

EPISODE #7: Dolores White

Listening To Ladies

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

Interviewee: Dolores White (**DW**)

DW: Music is something everybody is born with from a baby, it's basically a phenomenal thing, phenomenal thing.

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

I met with composer Dolores White in the fall of 2015 in Hyde Park in Chicago.

[excerpt of **Crystal Gazing** plays]

DW: I was an only child and my mother had to work because she divorced my father at three, when I was three years old, so I was raised a lot by my grandparents, my grandmother and grandfather. I loved them and sort of took on their lifestyle. Of course, many times my mother accused me of being old, having old fashioned ideas just like my mother.

[excerpt of **Crystal Gazing** plays]

DW: My grandmother and grandfather used to listen to The Symphonic Hour on radio and I would go in, you know as a young child, I would go in and be with them and I just liked their music. I never went to any symphony concerts, never, but I listened on the radio.

[excerpt of **Crystal Gazing** plays]

DW: Sometimes my mother would come home from work or something, she'd find me listening, she's say, "I don't understand why you are listening to that music", you know.

[excerpt of **Crystal Gazing** plays]

ECB: You are listening to a piece called Crystal Gazing.

[excerpt of **Crystal Gazing** plays]

ECB: Her mother got her piano lessons and ballet lessons and her grandmother played a little bit of piano.

DW: So she would sit with me to learn my notes and everything and I really enjoyed that, so my routine was pretty much through elementary was playing the piano, learning the piano, taking piano, and taking dance.

ECB: Her mother was a dancer and before Dolores was born, she used to teach modern dance and her aunt was very involved in literature and theater. So she grew up in an atmosphere of deep appreciation for the arts. She later went to a school called Lindblom that was pretty far from where she lived.

DW: They thought that I would get a better education at a school away from the neighborhood. So my mother always fought for certain things for me to be in that I could develop and just learn and be exposed to a diverse world.

ECB: For anyone who is familiar with Chicago, Lindblom is at 61st and Wolcott.

DW: When I first started Lindblom, I lived on 43rd and Michigan and I'd have to walk up to the L and then take the L to the last stop, which was Loomis, I believe, 61st and Loomis, and then take a bus and then walk a couple of blocks down or something, and I did this every day. And I did it all by myself, nobody ever took me. I had no fears, I was fine, I mean I enjoyed going and coming. And at that time you could walk and go with freedom, I mean you didn't feel like that anyone was gonna molest you or there was gonna be any killing or there was the violence that was certainly not as pronounced as it is now, so it was a different era. Although it was within the African American community, it was a pretty solid African American community that I lived in. My grandparents were very religious.

ECB: They were members of Greater Bethesda Baptist Church. Her grandfather had a prominent role in the church, he was the treasurer.

DW: And he just, you know, he just looked up to that job, because that meant that he was an individual, it was a very segregated time in Chicago and so his jobs were very, he'd wash windows downtown and then he'd also worked as a custodian at the Illinois Central. And then I would say great influence of mine outside my family, would be the music teacher and orchestra teacher at Lindblom. He was such a fun guy. But that was really where I sort of discovered the world of classical music, because I didn't get it in the neighborhood, I didn't get it in the community. What I did get was contact with jazz, I did get contact with jazz and of course church music.

ECB: At her church, they had a miniature string orchestra, as she described it, and she played in that and really enjoyed it. She also took piano and cello lessons at the American Conservatory of music.

DW: You know, that got me downtown, and many times you didn't leave the neighborhood so much, because everything was right there.

ECB: When she was growing up, she did not know about any women composers, nor any women cellists, but she did know about the pianist, Philippa Schuyler and Natalie Hinderis.

DW: Another African American pianist that was very, very popular, they played in the black community, they would have concerts and they give piano recitals, you know they were so pretty and everything that I just thought oh my God, that's a wonderful world.

ECB: For the first two years of her undergraduate degree, she attended Howard and for the second two, she attended Oberlin Conservatory of Music.

She told me about the time when her parents dropped her off at Oberlin.

DW: And I was supposed to get there by a certain time or else the dorms would be closed and we got there late and so we said well we'll stay in a motel and then come back in the morning. The motels wouldn't open the doors for us so we had to drive all the way into Cleveland.

ECB: That is about 35 miles.

DW: Yeah, these are things that you just came in contact with, that's all and you couldn't stay certain places. And so you would get really familiar with your surroundings and you accept this, I mean, you can't constantly fight, I'd gotten something like this, so we came back in the day but we never thought we'd have to go all the way, because the signs would say "Open", oh we don't have any place.

[excerpt of **3 Movements for Two Violins, Viola and Cello: Mvt. 1** plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt from the first movement of a piece called 3 movements for Two Violins, Viola, and Cello.

She spoke about how when she was at Howard she joined a sorority at the request of her mother, but that she found it very difficult to meet anyone in the sorority who shared her interests.

DW: Being an only child, I certainly was wanting to know more, you know, about different women, you know, it was a female sorority, so I was wanting to know more and I liked it, but I thought it was very time consuming. And I think to achieve you really have to work at it, know what you're about and continue that process.

ECB: Most of her younger years were spent working towards being a pianist and performer.

DW: I never thought of in any way of being a composer, because I thought all of the composers were like, you know, people like Bach, Mozart, all these people that was just geniuses, you know, you were told constantly that they were, so I never did. I mean, the thrill and the interest in music was basically from performance and then also you had really the idea that, as far as being a composer, that you had to have fantastic ear, certainly you have to have a good ear, but they were just amazing in every way.

[excerpt of **3 Movements for Two Violins, Viola and Cello: Mvt. 3** plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt from the third movement of the piece entitled 3 Movements for Two Violins, Viola, and Cello.

Her husband Donald White was hired by the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra in 1957.

DW: He came in as sort of like a celebrity in Cleveland because he was the only first black, and this whole environment, we're sort of on display. We were well received in Cleveland and it opened doors for us, you know, what we wanted to do so, the respect was great. I was able to, I think probably I was given an advantage since I was like the wife of Donald, and people they opened doors for us. And we respected that and responded with responsibility and took it very seriously.

ECB: Her entry into composition was born out of the fact that she and her husband often played at recitals together.

DW: A lot of people wanted to hear us, why are you constantly having to prove yourself and what do you sound like. And so we performed, we enjoyed performing. Most of the material was you know, European composers, and then get the idea, well we also played on black programs like Black History Month and like Martin Luther King and various things we were asked to play so I said, "I'm going to arrange these spirituals for cello and piano", and that's how I really sort of got started and we would play the five, I arranged five, and we would play them and they were well received and so that's encouraging.

ECB: So after testing the waters with arranging, she started composing music when she was a Master student at the Cleveland Institute of music.

DW: Well I met and sat in with Donald Erb, who was one of Cleveland's finest composers and he was very outgoing, tremendously outgoing with new music and he would try all kinds of things and it was made accessible and believable. And you could do what you wanted to do, you didn't have to be worrying about consecutive fifths and constant rules, you know, theoretical rules, you could just create you know, and we'll just go from there, and you were not condemned a lot of times for, "Oh my God, this is horrible, what makes you?" Things that you can write.

[excerpt of **Rhythm of the Claves** plays]

DW: And he was such a magnetic person and free, you know wonderful, and you could do it too, you always felt that you could do this, you could try this. And I begin to endorse this and think of it, if you love music then why not do your own thing, why not create, because you are a creative person? So that's actually when I really started thinking about doing my own thing and you have the right to do it and they would listen.

[excerpt of **Rhythm of the Claves** plays]

ECB: You've been listening to her piece, Rhythm of the Claves. When she first started composing, she wrote a lot for piano and strings because she was familiar with them and she also wrote some children's music.

DW: I wrote a children's book called Tommy's Pet Rock and one about Skiki and the Mouse, you know going out in the world and meeting different other farm animals and so these were things that I would put music to.

ECB: In the course of her career she's written both orchestral and chamber music, art songs, and choral music. She's also set a lot of poetry to music, including poems by John Donne, John Dowland, Meghan Brewer, Rushanique Derden, E.E. Cummings, Elinor Wylie, and Maya Angelou.

One such setting in particular was commissioned by the Cleveland Institute of Music Orchestra. It's entitled Give Birth To the Dream.

[excerpt of **Give Birth To The Dream** plays]

ECB: This piece uses text from the poem On the Pulse of Morning by Maya Angelou.

[excerpt of **Give Birth To The Dream** plays]

ECB: At one point in our conversation, she mentioned that there were not very many African Americans in classical music. I asked her what she thought the reasons were for this.

DW: They really don't feel as though they were invited to concert halls or that they felt welcome at concert halls. Classical music is just like some of the sports and things. To be a swimmer you need swimming pools, you know, and you need to have access to that particular, or tennis, you know, you have to have access to those places. With classical music, you have to have instruments. And some schools offer it and some don't and then instruments cost money, sadly, especially the better ones, so the finances sort of the detriment. And then they don't hear it a lot, you have to have the exposure to know that this is something that is accessible to you.

ECB: In our conversation, Dolores talked about the importance of community and encouragement in determining success.

DW: If you feel restricted in anything, you're not going to continue with that, you are not going to be successful with that, but if you are respected, what you do, what you say, at least listen to and provided opportunities for you to do things, this is how basically you succeed. I think everybody has a talent and that's your purpose on life to really find out what it is and develop it and grow, in this way you help the community, you help yourself, you feel energized, you feel worthy of being who you are and you know who you are, and this is really good, and I think there's a lot of times of trouble with a lot of people, they really don't know who they are and they are still searching. But I do think that the sooner that you learn that you are an individual, you are born certain, I believe frankly, that people are born with certain talent, and you have to develop this and hopefully you're able to realize this, that you are individual, there are many individuals, and everybody has something that they can do well, and it's up to you to find this out, to discover. Some people discover it from teachers or some from parents or some other ways, but you do have to have encouragement definitely, you can't have constantly a stream of disappointments or discouragement from different people. It's hard, really. You do need this nourishment, you really definitely do to succeed in life. You have to many times search it out. And accepting other people to do well and to flourish and to be great, ok, they do wonderful, that's fine, well I'll try to do my thing, because everybody is a distinct individual.

ECB: Dolores has had the opportunity to travel quite a bit in her life. Some of it was with her husband's orchestra, some of it was on her own, and some of it was with groups or teachers groups. She's been able to go to Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Peru, Spain, Senegal, Tanzania, Egypt, Ghana, and Cuba. So she's been able to experience many different cultures.

DW: Well of course a lot of African Americans haven't experienced a lot, and it used to not be, you know, with the computer and the technology and everything, you can experience some of this in schools and they can show videos or on TV you see now, you know, various other cultures so you don't feel so completely isolated, but when I was growing up, it was isolated. You didn't know anything about Mexicans and a lot of the other races that didn't come all the way from Europe. That was sort of, and we didn't even know that much about Africa for awhile, and it certainly wasn't taught in schools. You know, so, it's good to know about other races and other nationalities, and that way you can sort of you know, really sort of direct your life a little bit better and understand things.

ECB: And in her teaching career, she really worked hard to bring this cultural exposure to her students as much as possible.

DW: And when I was teaching community college, you know, community colleges are not necessarily too interested in the music and the fine arts department, so you don't get dedicated students, but you do want to encourage and interest them to get an appreciation of the arts and I think that's a tremendous achievement, you know, if you can do that, I've basically at the Metro campus, which was a city, an inner city in city campus, and so the students hadn't really been exposed to classical music at all and prefer not to be, but I developed a couple of courses there because it was about to go all jazz and I didn't like the idea that it would just be all jazz or gospel, because that's what they already know because that's what they are exposed to. And I have been there, I was there about 25 years, and I developed a course in world music, but it was a beginning course, because I travel, but it wasn't to say that I was an authority by any means, I didn't major or take ethnical music in college or anything like that, so my experiences was from travelling some and just getting to know briefly other cultures. But I thought, this would be a good place to introduce people that really had no exposure at all to other cultures, Indian culture, so I had this course in world music and then I also introduced them to early African American music. And so those two courses, and I was pretty proud of that. But you know, a lot of times, the principles at the schools and they don't want their kids exposed to anything other than African American culture, and that's very bad to me, because you are not living in that kind of world. I mean you are able to come out of it and to see and to travel and to be exposed to other cultures and their music and you find they will like it and envelop it and really enjoy it, expose you to one kind, not just one kind, but the rap and the popular and the church, like contemporary gospel and a lot of different things like that, that's fine, but that's not enough for students to really grow and be interested in the world. This is some of the problem, it's a really big problem.

[excerpt of **Give Birth To the Dream** plays]

DW: It's been good. I would say certainly it's been [?? 28:41] where you know, you're not accepted, you are estranged, not only for being a woman, but for the color that you are, things like that and the way you look, but I've had some really great experiences.

[excerpt of **Give Birth To the Dream** plays]

DW: Certainly I appreciate doctors and lawyers, especially doctors more so than lawyers, but they are necessary of course, but just to be in the arts and to do well, to accomplish in the arts and theater, dance, or poetry, literature and things, I think that's the highest form that you can reach, I really do.

[excerpt of **Give Birth To the Dream** plays]

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[excerpt of **Give Birth To the Dream** plays]

ECB: Thank you for listening.