

EPISODE #27: Ayumi Okada
Listening to Ladies
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I'm Elisabeth Blair and this is Listening to Ladies.

[excerpt of *Violin Concerto #1* plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of *Violin Concerto #1* by composer Ayumi Okada.

[excerpt of *Violin Concerto #1* plays]

AO: That was my first attempt to write for that instrumentation, the concerto. And I felt that, in that context of concerto, soloist is so courageous to stand up in the middle of orchestra, sometimes leading the orchestra and sometimes confronting with them, I felt it's really courageous and even holy.

[excerpt of *Violin Concerto #1* plays]

AO: So I wanted to use that as an inspiration for the story behind it. So I made up the story that it all started in Heaven and the Son descends to experience and to learn about the living and learn the things that are attached with the people in the world but he has to go back to rise again to the Heavens, so it's the journey of that arc.

[excerpt of *Violin Concerto #1* plays]

AO: I'm sure I was inspired by Christianity, but I didn't really intend it to be specific to that, Christianity, I just wanted to use this holy existence as inspiration of the sound.

[excerpt of *Violin Concerto #1* plays]

ECB: Ayumi started studying piano when she was 5.

AO: And then at seven, I was introduced to composing by my piano teacher. She was my first composition teacher as well.

ECB: She studied under the Yamaha method, which includes learning improvisation and compose.

AO: Piano was my playground or toy. Coming from school, I go to my piano and improvise and having fun for hours, that was my childhood.

ECB: She remembers the first time her teacher asked her to come up with a musical motive.

AO: I felt really liberated that I can choose the sound that I like and then I went to the keys and then played the harmonic interval third and then I liked the sound a lot and then I made it into the descending parallel third and I was so excited. I was excited because the simple motion on the keys turned into be a beautiful sound of music, so that was very interesting to me.

ECB: She says her teacher was a truly remarkable educator and woman.

AO: Unconsciously, I think she was a person who gave me the idea that it's nothing wrong being woman and then pursue music and dream of becoming composer, because even as a child, I could see that she was a talented musician and a composer, so I think I took her as my role model to pursue what I really like.

ECB: I asked Ayumi if, as a child, she noticed that all the compositions she was learning to play as a child were by men.

AO: Not really actually, somehow me being Japanese and then learning all the music from the Western composers felt really distant from, I am learning something different coming from a different world, so all the great composers being male didn't bother me too much, because either way it's really far from me.

ECB: She eventually went to Mannes School of Music in New York City.

AO: And then there at the audition, there was a music placement test of music history and then one of the questions asked me to name three, or maybe it was five, female composers, and then I was surprised, oh, are there that many? So that was a wake-up call for me.

[excerpt of *The Gray Wolf* plays]

ECB: You're listening to an excerpt from *The Grey Wolf*.

AO: Inspired by George MacDonald's short story called *Gray Wolf*.

[excerpt of *The Gray Wolf* plays]

ECB: For Ayumi, storytelling is at the heart of her artistic practice.

AO: I think my interest in music and how I see the music is that, music can tell so much different and complicated emotions just by the sound and then specifically with harmony. When I first found my third, I thought and then I moved onto the chord, and then I tried to find my own chord, which is not just a triad, and then by doing this exploration, I came up with the idea that one day if I know all the possible chords, maybe I can just talk with music.

[excerpt of *The Gray Wolf* plays]

AO: The protagonists are young man and then young woman. I assign piano to depict her and the cello to the young man.

[excerpt of *The Gray Wolf* plays]

AO: It starts out that the young woman was wondering around on the island in Scotland on a rainy day and she needed a place to hide and then he found her and then asked her for help and then she brought him to her home.

[excerpt of *The Gray Wolf* plays]

AO: He was drawn to that young lady, but at the same time, he notices something weird about her. And then at night, he was attacked by a big wolf.

[excerpt of *The Gray Wolf* plays]

AO: And in the morning, he found out that it was her.

[excerpt of *The Gray Wolf* plays]

AO: Both were drawn to each other, but because of the otherness of her, they couldn't be together and then he escapes from her and she let him go, but it's really just sad.

[excerpt of *The Gray Wolf* plays]

AO: Writing for *The Gray Wolf* was tough for me. I needed to stay in that dark place all the time until I finished the piece. They are fictional stories, but by telling the story whole heartedly, I felt like the young lady would be honored.

[excerpt of *The Gray Wolf* plays]

ECB: The Grey wolf was the first piece she really went through scene by scene and illustrated with music. Until then, she had maybe taken key moments out of stories, or the feelings of stories, and set those to music.

AO: I first drew some cartoons for myself to sum up the story, so that I can go through it linearly for myself, and I put that on my keyboard and then improvised as I looked at the cartoon and then that was ten minutes worth of improvisation and I took that as a skeleton of the piece and then elaborated into *The Grey Wolf*.

ECB: Later, after the first performance, she made a video using those drawings and the recording of the piece. This is posted on the show notes page if you want to check it out.

AO: The reason I made the YouTube video was partly because, what I experienced at the premiere performance was, I couldn't really tell at all in the moment what is happening within the music to the performer, I didn't have time in limited amount of rehearsal time.

ECB: She says the first performance of the piece was excellently interpreted by the performers, but she wanted to make sure that she could really get across the specific story to any future performers.

AO: I wanted them to be partly actor to tell the story to the audience, so I wanted them to know what is happening when they play certain music. But in the performance, I do not necessarily want the audience to see everything as I draw. I will leave it to the audience how they feel, but still I would feel so satisfied if they get any moment that I intended through the music.

ECB: So let's get back to her path towards becoming a composer.

She went to a teacher's college in Japan where she was a music education major.

AO: I wanted to become a composer but my composition teacher didn't really recommend me going to conservatory straight. At that time, I didn't quite understand why she didn't recommend me, even though she knew that I loved composition, but I think right now that I understand why she didn't recommend. It was because, in Japan, the conservatory composition major means to be encouraged to write more abstract music, as opposed to I like the tonal music very much, so I think she thought I would have difficult time if I were going to this world.

ECB: So she chose to do what she called the in-between-music education-so she could still learn about composition and meet people studying in various areas of music... but she says eventually she didn't feel like it was quite working for her.

AO: I am glad to meet lots of interesting people, but musically I was always frustrated that there was not so many classmates and then teachers who can really inspire me to become better. So I wanted to see how far I can go in terms of music and composition and that eventually brought me to here in the United States and then really going to the conservatory and to learn composition professionally.

ECB: If she'd stayed in Japan and went through the conservatory system there, it would have been a pretty long road. She would have had to start over and do a 2nd undergraduate degree (and take a difficult exam to even get into that)-and once she was in, it would have been a pretty conservative and intense road.

AO: And then I got the idea from someone who has studied abroad in New York, it's totally different in America, it's more accepting, more open and more encouraging, maybe you should think about going outside of Japan and see the world. And I thought, oh yeah, that excites me.

ECB: So, even though it was stepping way outside of her comfort zone to move to an entirely new country, she did!

AO: Even though, I thought once I land on JFK and then land on the land of the USA, I would die at once, because it's so boring and I wouldn't be able to breathe or anything.

ECB: She says her thought process was that even if she died when her plane touched down on that tarmac in New York...

AO: I felt I would feel more satisfied with my life because I put my step forward to what I want to be, so I would feel proud of me, even for that. And then there was actually more after that, so I am glad to living the life after that, so...

[excerpt of *Cape Roca* plays]

ECB: This is a piece called *Cape Roca*, and she originally wrote it for a new music concert in Japan, wherein each composer had to write a new piece of music...

AO: And the concept of the concert was to perform all the pieces untitled at the premiere and then the audience vote their own title for the pieces.

ECB: She chose to set to music her very favorite story from childhood.

AO: And I wanted to see if anyone from the audience would get what story I was going for.

[excerpt of *Cape Roca* plays]

AO: The story is a Japanese classic fantasy by Kenji Miyazawa, it's called *Night on the Galactic Railroad*. It's about two boys travelling through the Milky Way on the Star Festival Night.

[excerpt of *Cape Roca* plays]

AO: It has a sad ending, but a beautiful ending.

[excerpt of *Cape Roca* plays]

ECB: She got 75 votes for titles from the audience.

AO: And I looked through all the titles and it was mostly about nature and scenery, more than the arc of story, so I was kind of, oh, my music didn't really tell the story. But out of that 75, there was one vote that perfectly got the spirit of the story and the music.

[excerpt of *Cape Roca* plays]

AO: The vote was done by paper and pen, so I could see each handwriting, and from that handwriting, I could instantly recognize it, it's my mom's. So she totally got what I was going for.

ECB: The title her mom had chosen was a quote from the story.

AO: It all starts from here. It's really a message of the story.

ECB: But she decided that when she translated the title into English, she wouldn't do it literally.

AO: My mom's parents used to like travel around the world to see various lighthouses.

ECB: They particularly liked Cape Roca, in Portugal.

AO: And in there, there's this poem describing the Cape Roca, it says, "Here where the land ends and the sea begins." And I thought it's really beautiful, so I wanted to associate *It All Starts from Here* and that one, and then it's about Cape Roca. And then the image of the night and the lighthouse and then the sky and then the stars, everything felt really good.

[excerpt of *Cape Roca* plays]

ECB: Ayumi says that in the masters program at Mannes....

AO: Mostly somehow it was international students, like Asian composers who were mostly somehow female and it might be a cultural thing. I mean by that, in Japan, I actually encountered more female music majors than male music majors. Unfortunately, it's not a positive outcome of gender equality. But more like in Japan it's hard to make a living as a musician and then sometimes music education ended up in just education and there is a huge disconnection in between education and a professional musician. And then also there's a gender bias in my days, so women are expected to get married and then raise children, don't go on with their careers. So the pressure from the society on women is lighter in terms of what they choose to learn when they are in the education. So that's why lot's of women music majors. So I am not

sure about other Asian countries, whether that's true, but somehow I saw many female composer classmates at school.

ECB: I asked her about any experiences of sexism.

AO: It was also hard to tell for me, because I was so many ways minority when I was in college. I was Japanese and I was a woman and I was not so experienced as a composer, so I felt insecure and small. So if someone who is not that kind, confronts me, they sometimes intimidated me, but I was not sure whether it was because I was a woman or because I am not from here. But in general, I encountered so many kind people. And then that was because could keep going.

ECB: I asked her how her experience as a woman has been in her professional life now that she's out of school and she said that recently she's been very involved in musical theatre since graduating—and that world is largely male dominated as well, as far as composers go.

AO: And then just recently last year in New York, there was a group that was born, which is called Maestra, which is female composers who are writing for musical theater group and then it's getting bigger and bigger. And then there, I met that many composers, active composers, in one room, like 30, 40, and then that was really a positively shocking experience to see so many living composers, living female composers. Even the field is different, it was nice to see them and then be part of the community.

ECB: When I asked Ayumi for her advice, she spoke about the importance of finding and allowing your own voice.

AO: I feel like women in general tend to have more passion to fix a problem when they see it, and then for that, often times they end up sacrificing themselves or compromising more to fix it than men do. But as an artist in pursuing of your own art, you don't have to compromise. Music is a diverse art form and you being you keeps it diverse, so trust your music instinct and keep writing. And then go out in the world to find a place for your music and then people who appreciate it.

[excerpt of *A Walk in the Park* plays]

ECB: To find out more about Ayumi, 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. If you have an extra dollar each month you'd like to give toward supporting this podcast, just go to patreon.com/listeningtoladies. I really appreciate every donation.

[excerpt of *A Walk in the Park* plays]

That piece was called *A Walk in the Park*, and as ever, thank you for listening.