

CS 36 Transcript.mp3

[00:00:00] Did you sleep well last night? How about the night before? Yeah, me either. I'm Colleen Phelps, and this is classically speaking.

[00:00:17] Pianist Lara Downes was right there on the insomnia train with the rest of us whose thoughts have been racing with worst case scenarios all night for the last six months.

[00:00:25] Just crazy, you know, insomnia, nightmares and things and I thought, I bet I'm not the only one. And it was something to do because all my concerts had gotten canceled. So there I was at home.

[00:00:36] Downes did what so many of us want to do at a time like this. She put what she was feeling into her music making. We all need to take care of ourselves and get some sleep. So very quickly. In the early days of the pandemic, she put together an album of lullabies.

[00:00:52] And it was really lovely, actually was just I think it was the beginning of reimagining, you know, what you can do as a musician when the whole world turns upside down.

[00:01:10] It was a beautiful experience, actually, and kind of got me back on track just making music because it felt good.

[00:01:17] As a woman in a male-dominated field, I find myself instinctively avoiding talking about motherhood, since that's something that comes with career baggage. But with an album of lullabies, you feel like you've embraced that piece of your identity artistically. Or is it something you never particularly got hung up on?

[00:01:36] It's been a journey, I think, you know, internally and externally. Right. Because one of my priorities when my kids were really small was not to let my career take over their lives. So I really tried to downplay it and minimize it and practice at night when they were asleep and all of these things. And then gradually in our family, the awareness of what I do took a different place. And now my kids are so proud of my music making. And and I, I'm proud of having given them an awareness that you can do something creative and beautiful because you really love to do it and that you can do it because you work really, really hard. You know, externally. It sure it's you know, it's a it's a struggle to balance everything. What I love about this time, frankly, is that, you know, all of a sudden here we all are with all of our mess and there's no hiding it anymore. I think we're going to come out of this with a different awareness of family responsibilities and gender roles. And, you know, we will have seen toddlers climb climbing all over everyone, men and women. And I think that this the the length that we've had to go to, particularly as women, to keep those things separate, are not sustainable and not doable in the end.

[00:03:16] So many really great works of art have come historically from isolation times, where composers were either isolated for their own health or when they sought out being away from society. Have you learned anything about yourself artistically during this?

[00:03:33] I'm Planning and projecting and preparing for things that are far in the future? And that's a certain kind of a relationship with your work. It's a it's a process, right? It's a process of of developing and creating an ambitious thing. But there's something about the

spontaneity of doing something because it's what you feel today. And I found that with the virtual performances that I'm doing where, you know, sometimes things are coming together in a week or so. And certainly with the recordings where I'm not going into a studio for three days at a time. And, you know, really, really long, intensive days of getting this thing done. I'm drifting in and out of my studio space and, you know, sitting down for an hour or two at a time and kind of doing it when it feels right and it feels good and well. And also in people in my house are quiet. But, you know, I think that there's something that musicians are feeling about wanting to be in the flow of time, wanting to make the decisions and the statements that just echo what we're feeling.

[00:04:43] You know, what's a piece that I have just been playing all the time this summer is Summerlands by William Grant Still. Just so evocative, maybe evocative of this kind of missed summer that we've had last summer. A feeling of tranquility and that feeling that you have on a summer night out in the countryside, you know, just peace and fresh air. And tomorrow is going to be a good day. I think a lot of the pieces, they're so reassuring and comforting and they hold memory in them. But that's the thing about lullabies is that, you know, they remind us, of course, of childhood. Right. But they just always have this promise that tomorrow, tomorrow everything's going to be OK.

[00:05:45] As a concert pianist, Downs has been dedicated to showing the world exactly what American music looks like. She herself is from a mixed African-American and European background. So that take on programming is Lara staying true to herself. Her albums include arrangements of spirituals and her own take on the music of Billie Holiday. But she also consistently puts the spotlight on black composers from the early 20th century, like William Grant Still and another composer who also hit her career breakthrough in the early 1930s. Florence Price. Like Downs, a mixed race woman, a mom, and a pianist.

[00:06:22] One of the things that happens when we discover a figure like Florence Price is that we feel like we've checked a box, you know, OK, we know what a name. We found a name. We found this lady who wrote music. And that's enough for historians or for, you know, just sort of filling out the information gap. But then what happens now? Then we have to dig deeper than we have to actually get the music, play the music, teach the music, share the music. So I'm like I mean, I'm just so thrilled that I've had the opportunity to do this. And really, every time I hear from somebody who wants more information about where to find the scores or, you know, how to play the music, it just makes me so happy to think of a time in the very near future when this will have made a difference in terms of what we call classical music and who feels a part of what we call classical music. Her language is so unique and really coming from this interesting blend of, you know, a musical tradition. Yes. But also lack of moments in history coming together. And this is music that's really, I think, representing that transition from the Deep South to the big city that happened in the 1930s. And it is also music that's really claiming identity, because even though she was a mixed race woman who wanted desperately to have a big career in a very in a completely white male field, she chose to keep close to the music of her heritage. She could have erased it. She didn't embrace it. And I think that that's what's really extraordinary. And that's probably what resonates so much for me here. It is that feeling of authenticity and honesty. It just gives me so much happiness to see that music, you know, infiltrating the world. She lived a complex life full of balancing all kinds of things, notably being a mother, being a single mother, making a living with her music. The circumstances of her career. What happened to her music after her death and now this resurgence? It's really kind of an interesting snapshot of the way history works.

[00:09:06] Lara Downes used her piano to help you get some sleep. And she's also going to use it to remind you to vote. Find out how after the break.

[00:10:25] Lara Downes is quite prolific. She's released a lot of albums and performed all over the world. So I knew I would hear something good when I asked her for a recent performance or recording that was particularly moving. It was no surprise that the music was by Florence Price, but it was a special delight that she chose a collaboration with friend of the podcast, Rhiannon Giddens,

[00:10:46] You know, along the lines of like big dreams. It was really a beautiful experience to record Dream Variation by Margaret Bonds with Rhiannon Giddens, who is such a dear friend and a profound inspiration, and we thought we connected a few years before really around our shared vision of American music and how to kind of retell these stories and again, brought in that brought in the canon or the definition of what the music is. And let more people in. That song by bond market bonds with a text from Langston Hughes for us was really a statement about young women and young girls and, you know, giving them the license to to dream. This is a line from the song, "To to Flee My Arms Wide in some place of the sun to whirl and to dance till the white day is done"

[00:12:17] You know, it's a song about youth and about being a young person of color and. And again, potential and the ability to dream that the world belongs to you. I feel fortunate to be a pianist because the repertoire is so vast. I have friends who are a cellist who at this point really have recorded the existing repertoire for cello, which is also great, because then that motivates them to commission new music. But I think, you know, we're we're put on this planet as musicians to leave it a little bit different than we found it. Right. And I think that that is about doing something new. It can be mixed in with doing lots of, you know, lots of what's old and beloved. But we really should always be doing something new about the canon.

[00:13:13] When we say canon, we're referring to those pieces that have been played over and over again, mainstays of every classical season. For example, in December of 2020, Beethoven turns 250. So a lot of us who work in classical music are looking through his catalog. One friend noted that he found 311 recordings of just Beethoven's Ninth Symphony currently in print. That's a lot. And I read that statistic right as Deutsche Grammophon announced a new one, taking the total up to 312. This is just to make the point that in classical music, unlike any other genre, we rerecord things. And that is just not how Larry Downes rolls.

[00:14:00] This is relatively recent. But programing in America particularly has been as conservative as it has felt. If you look back to the days of Leonard Bernstein and you know the kind of programing that was going on in major institutions for American audiences, so much new American music was thriving on our stages. We're living a cultural shift. You know, we don't come out of this the same. And I it feels like a shift towards a rebirth and and towards a I really like relishing what is new and what is of our time, because we all need to feel the the life blood, you know, and the breath of who we are.

[00:14:43] What do you think it is that makes some pieces of music enter the canon or the repertoire and not necessarily others?

[00:14:52] I was just talking this morning with somebody about about the candidate and expanding it and also kind of why do we stick with certain things? And we were talking about Beethoven and how what is in Beethoven's music that's still. Affects us so deeply.

It's not some, you know, abstract quality called genius. It's the rightness of it. It's the emotional power of it. It's the, you know, crashing and banging and weeping of it. And so I think that when we come back to somebody like Florence Price, who got lost for a while, I think that that music will stay because they're those qualities exist in her music, too.

[00:15:50] Also, remember that all the music that we play with new at one point, I don't think there's anyone who put pen to paper 200 years ago expecting generations of musicians to bow down and revere and keep playing the. It's exactly the same way the music was written for all kinds of different reasons. The music was very often written to pay the bills. You know, the music was written to express a range of emotions.

[00:16:16] The music was written to make a political statement. And the music, again, was always new.

[00:16:21] And it was meant to be heard by a living, breathing audience. So I think that, you know, any composer from the distant past would be shocked, shocked to see a program of music that dates only from his lifetime. I think that history is only a history if it keeps going. Don't think it's fair to say that most of the great composers whose music we still loved were revolutionary in one way or another. They were forward looking people. They were not looking towards the path.

[00:17:02] That's Leonard Bernstein conducting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Bernstein being a conductor and composer who had a milestone year of his own in 2018 as Downes moves forward from lullabies. She's actually taken inspiration from the West Side Story composer and made use of a less known piece of his the song Take Care of This House from the musical Sixteen Hundred Pennsylvania Avenue.

[00:17:40] It was a historic Broadway flop. When the grace spot in the history of Broadway. I think because it was way ahead of its time, the show was way ahead of its time. You know, talking about race and the complicated history of the White House.

[00:18:00] Sixteen hundred Pennsylvania Avenue is a play within a play. It tells the story of the first hundred years of the occupancy of the White House. Part of the reason it was a flop was that in 1976, America was celebrating its centennial. The audience wasn't ready for Bernstein's biting commentary about our country's complicated and problematic history. The musical does make one particularly beautiful point toward the end, though, that America is a play that's always in rehearsal, undergoing revisions and improvements. Downes took that idea and brought together a group of friends to perform the song to remind audiences that we as Americans take care of the White House by exercising our right to vote.

[00:18:45] I started reaching out to friends, American musicians who care and like to make music for good reasons. And before I knew it, you know, again, because we're all here at home and feeling like you want to do things that are important. I had assembled a good dream. Team of American musicians are also great activists. People like Yo-Yo Ma and Judy Collins and Rhiannon Giddens and Anthony McGill, a whole cast of incredible singers and kids from the Brooklyn Youth Chorus.

[00:19:17] And we just made this beautiful collaborative video of the song where everybody you know just sings a little. I just keep thinking about the troubled times that we're living in. And I really wonder, as my parents daughter, you know, are we all doing everything that we should be doing to to make change on every single level? Are we all

giving the small amounts of money that we can give? And more importantly, the amount of time that we can give to really to service and our community needs to to turn things around and make things better. So this is our way for it for this month anyway, to do something.

[00:19:58] You can see the full performance featuring Lara Downes, Rhiannon Giddens, Yo-Yo Ma, and more on our social media. We're classically speaking on Facebook and Instagram and speak classical on Twitter. If you've come to the show recently, give us a follow and check out some of our earlier episodes. You'll learn when Yefim Bronfman first heard Beethoven. How Christopher Rouse lied on his college applications and how Ben Folds wrote a Piano Concerto because of a conversation at a dinner party. Classically speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio. The show is edited by Anita Bug and mastered by Carl Pedersen.

[00:20:32] I'm Colleen Phelps. Thanks for enjoying your backstage pass to classical music. And hey, come get some rest.