

Episode #28: Elizabeth Lain
Listening to Ladies
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I'm Elisabeth Blair and this is Listening to Ladies.

EL: My name is Elizabeth Lain. I am a composer, musician, rock oboist, urban mermaid, we will go with that.

[excerpt of *Mycelium* plays]

EL: It's on my business cards.

[excerpt of *Mycelium* plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of a piece called *Mycelium*.

[excerpt of *Mycelium* plays]

ECB: Elizabeth had a pretty encouraging musical childhood.

EL: My dad was like an old hippie rocker in the day, so, you know, I grew up going to bed with him playing old Simon & Garfunkel tunes on guitar or piano. My parents enrolled me in piano lessons when I was really young.

ECB: She didn't really like the lessons though...

EL: Because I didn't like how strict it was. I liked to play around more and improvise and make up my own things.

[excerpt of *Mycelium* plays]

ECB: She wrote her first composition when she was 5...

EL: In purple crayon on a red piece of construction paper, but I drew out all the staff lines and stuff.

ECB: It was called...

EL: *The Train*. It was basically just whole notes on middle C, but I was really proud of myself.

ECB: But she says piano wasn't really her thing, so in 5th grade she started playing clarinet...

EL: But that was not obscure enough, so I switched to oboe in like seventh grade. I guess I was kind of a snob, I don't know. It just sounded weird and when I heard it, I was like, "what is this thing? I need to play it!"

[excerpt of *Mycelium* plays]

ECB: Elizabeth did not take the traditional path to becoming a composer. She actually got a degree in computer science.

EL: I'd actually thought about maybe doing music school, but I was heavily encouraged to do something that would make money and I was good at computers, I was very into tech, I was always doing internet projects and stuff way before my peers and learning how to program since I was very young, because my dad was also a nerd.

ECB: She did end up minoring in music.

EL: And I think it was the right choice. One of the things I liked about it was how not competitive it was. They had a band, they had an orchestra, they were pretty good. They had a really good jazz band program and I actually got into jazz playing bass.

ECB: Just a real quick aside on the instruments that Elizabeth plays. They include oboe, English horn, bass guitar...

EL: ..hurdy-gurdy, modular synth, the bodhrán drum, some djembe...

ECB: ...and wooden flutes, to name a few.

The program was laid back and relaxed, and not high-pressure, and the teachers there were very open to students exploring, including learning composition.

EL: So there was a lot of support in that sense, in a very not competitive way, which I responded to, because I was like, they basically were like, "Yeah, experiment, try stuff and we will see what we can do." I ended up getting into doing a lot with theater and doing a lot of live improvised music on stage for theatrical productions, which now that I think about it was sort of like the start of sort of media composing. It kind of leads naturally into things like film and video games and stuff like that.

ECB: The scope of this podcast is pretty narrow but I just want to point out that Elizabeth's work spans many more genres than I can cover here. We are gonna talk a little bit later about this genre-crossing but I do encourage you to check out her website to get a more comprehensive idea of her musical voice. You can find that link on the show notes page for this episode.

Out of curiosity, I asked Elizabeth if the program in computer science was male dominated.

EL: Very much. There was like three women out of my initial class of 50, 60 people, maybe more, and half of them left the first semester, not because they weren't amazing, just because it was a mess, just a misogynistic mess.

ECB: After college, Elizabeth became known as a multi instrumentalist, and she was in demand to record stuff for projects. She was also playing with jazz bands and she wanted to record them...

EL: So I ended up getting my own recording set up, very very small home studio set up. And oh my God, I couldn't believe how bad it all sounded. And it was at that point that I realized that the studio is its own instrument. So I worked at that for years and then...

ECB: ...around 2009 she met Mary Hamer, a classically trained vocalist and pianist who also played in goth metal bands,

EL: And we decided to form this band project thing called DUETS_ and it was sort of our experimental project.

ECB: And in the course of recording in her studio and making music with Mary, Elizabeth got into using sample libraries, so she could bring sounds like strings into their recordings.

EL: And at that point, I was like, oh yeah, all this four part harmony things that I remembered from college started to feel like, ok, I know how to chord this out, I know how to start arranging it, and it was only really then that I started to realize like, maybe I can compose for a larger thing, like, maybe i can start writing music for strings and orchestras and stuff like that.

[excerpt of *Blood Moon* plays]

ECB: This is a piece called *Blood Moon*.

[excerpt of *Blood Moon* plays]

EL: So *Blood Moon* was actually one of my first compositions when I was like, you know what, I can be a composer, sort of when I broke out of that and then switched that mindset. And it was one of those nights when it was just like the red blood moon was out and I just remember that I was living in San Diego at the time and I just went outside and the weather was beautiful and I was just staring up at it.

[excerpt of *Blood Moon* plays]

ECB: I asked Elizabeth when she first learned there were women who composed music.

EL: From middle school all the way through college, I don't think I played a single piece that wasn't by a cis white dude. You see very very few women composers being promoted and like no trans composers. And it's not like there aren't any of us, like I am actually friends with quite a few people who are very similar in backgrounds to me too, but that you know, trans composers doing amazing work and amazing women doing amazing work and there's just no promotion, nobody's playing them, nobody is programming them, aside from very specific things, like "oh we are going to do a concert of all women." And it's like, ok, so first of all, yay, because we are actually getting some spotlight on people who aren't men, but also it's like, eh, it feels a little bit like, or you could just program us on normal concerts. And I can't tell you how many times people on Twitter or something will be like, "Hey, where are all the women composers at?" And of course, the flood of people like promoting their friends and there's lists out there that we've already compiled and people are like, "Great," and then they pass it on and don't do anything with it and it's like, we've compiled the lists, therefore our work is done. And it's like, first of all, it was women and non binary folks who compiled those lists, we put in the fucking work, but also, you all need to take that and do something with that, like if you are programming it, you should have women on every concert. You should seek out people of color. You should seek out trans and nonbinary folk, because you are missing a huge chunk of awesome new voices in the scene. One of the things that bothers me too, is like, I consider myself a trans woman, but also non binary, and it depends on who I am kind of talking to,

so like I also feel a little bit weird when it's like, ok, let's find the women composers, and I am kind of like, eh, how's that gonna feel? It's kind of like, yeah, that's where I tend to get played more, but at the same time, it doesn't really fit. And even this podcast, and I know you and I have talked about this...

ECB: If it's not obvious, she's referring to the name of this podcast-and to the scope that name clearly implies. When I created Listening to Ladies, my intention was to uplift the voices that have been historically disenfranchised in the classical music world. I completely missed the fact that women's voices are not the only ones being omitted from the canon and the concert halls. I was not thinking intersectionally at all. I did change the name of the accompanying concert series to be more inclusive, but for a variety of reasons which I'm not going to pretend are particularly good ones, I just have not put the time and work into changing the name of the podcast. I am gonna be stopping production of this podcast after the 30th episode, and I'll talk more about that in an epilogue I'll release in the fall...but for the time being, I get what Elizabeth is saying, and she's right.

EL: It's hard, because that idea of where do I fit is sort of, I mean, that permeates my entire life, but it also permeates the music scene I am part of and where do I fit and how do I express me and what I'm about in places that I feel like don't want me, and don't want what I'm about. So, I feel like there's a bit of a punk aesthetic of putting yourself out there. And I wish more people were receptive to that, because there's just so much cool stuff out there that people are doing when they come from these different backgrounds. For me, I relate to that more. I relate to Alex Temple, Crysanthé Tan, like these folks, a lot of weird modern music, like that gets me more than listening to Beethoven for the hundredth time. So this is also an interesting thing to talk about it, is when you look at marginalized people, especially women and trans people, people of color, etcetera, the elitism of the classical world is really hard because this idea that you need a degree to do music, to be respected. And a lot of times, it's really hard to get that when you are marginalized, it's like financially or through racism, sexism, whatever, just not being allowed in the programs.

ECB: She pointed out that the additional requirements that are so often put on calls for scores can also act as major obstacles. For example, calls for scores often require the entrant be a student, or be in a certain age bracket-and they also often require composers to pay a fee to have their music considered-creating a pay-to-play landscape that effectively shuts out anyone who just doesn't have that kind of money.

EL: I think one thing I really want to say about intersections, and sexism, racism, transphobia, all this stuff that is kind of lingering in the music scene, is just, I think my plea here is that it's so limiting that we're doing it, like the art of the classical music and the stuff that we love, like I grew up loving a lot of the same things everyone does, but one of the reasons why it's sort of stale and falling out of fashion is because we're hindering ourselves by not including these new voices, by not including this mixture of people of all different backgrounds, and in doing so, in limiting and trying to keep this sort of ivory tower approach, it's just not as relevant. And it could be, it is, when you listen to what people are doing, when you seek it out and you find these people that are getting like no credit, but they are doing amazing stuff, you realize that classical music and new music is incredibly relevant, we just have to as a larger society and the people that are programming this just need to recognize that.

[excerpt of *Midnight at one thousand meters* plays]

This is an excerpt of a piece called *Midnight at one thousand meters*. She says she has struggled with it for years-she first wrote part of it in college, then kept going back to it, trying to make it work, but never quite feeling like she was succeeding. She said she even tried to make it into a jazz tune at one point...

EL: So then eventually I kind of came back to it, after I had kind of done a lot of my studio knowledge and work and kind of found that groove and I was like, oh, this is just like some weird, creepy, chromatic, jumpy sound thing, like I know what this is.

[excerpt of *Midnight at one thousand meters* plays]

EL: I've always been really obsessed with sea life. My tattoo sleeve is all weird marine life. And so the title then came from, I read somewhere that at a thousand meters under water, light doesn't pass any more. And I started to imagine it as like swimming through murky water at night and something brushes up against your leg...

[excerpt of *Midnight at one thousand meters* plays]

ECB: As I've mentioned, Elizabeth writes music in a number of different genres-and when I asked her to speak a little bit about genre-crossing, she again brought up the elitism inherent in classical music.

EL: Like it really hit me when I was thinking about like minimalism and how we praise people for these pieces that are very repetitive. And this kind of like idea that you hear the phasing, you start to hear the inner play through a lot of repetition and that's praised as brilliant. And then you get those same people will hate on trance music or EDM because, "Oh it's repetitive and doesn't ever change," and it's like, it's the same thing, with just different instruments. They are more alike than people like to admit. And then you get like people doing things with tape loops and sampling speech or various other things and that's considered bold in classical music and it's considered really, you know, unique and modern and yet, the same people will get made at hip hop artists, "Oh, they don't write their own music, they just rely on sample loops and other people's material." I'm like, you are limiting yourself, like that's what's so annoying about it, is you are not only being an elitist jerk, you are limiting yourself and the possibilities of what you can do. And I don't understand why you would want to do that...

[excerpt of *Don't You Wanna Be Like Me* plays]

EL: It's hard to give advice because there's so much that is in your way and it's hard to be like, yes, just fight the system and you'll make it because that's not always true. But, take advantage of what you can. Take advantage of people that might have recording studios that you can just do some things, take advantage of friends who play instruments, do online concerts, get your music out on free services like Bandcamp, just make those connections. There are people that will appreciate it, I can't pretend it's going to take the world by storm and cut through all the sexism and racism and bullshit, but it shouldn't stop you from creating the way you can, because no matter how much you think it's not good enough, your art still has worth and it still matters and it can encourage other people. And do it for yourself, do it for people like you, do it because you have value and something to say, and hope for the best.

[excerpt of *Don't You Wanna Be Like Me* plays]

ECB: That was *Don't You Wanna Be Like Me* by Elizabeth's band, Duet_. If you want to know about anything mentioned in this episode, or listen to full streaming tracks of the music excerpted here, just go to www.listeningtoladies.com and click on the link to this episode. And as ever, thank you for listening.