

Episode 04: Getting the Song Out with Emilie LeBel - Transcript

Kathryn Tremills:

This week we are talking to Dr. Emilie Lebel and we've just heard an excerpt from "the place of scraps - the totem pole transported to Toronto" performed by soprano Phoebe MacRae and pianist Rachel Iwaasa with recorded text of Jordan Abel.

We feel so lucky that while we were searching for a composer for our first Women on the Verge commission, composer Jocelyn Morlock recommended Emilie to us. After exploring her music we were moved by her soundscape sensibility. At our initial meeting we found that we really clicked as humans too and so Emilie agreed to write a piece for us in 2018, that became "Blue of the Distance". Now we've toured it all over the world and are happy to call Emilie a close friend of ours. Emilie is currently Affiliate Composer with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and Assistant Professor of Composition at MacEwan University.

Emily Martin:

Okay. So, we're really lucky because we actually know you so well, and that is lucky, but for our listeners who do not know you very well, can you tell us a little bit about how you got into composition and what you're doing right now,? Especially during COVID, but just in general; what you're writing, where you are, all that good stuff.

Emilie LeBel:

I'm nodding, like people can see me - but, hello, I'm Emilie LeBel. I'm a composer based in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. For those of you who don't know Canada super well, it's quite far North, the farthest North I've ever lived. Originally from Montreal and Toronto. I'm a composer and teacher. I compose many different things. I would say for a long time, I focused mostly on chamber music. So music for smaller ensembles, both featuring acoustic instruments and pieces that featured both electronics and acoustic instruments.

I think that's really where a lot of my career has been. I really enjoy the smaller ensembles and the collaborative aspect of that. For the past few years, I've been writing a lot of orchestral music as well, which I also really enjoy while it's something quite different. So for the past two years now, I've been an affiliated composer with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. So as part of that residency as a composer, I write pieces for them, and so about once a year I have a piece performed by them. So that's what I'm kind of working on right now, but maybe I'll circle back around to that - what I'm working on in a minute and just sort of say where I started or where I came from because I think Emily asked about that too.

I always say I'm the product of public radio and public education. So I grew up in Toronto and took music in the public schools there. Neither of my parents are terribly musical or artistic, but my mom believed really firmly in us trying a little bit of everything. So actually, I don't know if you

all know this, even though you know me, well, I sang in choir as a kid for many years. My public school had a choir and everyone in my public school basically sang in that choir from grades three to six or four. So I sang in choir and then I started trumpet and played trumpet all throughout middle school, high school, played in the orchestra, went to band camp. And then, you know, at that point in time in Toronto, the music programs were quite strong and there was a lot of space to do extracurricular activities that way. So I really benefited from just how much was available to us freely, not because of our - you know, our parents' income or where we lived in the city. We just got to participate in those things.

Elizabeth McDonald:

You mean - just to interject Emilie - you mean within the public school system at the time.

Emilie LeBel:

Within the public system at the time, and I can't speak to that now. I don't have young young children. I don't live in Toronto right now, but my sense is some of that has changed, and you know, I won't go on a whole talk about that, because I don't know all the specifics of how it's changed in Ontario at this point, but I know where I live in Edmonton. It's certainly not as equitable and accessible as it was when I was a kid. So I always like to say I'm very much a product of having a good education and extracurricular activities available to me, and also the CBC part - so for those of you don't live in Canada, that's our public broadcasting system, and that used to be very well funded through public funds as well. And I just think of how many days after school, I listened to the radio, if it was on, when I came home or on the weekend or in the car, how much of my musical education came from listening to radio broadcasts and learning about different composers and different music, through that because my parents had that on so much. So that was really where my musical education, my love for music started. I actually went on from high school. I spent a year out of the university of Victoria studying trumpet and really thought I wanted to be in performance. Unfortunately my first year of university, I had quite a bad accident and shattered part of my jaw and broke the other part of my jaw. And those of you who play a brass instrument know any sort of injury to your face really changes how you can play - even something small, like getting braces. So having major surgery cracked that; sort of put the performance career on hold for me. And I ended up not staying at university and taking some time away and sort of figuring out what I wanted to do because I knew I wanted to be in music, but I didn't know what that could be if I couldn't do performance, because that was the only thing that was really, I guess, sold to me as a younger student, as a woman. I wasn't told I could go into composing or conducting or theory or, you know, it was sort of like, well, you can go teach or you can go be a performance major. So I actually went on to study audio engineering and finished a college program in that, and did some interning in a studio, discovered for many reasons that while I liked that whole world and the sort of creative aspects of audio engineering, that that's not really what I wanted to do with my life and went back to university.

I'm trying to think if I was 25 or 26 at the time. And I went back to do sort of a general bachelor of fine arts where I could take some music courses and it was through that, that I discovered I could compose and really enjoyed it and stayed on with that and continued my studies and slowly gotten immersed in the community in Toronto and did workshops and opportunities and just sort of carried on from there.

Emily Martin:

So were some of your first compositions electronic, since that was where your -

Emilie LeBel::

Yeah - so my first year - I'm just thinking about my first year at university, when I was taking composition classes, that was all acoustic composition. I'm thinking now, it was a lot of Bartok, and a lot of playing things on the piano and quite traditional, but very supportive and encouraging. But when I was at school studying audio engineering, we had access to the midi lab. And so I spent a lot of time in there sort of playing with sounds and I wouldn't really call them compositions, but like collages of different sounds and colors and just sort of figuring out how that equipment worked. And then slowly sort of brought the two together at some point in my undergrad where I was doing a little bit of both, which is kind of a nice thing if you think of my background playing trumpet and really kind of invested in all that classical repertoire, but then also going and studying audio engineering. It was kind of nice to be able to, to study somewhere where they allowed me the flexibility to pursue both.

Emily Martin:

Yeah, so with your background in trumpet were you hesitant to move in your composition into some other instruments or were you like, finally I get to try other things, or was trumpet your first instrument that you composed for?

Emilie LeBel:

Most of the early compositions I did were for piano or string trio or like very sort of traditional classical ensembles. And I think that was mostly my teacher and the way he taught, because as a composer, you learn about all the different instruments there are, how to write for them. I can't really remember being excited or disappointed about it. It was just sort of like, "Oh, these are the colors I have to work with." And these are the instruments I need to learn about how they work. I actually haven't written that much for trumpet on its own, which is kind of funny, but when I write orchestra pieces, you know, they always get like one good solo because they're the trumpets.

Elizabeth McDonald:

That's awesome. I'm wondering how you evolved from that sort of the formal part of the education of learning to write for traditional things into writing for the voice, especially considering now you write so much for a big orchestra with the Toronto Symphony, and yet you seem to balance that so beautifully with writing for the voice. What was the evolution there in your process?

Emilie LeBel:

Okay, well I actually didn't write much for voice as a student. My early education was quite focused on, again, writing small ensembles or orchestral instruments. I'm just thinking back now, I didn't really write for voice in my undergrad. It wasn't really approached. And then the first time I wrote for voice, actually, wasn't even part of my school curriculum. My teacher at the -

Elizabeth McDonald:

Do we need to talk about school curriculum and how to learn to write for the voice, or should we leave that alone for now?

Emilie LeBel:

We could talk about that because now I address it really explicitly in one of my own classes.\

Elizabeth McDonald:

Right.

Emily Martin:

Thank you. Thank you.

Emilie LeBel:

All the things you don't get as a student, you think carefully about how to incorporate that. You know, I don't think it was - in the grand scheme of things, there's lots of ways you can learn. So in a way I figured it out. But yeah, my first opportunity was outside of school during my master's degree and my student or my teacher at the time recommended me for this program through Soundstreams where I got to write a piece, my first art song piece, and I didn't really know what I was doing. So you know, you write this piece, you find the text and then, it was workshopped a little bit. So I learned a few things. She was like, "Oh, this doesn't sit well in my register or the way you've placed the syllables is kind of awkward. How about this? Or have a thought." So there's a little bit of time for that, but not much. And then I didn't write for voice again for a long time because I didn't know how to deal with text.

And a lot of the ways I was interested in composing and the sort of colors and sounds I wanted, I didn't know how to make that work for the voice. And I don't think anyone really ever showed me the possibility of what I wanted to do - that it was possible to do anything other than like a really sort of typical art song setting. We were really encouraged if we did write for voice to use texts that were already in the public domain so that we didn't have to deal with copyright for me, most of that text, I didn't find terribly applicable or appropriate to the sort of topics I wanted to deal with again. So I just didn't really write for voice for a number of years. And then I did in this program in Vancouver, they had the Art Song Lab where composers are paired up with a poet and you get to work with them and write a piece. And that kind of changed things quite dramatically for me. I worked with a really interesting and adventurous poet, Jordan Abel, who

just used space and text and narrative in a really different way than I had encountered in a lot of the art song that I had been exposed to. And so it gave me really interesting creative problems to approach and how I wrote the piece and spending a weekend in Vancouver, getting feedback from other singers, getting to see how other poets and composers worked.

Emily Martin:

So we were also paired with a singer? Or were you working with a variety?

Emilie LeBel:

So yeah, we collaborated before we got there on a piece and then we spent a week with a singer and a piano player working on the piece. And so there is a number of these composer-poet pairs, and then also a number of singer-piano player pairs. And then we got some mentorship for some workshops from some different composers based in Vancouver as well. So I think that was the first time I really saw the possibility of just all the different ways you could approach writing for voice and that success could mean different things and that you could work with people who were adventurous in spirit. And I hadn't really seen that in my education, and the way singers were educated and taught and supported in their programs. You know, I don't think voice teachers at the time were saying, "Oh, you should go work with a young Canadian composer and get a new piece for your recital." I found their repertoire selection quite narrow in focus.

Emily Martin:

But I also don't think there are many programs that allow for that much time to work on something. So I think there's so many factors, right? Is it that teachers aren't thinking about it and composers don't have the time to do it. So I mean, something, I think all of us have talked about before this podcast is finding a way to provide that time for composers.

Emilie LeBel:

And it is so hard. I mean I think about how quickly the school semester goes, how now that I'm teaching, I'm not a student, how busy my students are, how stressed out everyone is, and you want to have all these really important opportunities for them, but you also don't want to overburden them because I think they are sort of at the max all the time. And I don't think I saw it quite that way as a student, you know. Your perspective is different when you're younger. And you see things differently once you start teaching and sort of see the bigger scope, which again, I think when you're younger, you have a hard time sort of zooming out and seeing all the factors.

Emily Martin:

Well you could spend an entire semester doing one song and unfortunately we have to provide this education, same for singers of many different things over that 12 weeks or 14 weeks or whatever we have. And yeah, the space just isn't there to do everything we want to do.

Elizabeth McDonald:

But I also think that not every teacher that teaching voice has the experience of premiering new music and working with composers. So it's definitely something that's out of their comfort zone, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. But I think that it's part of one of the reasons why, is that it's how do we build that, level of communication with composers and how do we teach that if we haven't done that or paid attention to that, or focused on that then it becomes even more challenging. And then to do it with a young composer who doesn't have the vocabulary yet, it's a huge, potentially huge project - certainly fulfilling. And we certainly can talk about that later. But I think that's part of it too, don't you? I don't know. That was my, you know, I think about my experience in undergrad studying with Mary Morrison, who was a huge contemporary music proponent as someone who had done tons of premieres and new music. And she was always telling us to go find new stuff, but not every teacher was doing that. So I don't know...

Emilie LeBel:

Yeah. Then I didn't really write for voice again until I wrote for you. And then I got two voice commission's back to that and they were both really interesting projects. And then it was like, yes, I can finally dig into something that I want to do in a meaningful way with people who are going to understand and support what it is I want to do and also sort of integrated what they want to do. So I just kind of learned as I went and, you know you just have to listen to the people sing and see the kind of repertoire they're singing and think really carefully about what it is you're asking them to do in the piece and the text.

Kathryn Tremills:

So Emilie, that brings us, brings us very naturally to our commission, which you mentioned, and you talked about working with text and learning how to work with texts and with our commission, you set your own text and brought together your own texts. Would you like to talk about this piece, about Blue the Distance and how the theme was brought about?

Emilie LeBel:

Yeah, so the commission that I wrote for Women on the Verge was called Blue the Distance, and when the three of you approached me, the conversation was around the Syrian refugee crisis and how we could do something around that. I guess, where it sort of got to is this idea of women caught in turmoil or women caught in situations where they're migrating or leaving their home, and how we could talk about this or bring light to something that, or at least remind you, wasn't covered that way in the media. And it got me thinking a lot about how our media coverage of these things is biased. And we all know, I think, you know, critical approach media coverage here, how things can be covered in different ways. And we don't always see the story.

But a lot of the coverage I was reading, wasn't really talking about how women were experiencing that crisis. So for the project the starting point was me actually going and collecting news articles about the Syrian refugee crisis, wanting to talk about it, but also knowing that I couldn't talk about it as a white woman in Canada. I couldn't tell someone else's story, nor did I want to. But thinking about how we could, bring some awareness to this subject. And so my

approach was collecting all these news articles about the Syrian refugee crisis. And at the time I was living down in the United States. So I had collected quite a number of articles from both the United States and Canada. I think last time I talked about this, I was trying to remember the exact number. It was like 142 or 143 news articles. So had those all printed out. And then I went through looking for words that were frequently used or phrases that were frequently used and all these New York articles talking about women, talking about this crisis, and then just also some phrases that I found interesting or certain words that came up a lot. So, collected all those, had them all sort of spread out across my apartment at the time, circling words, crossing things out. And then I took an essay by one of my favorite writers, Rebecca Solnit, which is called Blue of Distance. So it's a bit of a different title. Mine's Blue of the Distance and hers is Blue of Distance, took all these words and map them on to her - I say, using erasure poetry techniques, and that became the text for the piece. And I really wanted the text to sort of encapsulate, the sort of spaciousness of these words falling on the page. So if you have a chance to go look at the score, you'll see how the words are arranged. It's not sort of a typical stanza by stanza poem, but there's a lot of space, certain words are repeated.

Emily Martin:

Actually we'll put that up on our site for the podcast, so people can just go right there and see it because I think it's super important to see.

Emilie LeBel:

Yeah. And I think often when you performed it, you had the opportunity to put the text up as well, or have it in the program, or just a way of sort of seeing how it's arranged, because I think that's important, to how I sort of worked on the piece and then the pacing of certain words once that was all mapped out. So I ended up, I think - I like referring to it now as sort of found text. I don't really say I wrote a libretto or did the text myself, but it's sort of a collection of words that I put together in a certain way. And I think that was really meaningful and important for me because by the time I sat down to actually write the music, I already had this really deep familiarity with the text because I'd spent months thinking about the text before I worked on the music, which is quite different than being handed a poem where, or choosing a poem. And then you have to spend a lot of time sort of figuring out the text from there before you write it. You can't just sit down and start writing music. If you don't know what you want to do with the text, or then you just end up, I think with texts doesn't necessarily sit well or work well for the singer.

Emily Martin:

Can I just ask you a little bit about that process? I know I'm sort of breaking this up, but I actually, as a singer, it's funny as I got older, I started really looking at the poem and how for any song and how the poet set it. So quite often, you know, stanzas are broken up in a way that I never got from the song and I always find it so interesting how the composer sort of took liberty with how different the poet said it. So I, again, think it's really important that our listeners see how you set it and then listen to it, because it's very, I think it's a really big important part of this piece.

Emilie LeBel:

Well, I'm trying to remember at some point a mentor said to me, don't let the text dictate to you how you structure your music or how you structure the overall form of your piece. So just because the poem is in two stanzas, it doesn't mean you need to write a piece that's sort of an AB structure. And that was like a really empowering moment for me, like just to be told, "Oh, you don't have to do it this way." And I sort of thought, well, of course, I mean, that seems so obvious. Of course you don't have to do it way, but text can sort of impose on you a certain structure or assumptions through the way it's set up on the page through the narrative. And so that is a really interesting decision how composers decide which way to take a piece or even repeating certain words or repeating certain lines or bringing something back, things that didn't exist in the original poem and their motivations for doing that are always really interesting.

Elizabeth McDonald:

I want to pick up a thread of something you've just said with respect to mentorship, and you were talking about a mentor giving you a moment that really made you take pause in your process. And we have talked a lot to you about mentorship. But I'm wondering if we can sort of have a conversation with our audience about your thoughts on that. And specifically, I know we've talked a lot about mentorship for women composers. I know you feel strongly about, can we stop calling us female composers or women composers? And we've had some funny conversations about what are the alternative options to being a female composer, which we probably can't say on our podcast - or we could because it's ours. So who cares, but we won't. But I'm wondering if you can talk about some of your mentors, and how female mentorship is important. Particularly as we move forward in the world we're in right now,

Emilie LeBel:

I have to just to say - I'm fully putting out my geekness here, but if you watch Star Trek, the Ferengis, they're one of the races that you see on Star Trek and they call females FEEEE-males and they have this way of saying it. So every time someone calls someone a female composer, I'd always hear that E is being elongated a little bit and it reminds me of the ferengis from Star Trek.

Elizabeth McDonald:

That explains the text I got from you the other day with like 17 e's.

Emily Martin:

Well, and I sense that this is not a good thing. I'm not sure. I mean, I don't watch Star Trek but -

Emilie LeBel:

In Star Trek the ferengis are not what you would call the most advanced society in terms of how they treat their women. Their women aren't clothed, they're not allowed to do business. And Star Trek has evolved in many ways in terms of, you know, sort of thinking back to the next

generation and, and some of those shows and how they were kind of advanced for their time in terms of some of their politics around gender equity and race equity, but so many ways so backwards, anyway...

Emily Martin:

So this podcast is now just evolved to being about Star Trek, which is great because I know nothing. So this is great.

Emilie LeBel:

So whenever I hear someone call me a female composer, I automatically associate it with ferengis from Star Trek. So there you go.

Emily Martin:

Is this the original Star Trek or next generation?

Emilie LeBel:

This is, well, you see a lot of ferengis in Deep Space Nine.

Emily Martin:

Okay. I'm going to put it on my list. Watch.

Emilie LeBel:

Not that I watch a ton of Star Trek.

Emily Martin:

I'm not joking.

Emilie LeBel:

Yeah. But I didn't grow up watching TV. So I have like a lot of shows I've never watched, but during COVID I've been watching reruns of Star Trek Voyager and Deep Space Nine. So when I get tired of reading, that's sort of my late night -

Emily Martin:

So just FYI, we actually talked to Cecilia about what she was doing and she's been watching the real Housewives. So we're very happy to find out about your Star Trek obsession that was in quotes because we realized you're not watching it a lot, but exciting.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Okay. But let's bring it back to the topic at hand we can go off on real Housewives -

Emilie LeBel:

When we talked you had asked me earlier about what I was doing during COVID and we never got there, but we'll talk about mentorship, because what I'm doing is not that interesting unless you want to hear about, you know, walking the dog for two hours a day.

So mentorship; I was just, you know, as you were talking about it, I was realizing I didn't actually have many strong women mentorship opportunities as a composer going through my education, but I had some really lovely supportive mentors. But what I think is important, especially for young women is to see role models and to see women doing things and seeing that as a possibility. So whether it's a singer, composer, trumpet player, for myself growing up, I didn't sort of see those women in those positions. And I didn't see the sort of possibility of what I could do. And I think that sort of applies to like, if we're talking about equity that applies more broadly to right - we need black women composers in, you know, orchestral residencies and we need, we need these women who are doing excellent, excellent things in positions where the younger generation sees them being excellent and sees that as a possibility. So I just think that needs to be said, there's like this role model factor in this that's also really important to the mentorship. Just seeing people being really good at what they're doing and doing it.

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I even remember as a younger student, I'm trying to think at some point during my high school career, big special treat, my mom took me to see Wynton Marsalis and his big band in Toronto. And at the time, not sort of being able to articulate what I saw on stage, but all I saw was that there was no men - or sorry that there was all men in his big band. And I went to sort of see this group and gosh, they were great and it was really inspirational, but I also didn't see myself anywhere on stage and didn't really see that, you know, that was possible. And then at some point in high school being introduced to the music of Ingrid Jensen music, Canadian, jazz trumpet player, she's based in New York city and just seeing like this amazing woman doing her thing and doing it so well, really sort of changed my perspective on things as a young woman, even though I didn't really have the world experience or the knowledge to articulate why I was feeling the way I did. I just knew that like, oh, there's this woman doing this thing and, oh, that's then possible for me to do that.

Now what I'm starting to see is that women are having these opportunities in the composition world to be in positions to mentor, not just to be a role model, but to actually work and support the next generation. And that's so important because our experiences in the world are different and we do need support and encouragement. And it's not to say that other people in the composition world don't, it's just been ignored for a really long time. And we need to be acknowledged and supported and that's nice to have those opportunities to have it be from someone who's had some of those life experiences as well. As a young composer, I didn't really get that, but I have to say I'm really grateful. I had some really amazing teachers and mentors who were very supportive of what I did and really did offer the encouragement I needed.

And I'm trying to think. I think the first time I had mentorship from a woman composer was doing the composer kitchen with Quatuor Bozzini in Montreal and Linda Catlin Smith was one of the

two mentors that week. And that was life changing for me, mainly because she's an amazing composer and amazing mentor, nothing to do with her gender. But it was also this woman who was profoundly gifted at what she does in parting her knowledge to me, and just seeing the way she worked with the ensemble and worked with people, she just sort of, was a role model by just doing what she did, you know, and just setting this example of how to be. And it was a really powerful moment for me.

Emily Martin:

So to talk about this mentorship, so how many female composers do you teach right now and what do you think about passing on to them when you're teaching?

Elizabeth McDonald:

Well, and just to add on to what Em said - about the mentorship you're doing at the Toronto Symphony as well, because that's part of your role, or it seems like it's part of your role there.

Emilie LeBel:

Very much part of my role. So, maybe I'll take a step back, because I spent three years teaching at the University of Montana and I taught almost exclusively young men. There's very few women in the program there, and that was starting to change in my last year there. We were starting to get a few more applications from women and especially in the master's program. So I saw my role -there was often just sort of being a presence in the department and even students outside of composition, just seeing that, you know, women composers exist, was actually a really important thing. And then just in terms of my curriculum, the pieces, we looked at, the music we listened to, the scores we presented in class, all addressed equity and diversity as a whole. And so one of the comments I frequently got in my student evaluation student feedback was, "Oh, she introduced me to all these composers and people I'd never heard of." And that was really important and powerful. So that like, that sort of transcends you know, just women composers, but - and teaching young men, it's important for them to know about women, composers, queer composers, black composers.

And I think that sort of ripples out as your teaching and changes their perspective and slowly makes your classroom spaces more welcoming, more inclusive. And so I think all that takes time, it was something I found very frustrating teaching there, at times that it was so male dominated and my program here, I teach at MacEwan University in Edmonton, I have more women in my program. I wouldn't say it's 50/50, but I would also say my classroom much more reflects the diversity in Canada as well. It's not all young white men in composition here. So I would say MacEwan as a whole is working towards better supporting, what diversity might look like in music. But I will say, we are a very different music program. We don't have an orchestra, we're not a classical music program here, we're jazz and contemporary music and a bunch of things, and so I think that kind of shifts some of this around a bit too. There's baggage, but it's different baggage than like the classical composer cannon baggage. So there are more women here and I would say probably the longer I teach here and the more we address diversity in our

curriculum, make our classroom spaces welcoming and inclusive. I think we'll start to see that change more. And again, I think that's just seeing people, students seeing people in those positions and knowing what's possible, and feeling welcome and included, and the music we're listening to in class and their homework and their assignments, reflecting their experiences and their perspective of the world. It will welcome in again, too. So I think that's a huge part of the mentorship.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Well, and if I can just jump in, I think what you've said is really wise because it's very easy for us to just focus on one aspect of the diversity and equity that we're looking for. And in this case, just women, when in fact, diversity and equity is so much broader and has so many more connotations than inclusivity. I just, I mean, I guess to say that just so that we're all aware, that we are just pounding the pavement for women, but that's part of our mandate is to, you know, raise up the voices of other women, but there's just so much more we can be doing within, especially our teaching. And, you know, we're always having these conversations hopefully, but I think what you said is really wise.

Emilie LeBel:

And I think too, in our teaching, to always be reassessing what we're doing like to not sort of say, "Oh, I have addressed this in my teaching. I'm good now," but that really is the ongoing work.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Well it's an ongoing relationship with our curriculum and with the students that are in front of us and with the community that we're engaged in.

Emilie LeBel:

I will touch on the Symphony - I'm doing some mentorship for Continuum Ensemble this summer and well, not in Toronto, it should have been in Toronto, but it's all online. And it's myself and Anna Höstman are the two mentor composers for their summer workshop called HATCH. And I have to say, I was really thrilled at looking at applications, how many women applied. It was just really kind of amazing.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Yes. I think that program is awesome, but I want them to have singers involved too just us, you know, just to put that in there.

Emilie LeBel:

And Toronto Symphony Orchestra, we do some score reading sessions and a bunch of outreach and education opportunities every year. And anecdotally, since I've been in the position, we've had a lot more women applying for those positions. And so sometimes I wonder if women don't bother applying when they sort of see the same people getting, you know, entrance into the score reading workshop or whatever the opportunities are. It's sort of the same

people year after year, the same demographic, having those opportunities. I think I start to wonder if people just sort of don't bother because there's an investment of time and energy in applying for things. So, yeah, the Toronto Symphony, I mentor a number of things for emerging composers, but again, I think, you know, even if there's just a young woman sitting in the audience and she comes to the symphony that night and hears me do a pre-concert talk and just sees someone that she hasn't seen before in that setting of an orchestra and just sees that as possible. That's a really powerful thing as well, just to know that we exist and maybe we're good at what we do. You know, again, no one can see me shrug because it's a podcast, but -

Kathryn Tremills:

Emilie, I'm wondering if we could wind back to the commissioning idea and the relationship that we create or form with between composer and performer. I'm not sure that's something that's always addressed or thought about, but you were recommended to us by Jocelyn Warlock, who will be speaking with later this week, for the podcast as well, very excited about, and she highly recommended you and that's - so that's how we found you. And we didn't know you, but we've developed such a long relationship with you, and that's pretty awesome. We think.

Emilie LeBel:

Yeah, that's so funny because actually I never knew where you got my name from. I just got this lovely, it was like a Facebook message or an email, saying, hi, this is who we are. Would you be interested in writing a piece? And, you know, composers secretly get all delighted because that's a pretty fun email to get when someone -

Elizabeth McDonald:

And you're all introverts, so everything's kind of secret or at least that's how it feels to us extroverts.

Emilie LeBel:

But just to sort of cycle that back to that idea of mentorship. So Jocelyn is sort of like a generation past me in terms of where she is in her career. And I think there's like this really nice thing of women putting forward other women's names because they believe in what they're doing and having that opportunity just to say, "Oh, this person would be a really good person to work with." That's a really nice thing that I found women composers in Canada do for each other because they believe in their work. And that's just nice to know as Jocelyn, I never knew - that I just got this lovely little email saying, Hey! and that's often how commissions work. You get a nice little email and you have a conversation and you sort of gauge whether the project is going to be a good fit for everyone, but you never know, and I'm sure this is the same for performers. You kind of never know where that relationship is going to go. But I would say one of the reasons why I like writing chamber music so much is because of the friendships and relationships I've gotten out of working with performers, you get to know them. Um, and yeah, you develop these friendships and relationships with them. And I think there's something really special that happens when a piece sort of has a life beyond that initial premiere performance. And I've had collaborations that have been that too, and that's okay. Like not every collaboration

ends up being a lifelong friendship. You can do your work and write a fruitful piece of music and have a good premiere and sort - but I just think of just thinking of performers I've written that initial piece with, for them. And then I go on to work with them in a number of ways and how meaningful that's been to my artistic development to have these sort of longer term relationships for where there's a level of openness and honesty and trust.

Emily Martin:

I think you said something really important that performers at least should listen to. We just did a NATS presentation about this, and we also included something about commissioning and we had somebody the other day - and you were on - thank us for putting that into this presentation. And something you mentioned about doing the research and knowing if this is going to be a good fit. I think especially young singers are so excited to have something commissioned or to commission something. They don't actually do that work. So something you also didn't know is when Jocelyn gave us your name, we spent a long time listening to your other pieces, getting to know who you were as a composer before we reached out and realized that you we're making sounds and writing sounds that we really were interested in finding out what that would look like for us. And so I appreciate you saying that because there's more to it than just, I want a piece or I want to write for this person. So thank you for saying that.

Emilie LeBel:

That's good to say out loud too, because I do say no to things sometimes if I don't think it's going to be a good fit because of the topic, or sometimes it's the timing or maybe the personalities involved - it's okay to say no, or suggest someone else or say, I don't think this is right, or I can't do this right now. And I think when I was younger, I was afraid to say no. And so I certainly worked on some projects that ended up not being very satisfying, both artistically and on a sort of personal collaborative level. But gosh, when they're good, they're so good. And you know, I think, I'm just thinking there's a piano player in Banff, Luciane Cardassi, and I've known her for 11 years now and have written her a number of pieces, and she's a very good friend now. But there's also like this level of artistic trust there that you don't have when you just meet someone for the first time or Mark Takeshi McGregor out in Vancouver, I met him, writing a piece for his trio and then wrote a solo piece a few years later and then wrote a piece a few years later for flute choir. And he started, you know, when you, when you write again and again for someone and you go and you do concerts with them in different places, it's like this really special thing that you don't always get. And with you, with your ensemble, writing a piece and then getting so much feedback and having the piece played a number of times to the point where now I sort of feel like the piece is yours and belongs to you, in this way that it wouldn't if you had only played it once.

And then getting to travel with you and, and have breakfast and have drinks. It's not just about the music, it's about, the people involved and those friendships and the trust and the openness and artistically you grow, when you have people who can be really honest about what works in your music. Maybe what's not working is what they enjoy. And that's really important. I think, you

know, if you sort of look at being an artist, you don't stop growing and learning when you finish school, it's sort of this lifelong thing. So it's these collaborations with these colleagues who really allow you to continue developing your craft. And you don't get that in the same way when you just work with someone once they just play your piece once. It's fine, it's just a very different level of engagement on a sort of a human and artistic level.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Well, we're certainly glad that you're still talking to us after we've all traveled together a bit because sometimes that can be like a hard no afterwards.

Kathryn Tremills:

Yes.

Elizabeth McDonald:

I'm giggling thinking back to our time in Paris, where we ended up spending quite a bit of time with your mom and we had so much fun with her, so that was so awesome -

Emilie LeBel:

Because I was super jet lagged too, because it took me -

Elizabeth McDonald:

My god, you poor thing. You were -

Emilie LeBel:

Two days to get to Paris, compliments of Delta airlines.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Well weren't you trying to come in from Montana?

Emilie LeBel:

Yes, and so flying out of Montana, it's always like three flights to get anywhere. And if you miss one plane, the rest of it's just gone right, because you miss all your connections. I've had like some good travel experiences when I lived in Montana. I have this memory of, I think it was actually on the way back from that trip.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Oh, no.

Emilie LeBel:

Landing in Atlanta and running through the airport and then hoping, because you know, as Canadian living in the States, with all my paperwork ready, just hoping I'd get good karma going through customs so I can make my next flight again, compliments of Delta airlines.

Elizabeth McDonald:

I see a recurring problem we may need to discuss -

Emilie LeBel:

The thing about living in Montana is there's really only two airlines that flew into our international airport. I'm putting the international in quotes because there's actually no international flights directly to Montana. But you had very limited options for which airline you could use.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Well I think moving forward, we're all going to have limited options on a number of levels. But anyway... So one of the ways we would like to wrap up our podcast conversations in a way to further get to know you and we've created a speed round of six questions that -

Emilie LeBel:

Uh oh, scaring the introvert here.

Elizabeth McDonald:

You are not the first one or will you be the last I'm sure. Emily and I think this is hilarious. Kate was like, "I don't know about this" in our conversations, but anyway, let's, let's go for it.

Emilie LeBel:

Okay. Here we go.

Elizabeth McDonald:

So favorite place in Canada?

Emilie LeBel:

Georgian Bay.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Awesome. Most cherished music score?

Emilie LeBel:

This is so nerdy. I have all the Bartók Mikrokosmos piano study books and I loved them.

Elizabeth McDonald:

That's awesome. Favorite summer drink?

Emilie LeBel:

So it's a Negroni but I put in bourbon instead of gin, but I also really like Negronis.

Elizabeth McDonald:

My gosh, now we're going to have to link like a recipe to that or something.

Emilie LeBel:

It's called a Boulevardier.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Oh, okay. I've been drinking Negronis and I have some bourbon. Maybe that's tonight's drink.

Emilie LeBel:

It's very delicious.

Emily Martin:

We'll have an extra tab on our website for all the drink recipes. This is the best one. So far. We've had a few, but this was the best one.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Morning, noon or night for composing?

Emilie LeBel:

Mid to late afternoon, actually.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Wow. That's really specific. And what time of day is mid to late afternoon?

Emilie LeBel:

Like two, two to three till about five to six is when I can think. We could have a whole conversation about composers sort of finding out their work habits. It took me a long time to figure out what my best hours of the day are and just not feeling bad, but I'm not good in the mornings.

Kathryn Tremills:

Here here.

Elizabeth McDonald:

And knowing that it is quite early in the morning for you right now while we're recording this. Sorry. A little bit. Sorry.

Emilie LeBel:

But not that sorry.

Elizabeth McDonald:

But not that sorry. No, because yeah. Anyway, we won't go into it because it's supposed to be speed round.

Emilie LeBel:

Right.

Elizabeth McDonald:

No, no, go ahead. Say what you're going to say.

Emilie LeBel:

Oh just there's like this really romanticized ideal of composers getting up in the morning and like composing and, and you read all these stories old, white European men from the classical canon, they all got up in the morning and wrote their symphonies. And so I felt a lot of shame for a long time that I'm not good in the mornings.

Elizabeth McDonald:

But that's because they had someone else doing everything for them.

Emilie LeBel:

They had a woman cooking all their meals.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Exactly. Exactly. We'll get up at 5:30 so we can get all the things done before we have to do those things. But that's a whole other story. Musician, you would like to be stranded on a desert Island with?

Emilie LeBel:

Laurie Anderson.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Okay. Should I know who she is? I feel like you should. Okay. We're looking her up. She'll be linked.

Elizabeth McDonald:

She's like a fairy godmother for all women composers. I think she - oh, you just need to go listen to her big science album.

Emily Martin:

Okay. We'll link it. Well, listen.

Elizabeth McDonald:

I might have to edit out me being stupid. So there you go.

Emily Martin:

Link and listen.

Elizabeth McDonald:

And our last question, what professional singer would you love to write for?

Emilie LeBel:

I don't know.

Emily Martin:

You are not the first person to have a blank on this one, by the way.

Emilie LeBel:

Can I be really honest? I would want to meet them because personality is so much to do with how I relate to people when I write for them. And there's some singers I've seen on stage and I really admired how they sing and how they work. But when I've met them, I realized it wouldn't be maybe the best personality match.

Elizabeth McDonald:

That's so interesting that it's more than their sound.

Emilie LeBel:

It's more than their sound. And there's like, there's so many different sounds to me that are interesting. I don't think I could choose, you know, like just, just one.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Cool.

Emily Martin:

I love it when the answers in the speed round actually reinforce the answers you gave us in the interview. So thank you.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Yeah. That's cool. So just to do a final wrap up, why don't you tell our audience where they can find you and your music. Whether it's websites, socials, just give us a quick rundown of where to find Emilie C LeBel.

Emilie LeBel:

So I have a website. Do we need to say the www? I always find that funny - dot - emilielebel.ca And it's Emilie E-M-I-L-I-E, and LeBel L-E-B-E-L. So my website, I actually do keep fairly up to date. So it's got my jam packed calendar for 2020, so many exciting concerts going on right now, and you know, links to my catalog. So you can see what pieces I've written, see some descriptions of some recent pieces. So for instance, the piece I wrote for Women on the Verge, it's there under the recent projects drop down and you can read a little bit about it and listen to a clip. I also exist on SoundCloud and that's linked from my website, but I've got some recent, somewhat recent and less recent music up there.

If you're interested in my orchestral music, you can send me a little secret email. There's a lot of union rules around, orchestral recording. So we actually can't post those publicly in their entirety, but I can send you a secret private link if you're interested in some orchestral music, if you're interested in scores or commissions or anything like that, best to email me. Some of it exists up on the Canadian music center website, which is where you can find out about lots of Canadian musicians. And actually some of my vocal music is now up there available for purchase if you want to purchase a score. But you're always welcome to email me. If you're looking for a score that's not up there or, or just want some more information. I do return emails pretty promptly.

Thank you so much, Emily. We can attest to your prompt emails and to you being an amazing collaborator and composer. And we're so grateful that you could join us today. Thank you.

Emilie LeBel:

Thank you for having me.

Emily Martin:

It's been wonderful.

Kathryn Tremills:

It was great to have you with us for this interview with Emilie LeBel. We are going to wrap up with an excerpt from the Women on the Verge 2018 commission "Blue of the Distance" for 2 sopranos and bowed piano.