

EPISODE #5: Jessie Montgomery
Listening to Ladies
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Host: Elisabeth C Blair (**ECB**)
Interviewee: Jessie Montgomery (**JM**)

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

[excerpt of **Source Code** plays]

ECB: You're listening to Jessie Montgomery's piece Source Code. It was commissioned by Symphony Space in New York City. They wanted a piece that addressed a specific question.

JM: What is your identity as an American?

[excerpt of **Source Code** plays]

JM: I had to at some point sort of accept the obvious thing, which is that I'm half African American and I'm half Irish and Sicilian American and I identify really strongly with my African American heritage and so I took that as an opportunity to go deeper with that.

[excerpt of **Source Code** plays]

JM: I'd chose to think about song and about mainly freedom songs and black spiritual as a source material, sort of how Bartok was using eastern European folk music and you know other composers as well, but his of course is much more explicit and much more detailed in terms of his collection of songs. So anyway, I decided I would use this, sort of the syntax of the spiritual as a basis for the piece, and it's not a new idea, but for me it was a really compelling way to sort of reconnect with sort of that part of my heritage.

[excerpt of **Source Code** plays]

ECB: Jessie was born and raised in New York City.

JM: And I have two parents that are both artists and so I had a lot of support and I think that because they were both artists, they weren't like pushing it on me, you know, they were very much about letting me discover it on my own. But then once I chose the violin, my dad was like super, you know, he was like the Suzuki violin dad, and you know he would practice with me every day. I had I would say kind of an ideal situation in terms of the parents being totally on board with it and being able to support me at home.

ECB: She started studying violin when she was just four years old.

I asked her if there was ever a time as a kid when she wanted to quit.

JM: Yeah, I mean I wanted to quit violin when I was like eleven or twelve, which I think is pretty typical of kids who've played violin as little kids. You know, around eleven or twelve, you sort of like start to change and think, oh, but I also like these kinds of activities, I like hanging out with my friends, I like you know, whatever. I wanted to quit, I was like bored with it or something, I don't know.

ECB: But she had a really flexible and thoughtful teacher.

JM: And she let me sort of not go to lessons, but participate in all the group classes so that I still had the like social aspect of it going on.

ECB: This teacher taught an improvisation class.

JM: And so that was like the big draw, was like, "ok, well you can come to improv class, you know and not to your lessons, and let's see how that goes, you know at least you are still playing and you are being creative." So she was awesome and she had that, we had that avenue that we could go down.

ECB: She didn't quit for very long though.

JM: At one point I realized this was something I wanted to do forever and I figured out that I would need to, you know, spend a lot more time doing it in order to make it my life, so yeah, it's a pretty big thing to realize when you are about thirteen, but I think for a lot of musician, or musicians who make it into a professional career, I think that that's around the age when you sort of like decide, you know, this is gonna be what I am gonna do. Music was a very social thing for me also, so I was like really into my friends and really into like the ritual of like going to music school on the weekend, on Saturday, and like doing all our classes together and I loved playing the violin so much.

ECB: She was enrolled in these improv classes from age five to twelve. The teacher's name was Alice Kanack, a young New York City Suzuki teacher who was designing a method for teaching music to children, which she called Creative Ability Development.

JM: So it's the idea of like getting kids to connect with their innate musical ability and it is based on the Suzuki method in the way that it's a lot about the teacher plays something and then you play along with the teacher and sort of repeat this activity over and over again, the same kinds of exercises over and over again. There were these games or structures where we would have to work in call and response with the teacher and with each other and we would make these elaborate performances that were like all improvised and all based on just like listening and reacting to timing of the teacher and of the other members in the group. So I got to participate in this journey with her and so that was a very special thing.

ECB: Now I didn't start doing improv until I was an adult. I found it very empowering, but I imagine it must have been so empowering for a child to realize that you could contribute with your own ability and imagination to something, that it wasn't written in stone, that you were welcomed into it. I asked her how she felt about this opportunity looking back.

JM: You know, it's like when you are studying something as a kid, you are kind of, you don't realize how special it is, you know, and so coming back to improvising as an adult, still felt like really new, because it's so much about where you are in that moment and always like having to come to that realization every time you play or every time you improvise can be scary.

ECB: As for composed music, she started writing it when she was about eleven years old.

JM: And I would say definitely was like a direct link between my improvising and starting composition.

ECB: From junior high through high school, she took music composition classes at the Third Street Music School Settlement in New York.

JM: The like mode of the composition class was great because the teacher, he was more of a guide, and I think with teaching composition it is kind of like you have to let the students sort of find their own way with it almost. At a collegiate level it's probably a different combination of things that has to go on, but like for a kid, yeah he would just kind of like let us go. He gave us a keyboard and some manuscript paper and we would figure out, play something on the instrument and then write it down and he'd sort of help us, "Oh okay, well you have this line that you just made, like you could add rhythm underneath it or you could do this or you could do this or you could do this or you know..."

ECB: You may notice some small recording flaws in this interview, but that particular one was just spectacularly timely. I hope you enjoyed it.

Once or twice a year, the composers of the Third Street School would have a concert in which they would perform each other's work.

JM: That sort of feeling of like writing a piece for your friends and having everyone perform it was like really positive experience that I think carries into what I look for in my experience now with writing. I'm writing for specific friends and groups that I feel connection with.

ECB: When I asked her who she looked up to in her younger years, she said it was her classmates.

JM: Yeah there was just some like whiz kids at Third Street, and I think just the fact that they were my peers and only a little bit older than me was like super exciting and you know, I felt like very close to being able to do what they did, so that was really inspiring. I mean I think there was just a lot of talent at the school at that time and I also had a really wonderful chamber music coach, Erica Nickrenz, she is the pianist of the Eroica Trio, and she was just like, as a person, really really generous, and really sort of fun and really seemed to like have her stuff together and as a kid, I looked up to her, because she was, I think at the time the trio was just starting, getting going, but they seemed, in my eyes they had this like huge career and they were like totally making it. And I think they were like literally just getting their foot out the door, because then she had to leave teaching at my school to go do the trio. But there was something about her lifestyle that like I thought was like really cool and I thought well wow, that seems like a good life, you know. Now I realize, like it's really hard, you have to do a lot to maintain, feeling balanced and all that stuff, but totally her attitude about music and just like being a musician and the lifestyle was like really very attractive to me as a possibility.

ECB: When Jessie was seventeen, she auditioned for a competition put on by the Sphinx Organization. Sphinx is a Detroit based organization dedicated to diversity in the arts. It was begun by Aaron Dworkin, a young black violinist who wanted to address the stark underrepresentation of people of color in classical music.

JM: I did the competition and then I think I did it again the next year, because you can continue to come back if you don't place first, so it becomes like this networking thing, that's one of the strengths of the organization is that there is this huge network of people that they've built over the years because they invite semi finalists to come back every year and either play in the orchestra or to compete again, depending on whatever they choose to do.

ECB: She met many of her friends and colleagues through the organization. In the annual competition, she placed as a Laureate twice and was a semi finalist several times and they offered many other opportunities. She taught for many years in their summer program. She was in the Catalyst Quartet, which involved a lot of touring, about 150 concerts a year and she received a project grant from them called the Empower Grant, which supported her debut album as a composer.

JM: So I owe them a great deal of gratitude and I feel very fortunate to have been and to continue to be part of the family, we call it La Familia of Sphinx. So yeah, we continue a relationship now through administrative pursuits and various other ways that I remain connected with them.

[excerpt of **Starburst** plays]

ECB: You're listening to Starburst for chamber orchestra. It was commissioned by the Sphinx Organization.

[excerpt of **Starburst** plays]

JM: It was like I was writing for friends again and I knew their personalities and so I was writing to that and also really virtuosic playing ability. I was really consciously trying to get as many colors out of the ensemble as I could.

[excerpt of **Starburst** plays]

JM: And I came up with the title at the end, realizing that it had a sort of feeling of like shooting stars.

[excerpt of **Starburst** plays]

ECB: I noted to her that this very specific directing of color and technique was quite different from the improvisation she had spend so much of her younger life involved in.

JM: I really enjoy the super detailed aspect of like making certain colors and certain gestures happen like at a certain time and having the control to do that. And then I like to just like go completely on the other spectrum and like open it up, so you really get a sense of both aesthetics are sort of like undulating back and forth and sort of like cosmic, I don't want to say cosmic, but it can have that feeling of like being in like two different worlds, which I like.

ECB: Hey, I'm gonna take 50 seconds for some gratitude. First I'd like to thank Dave Martin, who was already a pledged subscriber, but who bumped up his monthly pledge, so thank you Dave. And also I'd like to thank Dee Blair, that's my mother, for her monthly pledge. I'd like to thank the iTunes user, Julia Doll, I don't know her full name, but I am very thankful to her, she left a review after I put out a general request on Twitter. If you'd like to leave us a review, I would really appreciate it. Just go to iTunes and look up our podcast, and tell the world what you think. And if you'd like to become a pledged subscriber,

just visit patren.com/listeningtoladies, donations start at just one dollar a month and they make a huge difference. Ok, back to the episode.

The first woman composer Jessie ever heard of was Clara Schumann. She was in an ensemble at age fifteen that played one of Schumann's pieces.

JM: And then like in college, I learned about Hildegard Von Bingen, you know, it's like....

ECB: For those of you who haven't heard of her, Hildegard Von Bingen was a Medieval composer, definitely worthy of being celebrated. Her story is fascinating and inspiring and her music is beautiful. But she remains one of the only woman composers covered in many university history courses. To give an example, she was the only woman composer represented in The One Thousand Years of Music History covered in my graduate entrance exams. So, we were laughing because in one sense poor Hildegard has become a bit of a joke, the only representative, the token woman.

JM: You know, I didn't really know what was up, like in terms of talent and output until recently, until probably after my undergrad was when I really started like noticing. I think maybe Jennifer Higdon was maybe the first woman composer that I had heard of who was like contemporary and I thought, wow, her music is really like electrifying and lot of movement and texture and to me it was exciting at the time.

ECB: Later, she would study with composer Joan Tower, who was mentioned by Ingrid Stolzel in the first episode of this podcast.

JM: She's so smart about music, I mean and also just like super intuitive about music. Like she's really aware of how things happen in time and like the connection between one moment and the next, that's probably the biggest lesson that I got from her.

ECB: When I asked Jessie if there were ways in which her gender had affected her career, she shared a story of something that had recently happened.

JM: I was asked to write a piece commemorating an institution that is all males basically, this institution, and then without telling me, the person who was commissioning was also speaking to other composers, which is fine, totally their prerogative, that's how that works, you know, you have to make sure you get the right person for the job. And I found out that they decided to go with somebody else, but it was awkward, they had promised a certain amount of things up to that point, it was just poorly executed. So I was under one understanding that something else was happening, you know beside it. And then as a concession, the commissioner says, "Oh, well you know, we are actually gonna have so and so write the piece, but we want you to write another piece that celebrates the wives of this organization, blah blah blah, and their sacrifice in supporting these men on their journey", you know, and I just thought, it was like one of those things when you are on the phone and your mouth is open and you are like, how am I supposed to react to this? Because it was like a genuine request, this person really felt like this was a proper way to make up for what happened, and I thought, ok well we'll just keep, we'll stay in touch, well anyway, it fell through. But anyway, that was like the only really kind of weird experience that I had. Mostly people are excited, I find, I mean people are all about diversity these days, a lot of people, enough to sort of like make it a trend I think. So I think in general people are excited to diversify their pool of composers and people that they work with, so I've found recently that, it's hard to know, because I don't know how men are treated in this thing, but I have been fortunate to, in general, been treated very well, and so I'm gonna hope that that keeps happening, basically.

ECB: When I asked her about what her motivations are when she's writing a piece of music, she spoke about storytelling and imagery being really important in the process.

JM: The piece I am working on now is called Records from a Vanishing City and it's based on my recollection of listening to music as a kid. So it's like image based, but also there's a sort of like story line, there's a story of me as a kid and my perception of what was happening.

ECB: She also thinks about the emotional effects her music might have.

JM: I do think a lot about emotional draw and pull and moments, like moment to moment gesture, sort of carrying you through time in a way that has place marks and you know, so I just think about myself, oh that's a great thing to say. I think about myself all the time, but I think about the things that I respond to most as a listener. Rhythm is really important to me. I like the idea that you can sense space in sound, like dimensions. I like the idea of writing for dance. I haven't written anything for dance, but I do think about dance when I write.

ECB: In her bio, she writes, "Music is my connection to the world." I asked her about this.

JM: You know I had this really great experience, it like affirmed a lot of things for me and then shaped a lot of the way that I think about how music functions. And it was in I was in Rhode Island in Providence, teaching at the organization called Community Music Works and it's a social justice mission. What they have been able to accomplish is absolutely incredible, in terms of building the community around the school. So there was a lot of teaching, a lot of engagement with young people, with students and also their parents, and sort of building this culture around the school. And music was like part of it in a way that was, you know, it was another element of what was happening in the community. It wasn't like ok, we are making this like rigorous music program, where everyone coming out is gonna be the next Yo-Yo Ma, you know, the next Perlman, although there are a bunch of really super talented kids in there that really love music and practice a lot and stuff and participated in other activities aside from this one, musical activities, but the growth of the community and watching it grow around music so organically was like a life changing experience. You know, music as a way to bring people into the room together, and so it is actually like a physical thing, like physically bringing people together into a community, or building a community physically that exists around music, is a super important thing for me.

ECB: I asked her how she feels about the composer's career companion, that is teaching.

JM: I am totally ok with it, because I actually really love teaching. Again, I go back to my experience in Providence with Community Music Works, in which we were teachers, administrators, and performers. We performed fifty concerts a year or something like that. Mostly local, we did go out to Boston and Connecticut and sometimes, yeah, travel a little bit, but the experience of being all of the things, it was totally possible, everybody did it. I mean, it was hard work, it's like you have to balance it all, but I think an artist should expect that they are gonna be doing all of it and that they all feed each other. I mean I feel that it's necessary to occasionally sit down with a student and try to explain to them what it is that you do, because it helps you know, strengthen your own understanding of what you're doing and I feel like it's necessary for me personally. And teaching younger people is really interesting to me, at high school level specifically. College level, they are interesting, but I like the idea of, I don't know, I feel like maybe it's like a weird control thing, but I feel like you have more of like an influence on what happens and I like being a part of that.

[excerpt of **Banner** plays]

ECB: This is a piece for string quartet and orchestra entitled Banner. It was another commission from the Sphinx Organization, this time to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Star Spangled Banner.

[excerpt of **Banner** plays]

JM: As a black American especially, I have mixed feelings about the statements in the song, in terms of land of the free, et cetera, et cetera...

[excerpt of **Banner** plays]

JM: It was a hard project because of the sort of inequality aspect of it, of actually being in this country and celebrating it through song, so I had to sort of work my way around the subject matter in a way that was like respectful of the song's history and what it means to so many people, but then also sort of take the opportunity to find my own voice in it. So, what I did was, I transcribed a lot of freedom songs and also civil rights songs and also a few like socialist anthems from like Cuba, well Puerto Rican national anthem was there, and also like This Land is Your Land, you know, so there was a mixture of like different kinds of songs that all comment on American experience from their different aspect and also the main culturally, like I tried to represent an array of cultures that are here.

[excerpt of **Banner** plays]

JM: So through those songs, I sort of wove together themes from the Star Spangled Banner as well as these songs. And the string quartet was sort of to symbolize the individual and then the orchestra as the larger community. They sort of go back and forth, they work with and against each other the entire way through.

[excerpt of **Banner** plays]

ECB: I've created this podcast to help celebrate and showcase diversity in classical music composition. In the present socio-political climate, in the US and in many parts of the world, it's so important to affirm and reaffirm that diversity is not something to be feared, but something to be celebrated. We get it right in kindergarten when the emphasis is on learning to share, but as adults in society we sometimes lose that along the way. It's my fervent hope that as a country and as a planet, we'll continue to grow towards sharing. Let's open up to our neighbors, especially to all those who have been historically disenfranchised. I urge you to ask yourself if there's anything you can give, time, money, skills, space, ideas that could help make the society you live in more compassionate and more equitable. Show notes for this episode can be found by visiting www.listeningtoladies.com and clicking on the link to the podcast.

And as ever, thank you for listening.