn't happy with those results, so I did the project a third time. And then I was like, you know what, maybe there are other things aside from fugues that I could do, so I did a theme and variation. All the sudden I started staying at school, after school, every single day until the music lab would close.

[excerpt of **A Stiffening Wound and the Pit of Red** plays]

ECB: You are listening to **A Stiffening Wound and the Pit of Red**, for small ensemble.

[excerpt of **A Stiffening Wound and the Pit of Red** plays]

ECB: As a teenager, she was really into romantic music.

WG: I had this really cheesy cd called Classical Thunder. It was like every single really loud aggressive piece of classical music. So like there's Prokofiev, and Tchaikovsky, like all the favorites and plenty of things from, you know, the Romeo and Juliet ballet and the whole suite, so anything that was like really rambunctious. I really liked the organ, so like Bach's Toccata and Fugue in G minor, I probably had like 27 versions of that piece that I listened to. Ranging anywhere from like brass quintet to like techno remixes of it, because I just thought it was awesome. And then a lot of film music, I actually was introduced to John Corigliano at this point. I watched the Red Violin, although I probably shouldn't have, because there's some pretty, pretty sexy, sexy scenes that happen, but I was moved by the fact that like, oh, it was something slightly more elevated than other film scores that I had listened to for sure, and I loved watching movies that were definitely about music, so Amadeus or Immortal Beloved I watched all the time.

ECB: So after taking that theory class, she continued to compose, often.

WG: I had accumulated a small portfolio, but when I exited high school, I was thinking I was going to be a history major.

ECB: She loved history and she'd always done particularly well with anything art or music related in the AP history classes she had taken. But after just one week at college, she switched her major to music composition. She had, almost as an after thought, dropped off her portfolio with the music department and it had been well received.

I asked her if when she started college, she'd heard of any women that composed music.

WG: No, I would say, no.

ECB: So with a lack of role models, what was it that made her feel like she could pursue this as a career?

WG: This very famous scene of my childhood that my dad really likes to retell, is like, I was in, because you bathe babies in a kitchen sink, he would say like, "Whitney, don't drink the bath water, don't drink the bathwater Whitney", and all of the sudden I would open my mouth and this whole like bubbles and soap would come out. So I am famous for not following directions. And also, I didn't, it's not like I wanted to be a certain composer, I wasn't like, oh I want to be Mozart, I guess I kind of wanted to be John Corigliano a little bit, I was just like, I kind of just wanted to scratch out his name on The Red Violin score and write Whitney George instead, but it wasn't like I was aspiring to be anyone, I just wanted to create my own art and I'd seen men and women both have their outlet, whatever it is, so it didn't really, it's strange, it didn't occur to me that it was an issue. And there were plenty of women playing instruments, particularly flute, that's a very female dominated sort of, instrument.

ECB: She started studying at Chico State, where there were no women composition faculty. And later she transferred to CalArts.

WG: At CalArts, there were finally women on faculty there and I sort of was like, oh, I hadn't heard of any of them but it didn't matter, it was just nice to see other women doing, and in my incoming class, it was mostly men as well. It didn't bother me and it wasn't something that I originally really didn't think a whole lot about, which is strange.

[excerpt of The **Masochist's Tango** plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt from Movement 3 of The Masochist's Tango for solo violin or viola.

I asked Whitney to speak about any ways in which she felt her gender had affected her career or her education thus far, and she immediately spoke about conducting.

WG: I think I actually endure sexism on a totally different level as a conductor than I do as a composer. I feel like the sort of sexist attitudes in composition manifest themselves quietly sometimes, and that conducting is a much louder sort of arena for that sort of stuff to surface.

ECB: She said that the first time she ever experiences sexism was in a conducting class.

WG: And our conducting final was to conduct the wind ensemble and I did everything just fine. And my toes curl at this, the older gentleman who was teaching the class said, "That was great, except for you conduct like a girl". I was insulted by that comment, but it's something that actually bothers me so much more in retrospect than it did at the time, but it's just a really, really screwed up thing to say to anyone.

ECB: These days one of the primary ways she experiences sexism is through comments on her appearance.

WG: I'm almost completely tattooed. I have a whole back piece, I am almost never naked in that sort of respect, but I wear lots of gowns that are backless. I just wear what I feel comfortable in. And plenty of people make all sorts of comments about not my conducting, but what I've worn on stage. Which, yes, great dresses, but trust me, I am really working it out there, if you have other things to say aside from, oh some rude man said my outfit was distracting at some point, just don't come to our events in the future. I think I actually, sometimes I am not especially sugar coated.

ECB: Perhaps sexism is, as she put it, 'louder' in conducting than in composition, in part because whereas composition is often an activity done alone, conducting is very social.

WG: It's like reading a party, while you are being the best hostess, is like being a conductor. You're reading like, oh is this person offended by this comment, how am I gonna get the best sound from this person, like where can I coax the good energy by making someone feel good but also pushing them to like make something better with what they are doing. So I try to create an atmosphere where I let the musicians know that they might know the music better than me. And I wouldn't say it happens like often, often, but often enough, maybe once or twice in a rehearsal, where someone has done something that the music has not asked them to do, but the mistake that they made is actually the correct version.

ECB: Although she's noticed that many conductors are more reserved, Whitney uses language actively and creatively in rehearsals.

WG: Trying to describe the sound, trying to get at the sound in a certain way, trying to like make a metaphor for how the sound is supposed to sound. Like we were talking about accents, I was like think about like a small ball of pizza dough and just like throwing it against the wall, like that impact is actually quite, it's forceful but it has some roundness to the edge of it, so like that visual metaphor certainly helps me try to identify how the sound is supposed to sound.

ECB: So, imagine you hosted a dinner party, but until the dinner began, you'd never met any of the guests. Being a guest conductor is a little bit like that.

WG: I get nervous about it of course, because people don't understand how I typically work. I tend to offset things that are difficult with a fair amount of humor, because I think that once you sort of loosen up, you're gonna make sounds that are better. And people might think that I, quote unquote "waste time" during rehearsal, believe it or not, I'm not and I am very conscious of the clock and how it ticks, but it's important to get that space. Because music also can never not be fun, that sounds like such a basic statement, but one of the reasons I stopped being a performer and specifically an oboist, is because it just wasn't fun anymore. It wasn't fun. I was a part of every single ensemble and just dead tired all the time and just people weren't nice in rehearsals, I was like, why are we doing this if we are not obviously enjoying our time. So, I think that's very, very important.

[excerpt of **The Yellow Wallpaper: Overture** plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt from the Overture of an opera called the Yellow Wallpaper, for chamber ensemble, soprano, actor, and dancer. It's based on the proto-feminist short story of the same name by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which describes a woman's descent to madness through her obsession with wallpaper and an oppressive husband.

[excerpt of **The Yellow Wallpaper: Overture** plays]

WG: I was having a really hard time working on mixed meter stuff, so I wrote stuff that was hard that I was having problems doing. So the reason **The Yellow Wallpaper**, which was written in 2010 exists, and why there's so many weird metrical shifts in it, is because I needed to write it and work on it. And I got better.

[excerpt of **The Yellow Wallpaper: Overture** plays]

WG: And then, I make those sorts of tricks for myself all the time, like hey, is keeping a steady accelerando over eight minutes that's hard, let's write a piece where that's a thing and make myself work on it. So I always exploit my own weaknesses, I have to because otherwise I won't get better.

[excerpt of **The Yellow Wallpaper: Overture** plays]

ECB: Whitney's bio states that she "specializes in the use of mixed media to blur the distinctions between concert performance, installation art, and theater."

WG: I love working with visual anything. There's not a lot of my work that is just absolute music. There's a few pieces sprinkled here and there, but they otherwise have a kind of programmatic title.

ECB: She's the artistic director and conductor of a chamber orchestra called The Curiosity Cabinet, formed in 2009, and this ensemble plays a lot with theatre, drama, and as she puts it, "playful engagement with the prototype of the classical concert."

Topics she's created work about and staged with the Curiosity Cabinet, include the story, told through music and puppetry, of a Latvian immigrant who constructed a monument called the Coral Castle in

Florida, and an extensive series illustrating various fears - the fear of toads, the fear of being undressed in front of someone, the fear of being hypnotized... She also draws often on literary sources, including Dante, Guy de Maupassant, and Murakami. For Whitney, storytelling is important.

WG: I think the new music world has done some really awful thing to alienate the audience and I think the lack of narrative and storytelling in programming is gonna kill us in a way. And trying to bring that back with what I do with my ensemble, or what I individually do with my own work, is really important. So I think in general I am more interested in the experimental attitude of Twentieth Century works that still have that programmatic idea of the romantic era.

[excerpt of **The Whispering City, Movement III: More to Me** plays]

WG: I've been more true to this statement as time goes forward, which is I'm just gonna do me.

[excerpt of **The Whispering City, Movement III: More to Me** plays]

WG: As I've become less tethered to academia, I find that my music is much more, I don't want to say indulgent, but it's definitely the music I want to write. And I come into barriers because of this, because people like to fund very academically driven music. Probably the most frustrating aspect of my career and just me as a person in general, is that I don't fit very neatly into one category or another. And people love to put things neatly into their compartments where they fit. And the fact that I am a composer conductor woman visual kind of artist who also does weird sound design and performative, like it just confuses people, they're like, "I don't understand, well what is it that you do?". Well actually I do a lot of different things. And I like that involvement in being involved in all the different aspects of things.

[excerpt of **The Whispering City, Movement III: More to Me** plays]

WG: I think I've been continuing to be more, not that I haven't been true to myself, but more true, less interested in pleasing granters or people that might fund music, to try to find the people who are just interested in how I sound and trying to get sponsorship or support in that way instead.

[excerpt of **The Whispering City, Movement III: More to Me** plays]

ECB: That was More to Me, movement 3 of The Whispering City, for full orchestra.

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