

Episode 03: Getting the Song Out with Katerina Gimon - Transcript

Elizabeth McDonald:

Hello everyone and welcome to the GETTING THE SONG OUT podcast! We are WOMEN ON THE VERGE

I'm Elizabeth!

Emily Martin:

I'm Emily!

Kathryn Tremills:

I'm Kathryn!

During COVID-19 we realized that we needed to keep the art song world at the forefront of the conversation. We had been talking about this project for a long time and Quarantine was the perfect time to connect with new and old friends across the country - incredible Canadian female composers ...

Kathryn:

The work we just heard is an excerpt from up and coming Canadian composer Katerina Gimon called *Elements* in its premiere performance by the Laurier Singers. Before we spoke for this podcast, I was introduced to Kat when the 2019 Ontario Youth Choir performed *Elements* under the direction of Vicki St Pierre. Towards the end of our week of rehearsals with OYC, we skyped with Kat out in Vancouver. I had fallen in love with this work almost immediately and then really enjoyed how approachable she was with the young singers. We discovered she's a hot commodity with many choral groups across the country and she has some really lovely solo vocal repertoire, so Elizabeth and I connected with Kat when she was visiting Toronto for premieres last fall and then knew we had to have her on the podcast. Here is our recent conversation with Katerina Gimon.

Elizabeth McDonald:

It was so great to connect in person in the fall, which seems like so long ago.

Katerina Gimon:

Oh my gosh, yeah. I was thinking about that yesterday. I was like, wow it feels like - I don't even know, like years ago with just like everything that's happened since then.

Elizabeth McDonald:

How are you holding up? What are you up to?

Katerina Gimon:

I think early, it was quite tough. This is my first year freelance, I don't remember if I told you that when we met, I started freelancing in September, so I was sort of expecting this big year. I'd spent like my entire fall, just madly writing. And I had I think like 10 premiers set for the spring and the summer, and then just everything got canceled. So I think it was just like a big: like I've been working towards all this and now, I don't know when it's going to see the light of day. So I mean, obviously of course, we're all in the same boat, but it was just like, I think for a while, just dealing with that grief. Especially because it was my first year of freelance. I basically put all my eggs in that basket, so that was a little tough. But aside from that and you know, once I'd sort of gotten over that, it's been nice to have a bit more time to reflect on, you know, what I want to do and new projects I want to work on and people I want to collaborate with and whatnot. So that's been nice. I will say, it has been a little hard thinking creatively again which was something unexpected. But I guess, you know, when you're thinking creatively, it's very tied to like your mental health and your wellbeing and everything as well.

And so I think it's really forced me to - I mean, brought on that realization by just like smacking me in the face with it. But also helping me focus on those emotions and find ways to tune those into my music as well, which has been really nice. So I ended up - one commission that I was supposed to write, it was originally supposed to start early April, it would have been. It was originally going to be on this beautiful poem. It's actually posted on my wall behind me, you guys - you can't see... About deforestation by a poet that I came across actually on Tumblr of all places. And she's based in Saudi Arabia and it's a beautiful poem. I still think I want to set it at some point. But with everything that happened and it being the next piece I wanted to write, I actually reached out to the conductor that the piece was for and I said, how do you feel about me setting this other poem instead? And it's the translation of a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, the German poet called, This darkness is a Bell Tower, is the translation. And I reached out to the translators and I said, "can I please set this, please, please, please?" And eventually they got back to me and said, yes, so I'm actually just finishing up a setting of that right now. And that entire poem is basically just about finding a way to deal with grief and take darkness and turn it into your strength, which is like exactly what we're all dealing with right now. So I think that was something obviously that would've never happened - a moment that would have never happened if all of this didn't happen. So there's been nice moments like that as well.

I think it'll be interesting when, when everyone comes back together after all of this - and it's written during this time, and then everyone actually sings it with all this context in mind. I think I'm going to have a hard time not crying, which is why I don't perform my works anymore.

Elizabeth McDonald:

So true. Hey, I can imagine, and we're all sort of having moments of just crying randomly as well. So that's also not helpful. Yeah, we're dealing with this.

Katerina Gimon:

Yeah, I mean, I was watching a Netflix Explained series - I don't know if you guys have seen any of those. They have a whole series on Corona virus and they had one, the most recent one that came out where at the very end they talk about singing and about how people are missing singing and how they are coming together. You know, I don't know if you've seen the videos in the streets in Italy where they're all singing out their window and I just started balling. I'm getting emotional thinking about it because I mean, how much we all just like miss having that all the time, you know? I mean, it's how we connect. It's how we deal with that kind of thing. And I mean, ever since I was young, that was, I mean, that was what I did. I grew up singing in choir. I grew up you know, singing myself privately as well. And it's just, it's sort of strange eventually being at this point now where you just actually can't, you know, we don't have that. We can't, you know, when people are in the same room, they say, animals do this as well, but you actually like mirror the emotions of other people and it helps regulate you and feel better and you sort of play off each other. And that's something that I feel like we don't get to the same degree when we're on zoom.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Absolutely.

Katerina Gimon:

We can do it a little bit, but it's not really the same thing cause you're not in the same space. So I think it's been a little difficult for all of us to get through that. So I'm lucky I have one little cat behind me right there and another one in the other room. So he's been doing a good job. He's my little protector and worry over there.

Kathryn Tremills:

So I think back to when I first heard about you Kat I had an amazing time at Ontario youth choir with Vicki St. Pier conducting. And she introduced me and most of us with the choir to your piece Elements, which I just fell in love with immediately. It's just so amazing. I find it to be such a viscerally moving piece that resonates with the vibrations and the earth evolves gradually throughout the four pieces to a culmination of fire and flowing on into eternity, by water. And you use a lot of extended vocal techniques, including overtone singing, which of course freaked everybody out at first. It was such an amazing experience to hear the kids learn how to do this. And like the title, this group of four pieces uses the techniques to recreate the sounds of nature and seems even indigenous inspired. I'm wondering what led you to compose in this free Sonic space? Who were your inspirations? I could guess some, some other composers, some other styles that may have fed this inspiration?

Katerina Gimon:

Yeah, okay. So, I mean, I guess maybe I should talk a little bit about the inspiration behind that piece to sort of lead into that question. But I actually wrote that piece when I was in - three of the movements, the first three movements I wrote when I was in my second year of my undergraduate degree, my first year of full time composition lessons, actually. And then I wrote

the final one, Water at the beginning of my third year and where I did my undergrad at Wildred Laurier, actually they have a composition and improvisation program. And for some reason, I don't know why I decided it wasn't scary enough to just compose and sing in front of people. I thought I also needed to make up music on the spot. So I signed up for the improvisation program, and I started that in year two.

And so a lot of the - I think what fed the creation of that piece and me composing in that style was actually the fact that I was beginning into the world of improvisation for the first time. And I was the only vocalist I think was the other thing. So I was thinking in a very instrumental way with my voice, because I had to basically blend, which I feel like is extra hard as the only vocalist and a group of instruments because people automatically will, like, I hear a voice there's going to be words. So I had to experiment quite a lot with my voice in terms of things I could do instrumentally. And I think it must have got me thinking about: I wonder how this would play out on a large scale with, you know, like a choir or whatnot in a more of a textural fashion and the composer you were probably thinking of when you were saying, I wonder what composers influenced you - Murray Schafer, definitely. I sang a whole whack of music growing up in choirs, but Murray Schafer was definitely one where I sang his pieces and was like, my gosh, this score is amazing. It's so cool. I love the fact that I have, you know, I have freedom to be creative and to, in a way compose little bits of the piece myself and I always enjoyed that. And you know, there's going to be bias with every composer. They're going to write things they like. And so I love doing those things. And so I wanted to write a piece that did that. So there was basically, I guess, two goals with that piece. And one was to explore, you know, the things I could do with the voice that were maybe more instrumental in nature - tangible, like out of the box kind of thinking. And the second thing was to create something that was, I guess, beyond language or borders.

And this is more of a broader kind of thing. Part of the reason I originally got into music which I think we've all had that this kind of similar experience at some point, where you're performing something and you're realizing that it is conveyed to people of all walks of life. We're all sort of connecting on this unified theme. And I had that kind of a moment when I sang in a church - I think I must've been 14 or 15. I was singing in a children's choir, singing somewhere in Germany. We had this piece at the very end of our set when I was singing the Hilton children's choir where we used to go out and hold hands with the audience. And I went up to this German lady and I was terrified, but I held her hands and I sang into her eyes, this song called, Dream a Dream is the name of the song and it's about peace and people coming together and everything. And she did not understand a word of English I could tell, but at the very end, her eyes were just, you know, like streaming tears. And she pulled out of her pocket. I have to see if I can find it, this little heart shaped rock, I don't know the story behind it or anything. She just gave it to me and put it in my hand. And I was just like, I don't think it completely said to me at that moment, but after that, I was like, that is so amazing that we didn't speak the same language and we connected in this way. And so I think I sort of trace back to that moment and why I got into this in the first place was because I wanted people, you know, no matter what language they speak, where they come from to be able to connect on something.

And so I purposefully, when I wrote that piece, didn't put any language in the traditional sense in there. All the syllables are made up through improvisation except for the second movement where I have a whole bunch of different languages. I'm saying the word air basically. But it's more textural, so you don't really hear it in like a traditional kind of way. Yeah.

Elizabeth McDonald:

That's, that's so interesting as a singer to hear a composer's perspective on sort of their thoughts and their ideas. And it's actually really cool to hear you as a young singer. And by that, I mean, in undergrad being open, not just as a composer, but as a singer as well to go into improvisation class, because I can tell you, I would have been terrified. And most of my - I won't speak for all my singers, but I can imagine a lot of my singers would be terrified to do that, and yet you end up writing that in your music.

So I'm actually curious as we go on this sort of journey of your process and whatever, if we can talk about your commission process with respect to the voice, sort of in general, but also specifically, so when you're being commissioned by a specific singer and whether that's a solo singer or choir, and of course I'm interested in the solo part, but how do you approach writing for that voice specifically, or that sound specifically, especially with respect to considering that every voice sometimes will have these sort of unique and extended things that they can do that generally, maybe that voice type doesn't do. How do you balance that with the idea that I still want this piece to be performed by other people or whatever, is there, like where do you start when you start to think about writing for someone specifically?

Katerina Gimon:

Yeah, so usually what happens, I mean, say I'm going work with a solo singer, we get together, I like to have an initial conversation if possible in person, if not over your zoom or something like that, where we actually talk about common interests, where we want the commission to go, what kinds of things they're interested in if they haven't already suggested a tack store theme or what not, and sort of limit the scope a little bit. And then from there we might talk about what they can, what they can do, what kind of their voice type they have. I might ask them for their range, their tessitura, you know, where their bridge is so I can avoid certain notes. I tend to, I mean, I'll use those terms, but a lot of the time I'll say, where are your happy notes? You know, where are your sad notes? What are notes that you like? You're not so happy about singing a held note on or like good climax notes. So just those kinds of things, which I've worked with some more experienced singers now, and I've worked with some student singers as well. It's a little easier for some singers who have worked with a lot of composers before to give that kind of information. I just wrote for, I don't know if you know, the soprano, Dory Haley, she's based in Vancouver, but I just wrote for her a piece for Vancouver Island symphony and I asked her that stuff and she's like, actually I basically already have that written down. And she gave me this nice piece of staff paper that had all these things. It was like, I can do these notes. These are

great for climaxes. These are great if they're staccato. And it was like, "ha-ha," I didn't have to pull that out of somebody, but normally I'll do that kind of thing.

I also really like to ask for recent repertoire, like, what are your favorite pieces you've sung recently, if possible, can I have recordings of them? And then I'll sort of get that person's voice in my ear as well, because then I can start to think, okay, like they sing, you know, like a coloratura really well in the mid register or something like that. And I think that's just something that you sort of start to understand by listening to that person's voice a little bit more. I mean, you can learn that to a certain degree by having it on paper, but by also hearing it is like a completely other thing. So as much as you can listen to the person as possible, also really helps again, either in person or via recording.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Yeah, it's interesting that you say that about that singer having a list of things that she likes to do or doesn't like to do. I just sat in on a session with Alexandra Smither who did a whole session for singers and composers through the Cincinnati Art Song Initiative. She had a whole list of resources. And I think that's so important for young singers as they're developing to be conscious of cataloging, not just for the fact of being able to communicate to a composer who might compose for them. But also when they're looking at repertoire that's existing, you know, looking at things that maybe suggest, "Oh, I feel really good in this. So this is a song I want to try." So then it might make it so that they're less intimidated in trying new pieces by new, up and coming composers or established current contemporary composers.

So as I'm listening to your music, it's really clear that you've really continued to define or hone your development as a composer, with your understanding of the voice. I can hear how you've started to make different choices. And I'm wondering, I'm a big fan of process and discussing process. My students often roll their eyes because they forget - they haven't realized yet that process is everything. So I always love to talk about process. And so maybe just talk to us about as you've come through this process of composing, what kinds of things have you discovered don't work vocally maybe, or just in your own composing versus things that do work; things that you've thrown out the window that you're like, yeah, I'm not going to try that anymore. And then I'm wondering too with your work with Chroma, which I assume you write a lot of that and improvise, how that's influenced some of your - not just art song but even choral writing. If you want to speak to that.

Katerina Gimon:

I can't think of anything specific actually for the voice. I mean, I think the most important thing for any composer writing for voice is actually to just sing it, you know, sing it yourself to go through it. And I mean, it's funny, but you can tell when people don't sing through it, you're like, this just doesn't make sense. Like this was clearly written on a piano because it's jumping octaves really quickly or like, you know, rookie mistake, you give a composer your range and they take that as I can jump from the highest note to the lowest note on an eighth note - like, no, if you can't do

that, then like don't expect anyone else. I mean, it's the same thing if I'm writing for piano; I mean I'm a decent pianist. I'm not amazing pianist, but if I can't play it like a million times slower, but like still do it, then I shouldn't be able to expect a pianist to do it at all.

You know, it's the same kind of thing. And I mean, I can do that with piano because I do somewhat play piano, but I can't do that for violin. But it's the same thing with voice, you got to sing through the lines, you got to check it with the vocalist is another thing. I've become really big in the past couple of years at actually sending, which is a little nerve wracking, sending a draft to whoever I'm working with. And I think it depends on who it is because some people, that might make them nervous, they might want to see the final product. But a lot of the time I actually, if people are open to it, I like to send them a draft. You know, like here's my skeleton, it'll have notes, like "flourish, the piano part here." And like "this continues on for a little bit, but it's extended." So like very rough notes, but they can see like where the piece is, the kind of ideas I'm going to do and just like the beginnings of it. And then they might say things - which I've had happen - I love this idea. Could you do even more of that? Or like, what do you think about bringing that back at the end? Like things that I might not think of. And then I'm like, Whoa, that's a great idea. This is a collaboration, right? So those are the kinds of things I think I've learned.

Elizabeth McDonald:

That's really awesome. That whole, like you say, it's a collaboration, about bringing your singer in sooner in the process than just that's finished. I think that's really wonderful. Do you want to speak to some of the work you do with Chroma and that influence on your, on your vocal writing? Does it have an influence on your vocal writing?

Katerina Gimon:

I guess for those who don't know, I'm part of a mixed media, digital art, new music collective called Chroma Mixed Media. So it was founded by me and two other composers when we were all at UBC. And it's funny because we're all composers, but we all do other things as well. I mean, I do a lot of arts as many kind of stuff as well and work with electronics. Brian, my partner, who's another member of the group. He also does a lot of work in programming in virtual reality, which is sort of where our newer realm is as well. And then the third member, David is actually a visual artist and does a lot of 3D art as well. So we have these really cool - I feel like I'm the least interesting of the group. They do a lot of really cool stuff, I sing. But the three of us together, I feel like worked really well because we all have this background as composers and as improvisers, but also bring in other art forms.

So we ended up with this really cool interdisciplinary mishmash of stuff that we do. And a lot of our early work was live performance where we would like process live visuals and like process it electronically. But more recently, which is probably the work that you've been seeing has started coming out the past - I think we think we started it two years ago, but it's a long process to get things done in virtual reality. Is our first musical virtual reality experience. And it's called Naona.

And it's like very low level interactive right now, but basically you can go in, like you put on a VR headset and we've written, I guess, for lack of a better words, sort of album, but we've recorded it in individual tracks. Right, so my voice, different layers of my voice guitar, other instruments, strings and what not. And as you walk through, you are able to, you know, alter when things come in, how long things happen. You know, if you're in a cave, you'll like have more reverb kind of thing. So this is just a very first like early experimentation in this, but it's like this crazy whole other world of how people can be completely immersed in your music. So that's step one right now. We're getting started with some other work that is even more interactive where you can actually shape the sound even more. But you'll hear about that in two years when we're done, because it's a long process. But in terms of how it's shaped my own music, because that, I mean, to people listening sounds like a very different world from, you know, vocal writing and choral writing, but you notice themes in some of the words I said, like immersivity, you know, being surrounded and what not are common threads.

I talked about that earlier with Elements. I love the idea of people being spatialized and I think electronics also can very easily be, you know, an extension of like an extended technique in a way, you know what I mean? Just in the way in Elements I'm using extended techniques of the voice, you can use electronics. I'm actually about to start next month a piece for voice and electronics. You can use electronics as an extension of the voice as well, and you can, you know, you can stack these things, you can do extended techniques and, and other things. And I mean you can layer so you can start getting textural effects as well. So I think there's just a lot of possibilities opened up by electronics and a lot of things that can sort of be fed back and forth. You know, I create the sound in the digital realm, but how can I emulate that with voices, you know, on the road, acoustically, that's the word I'm looking for this digital sound. And you can think something as simple as - let me think - in Air, for example, the effect that we have, like the entire piece basically just sounds like a mishmash of people talking together, which you could easily get like the Looper in electronics, if I just go [sound effects] and just keep looping it, you're going to get that same kind of effect. And that's something that in a way I'm sort of recreating in a piece like that.

Emily Martin:

It's really amazing to hear all of these different thoughts you have, right? How, how one thing leads to another and things I've never even heard of, I'm excited about the VR is that you have to be in person for that, right? You can't do it from your home, right? If you have a VR headset, so we're just packaging up the final product right now, the album and everything's done, and we're just putting the finishing touches on and it's going to be released to be the Oculus store. So, I mean, if you have a headset of your own, which I don't know if you do, you should be able to experience it from home. What we've been doing right now, because it's sort of at the point where not everybody has headsets is before the quarantine, we're actually holding it as an installation event so people could come in and they could experience it, which was funny on a Canada Council Grant. We had to be like, we need to buy headsets.

Emily Martin:

What a wonderful project right now that can span the COVID 19 issue. Right? And so without you even knowing that you've now created an experience and a piece that can pretty much survive anywhere. I mean, that's really amazing for forethinking without forethinking.

Katerina Gimon:

Exactly. And I mean, it's funny because I was joking earlier, I posted on Facebook, I think a couple of weeks ago, I was like, although like my acoustic music has sort of died down a little bit, like things have been going crazy with my digital ensemble and it's exactly that people are suddenly interested in ways they can experience the things from home and this new and innovative way. And I mean, it's led to like that piece that I told you about, we also adapted it for 360 video, which is a little bit of a different experience, obviously, because it's not interactive. 360 video is basically just like there's somebody walking through it and like from start to stop kind of thing.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Is that what we see on YouTube right now, the preview?

Katerina Gimon:

That was what I was posting as part of Cluster Festival, if you saw that. 360 video is basically like, if you have your phone and you move your phone, it actually looks at different parts of the scene. So it's actually like, I'm viewing the world around me and I can be like, "Oh, like, let's look at this rock. Let's look at this mountain." Like, so you can, I mean, if you're standing, you can actually just like walk around or on your computer the way you do it. I think it's a bit less natural, but you just use your arrows or drag around, but it's still really cool. It's immersive in a way. I mean, not quite the same, but still like a little step further than just watching a video.

Emily Martin:

So to get back sort of to this process, right. So it sounds to me like you've discovered all of these things sort of on your own and you already mentioned, mentioned Murray Schaffer. But let's go back sort of to some of your other influences or mentors. Do you have any female mentors or female influences that you've had in the past or now that have helped with some of these processes that you're talking about?

Katerina Gimon:

Yeah. I mean, I feel like I've actually been very lucky that I've had a lot of amazing female mentors and from quite a young age as well. Like when I started singing, actually I studied with a teacher in Oakville named Linda Fletcher and she actually - you know her? Yeah, I guess she's somewhat local. So she actually does some composition herself as well. She has a number of pieces in the RCM books and what not. So I mean, I was saying, I think that must have been the first time actually I'd sang music by knowingly, of a female composer and, you know, seeing her there with me working with her. And so that was something I think pretty unique. It was the first time I sort of saw that I could do that. Later, I mean with her as well, I

mean singing Nancy Telfer and others, I think she did a good job at like helping me make sure that I was doing that kind of stuff and thinking it through researching the composer and what not.

So she was great. She was also very good early on, I studied piano before and other instruments and they never really seemed to be very interested in anything other than me, like doing my scales and like ticking the boxes and pieces. But the second Linda found out that I wrote music and that I - like it was song writing basically at that point - she was like, "Oh, well, like at the end of my lesson, why don't you like play me what you're working on?" And it was the first time somebody had sort of taken interest on that. And of course, I mean, I was super shy about it. I didn't like showing people what I was doing, but then soon enough, you know, she convinced me, why don't you do it in rotary festival? Because they started entering categories for composition and what not and you know, one thing leads to another and eventually I just decided to go to school for music. So she was absolutely fantastic.

I also studied when I was in choir, I think I mentioned earlier, I was in Hamilton Children's choir. The conductor for Hamilton Children's Choir is Zimfira Poloz, who I believe actually teaches at UofT. So you might know her as well. She was an amazing mentor as well too. I think it was great to see like such a strong, passionate leader, like of our choir and just the repertoire she picked and everything was amazing. So two very amazing women, I think musically leading me through. When I got to school later, I actually studied with a man for the first two years. And it was great. That was actually - I wrote Elements during that time. But I felt like eventually I hit a bit of a wall and I didn't quite know what it was at that point, but then I studied with Linda Catlin Smith, my first female composition professor in my fourth year, fourth and final year of my undergrad. And it was just like, "Ah!" Like night and day.

And I think it's, I mean, it's similar to a voice teacher in that, I feel like you're there to learn about your instrument and everything, but you're also there in a way to just get to know them like a little bit of therapy maybe, but not really, you know what I mean? And that was just something I wasn't getting from my male professors. I think, I mean, it's sort of a complicated thing. I think they just, maybe don't like to do that or they don't want to connect in that way with female students because they're afraid and it's, I mean, it's unfortunate that that happens because then, you know, women don't end up getting the same close mentorship and ideas and thoughts and connection that male composers were getting. But anyways, immediately I connected with Linda and we hit it off and we're just like, yes. So my composition skills basically went like opened up insanely at that point I decided to apply to masters school, which is something I'd never considered until I studied with her. She realized things in my music like, I used to sign my scores K. Gimon, and nobody said anything about it. And then she's like, "Hey, why do you do that?" And I was like, "Oh, I don't know. I want people to think I'm professional." And she's like, "is it because you're a woman and you don't want people to know?" So we had a conversation about that, which I mean, obviously I don't think any guy composer would have ever said anything about that. So I had interesting times with her.

And then because of that experience, I actually specifically chose UBC to go to for my masters because it's the only Canadian Masters school or was at the time, that had a female professor on the full time faculty, which is, who teaches the graduate students. So Dorothy Chang is amazing. She was great as well. Opened my eyes out to so many coloristic things. She's very detail oriented as well. And again, we just connected on this amazing level and she's still a great mentor to me as well. So clearly I'm spoiled.

Elizabeth McDonald:

It's amazing how we discount what you've just said. And when we wonder why we don't have more female composers, what you just said is exactly why, you just said it so beautifully. Thank you.

Katerina Gimon:

Yeah. And I had to look for it. I think is the thing, and I mean it's tough. In my undergrad, it's a little better as you go on it sort of thins out of women. In my undergrad, I think there was a handful of women in my composition class. So pretty decent, but you know, as the, as the years went on less and less, and then I go to my masters, of course I'm the only one doing their masters as a woman, I think one of two in the entire graduate program. And I mean, it feels very lonely. As much as you want to do something, it's still like, you feel like you don't belong as much as you know you do. And I think that's a very tough thing for anybody, you know, to deal with. And so, I mean, especially moving to a new province and, you know, across Canada somewhere I'd never been, it was actually very tough.

My first year of my master's, my compositional output went right down and it was just like imposter syndrome right out the roof because it just, you know, you don't feel like you're quite there. But Dorothy was amazing, you know, pointing me towards amazing resources programs I could take part in, and yeah, I think that's what kept me going honestly and helped turn the tables.

Kathryn Tremills:

That's, that's terrific, wonderful that you've found so many amazing women mentors and not everyone is so lucky. And so you also really took the initiative to search it out and hopefully it's going to be easier, continue to be easier in the future that we'll find more and more women teaching composition and right out there. And composing anything as a performer on any instrument, especially voice, especially composition, it's such a vulnerable thing. And, and so much of our learning and studying and the process is learning about ourselves and the more that you can sort of be mentored in that, in that area, by the people we're working on, I think it really makes a big difference.

Katerina Gimon:

Exactly. Yeah because anybody can tell you know, like that those should be beamed, you're missing a rest or whatever, but like that's not what people are interested in my music. They're not like she has impeccable beaming and her rests they're broken down perfectly. Like nobody cares. I mean, as long as it's legible to a certain degree. That's not why people are interested in my music they're interested in, you know, like it seeming authentic, you know, it seeming authentically me, it seeming relevant to the world we're in today. And that's the way you're going to get to that is working with a teacher that is helping you get to you, which is something I feel like you need that close relationship for.

Kathryn Tremills:

Yeah. That's great. And so we could segue into your choice of poets. We've noticed that many of the poets, most of the poets that you've set are women. And we're wondering if that was a conscious choice if you have consciously searched out women or if it's kind of happened naturally organically.

Katerina Gimon:

So I mean, originally it was, it was actually organically. Somebody had pointed it out, I think like one or two years ago, I was talking with a grad student who is doing research and interviews on female composers and the lack of, or lack of representation today in Canada. And she pointed the same thing out and I said, "Oh, you're right. I guess I haven't set any" - at the time. I hadn't set any guys. Now I've set a couple actually and it was definitely unintentional at the beginning. I think I just must have been drawn to it more, you know, the different perspectives feeling more like it was my voice, I guess in a way. I mean, even though I'm not singing my own compositions or performing them myself, I feel like it's still my own voice in a way. So it's very important to me that it's something I want to say, something, I would say, something that is me and I think I found that a lot more in female poets.

So I think early on I did a lot of my own stuff. So that's also part of it, if you're setting your own stuff it's definitely by a woman. Then I set Pauline Johnson as well, who - she has ties to, Ontario around where I grew up. I think Brampton area actually, and then Vancouver and BC area as well. So she sort of had ties to both the areas that I was in as well, too, which I thought was sort of interesting. And a lot of her poetry, just the scenery she describes in the world, she describes, it's just, I felt like I was there and I understood it in another way because I have lived in the same places, even though, I mean, there's passage of time between that. So her poetry. Christina Rossetti I set. But more recently, I guess I think I mentioned to you, I've been doing a lot more work with living poets, which is something that I was terrified to do for so long. They don't really teach you in composition school, you know, how do you, how to seek out living poets, how to commission a poet. So it basically just got to this breaking point, like about two years ago where I was like, I really want to be writing about relevant things and I really want to be searching these topics. I don't feel like I'm there myself as a writer to be able to do it. How do I do it? And of course, you know, my partner points out the obvious, well, you should probably work with the poet. And even though I sort of knew that in my mind, I was sort of steering away

with it because you don't know how you even start something like that. So I ended up taking part in a number of programs: Art Song Lab in Vancouver, Renaissance Opera ran a great Lib Lab program, which is sort of like an intensive one - basically three days in a row each day, you wrote like a different mini opera, which is insane - where I met poets through that, and also reaching out through people and having some conversations with some other composers. I know about how they went about commissioning. I actually reached out to - do you guys know Marie-Claire Sandon? She's a French Canadian composer, look her up. She's great! Yeah, I called her actually, because I know that she works with living poets and I said, you know, what's your process? How does this usually work and everything? And she led me through it very kindly. And I've reached out to my first collaborator where I actually commissioned the text, Lauren Peat, who was a friend of mine. And now I think I've been pretty much working exclusively with like newly commissioned text or texts that are written by somebody who's living; all women this year and a half, except for Walt Whitman, because I had one commission that was for the anniversary of his death I believe it was. So he's the one exception.

But yeah, I feel like when you're working with living poets and women, it's just, you can actually talk about things that I feel like - matter in a deeper way. And people resonate with in a deeper way today, because I mean, I love Pauline Johnson. I love Christina Rossetti, and there's still things relevant, you know, in talking about nature and what not, but you can't dive into things like, you know, lack of diversity in the artistic world that we're in today, you know, #metoo, and different things like that. You can, I mean, it doesn't exist to the same degree and if it does, it's very rare and maybe not quite the kind of setting you want today. So if you want to be writing both those kinds of things - or even like deforestation, I mentioned that poem earlier today, those don't really exist in public domain poetry. So yeah, it's led me to working with some awesome collaborators.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Well, you're definitely speaking our language because that was the whole genesis of the trio, right? And the joke internally for us is that we got tired of singing about 16 year old virgins, because we were no longer that. You need to move along.

Katerina Gimon:

It's so true though. I mean, like, I just remember every song that I - I mean, as I mentioned, Linda was great, actually, she picked out songs, made sure I had some diversity in what I was singing, but I mean, through a lot of my undergrad, I sang with Vicki in my last year, so that was great, but before then it was just like, I think I sang like one or two pieces by women. You know, it was all by guys. It was all like the pretty little flower. And then the flower opens and it's like, okay, I'm done. Is this all I get to sing about it? Like I don't know. I don't relate to this, this isn't what matters to me, this isn't why I got into doing this. You know what I mean? I got into this because art and music are one of those places where we can deal with things that are more difficult and that are like our world is dealing with today and this isn't it, you know, I want - I want the good stuff.

Emily Martin:

Well this is the perfect segue then to the question that I find most interesting, is that I've seen this wonderful trajectory of how you've sort of written in your career, right? So you started with choir pieces or choral pieces, and then you went sort of just to solo song. And I know you're still doing all of that, but now you're going into opera. So you shared with us some of your future projects, which I found super interesting, and they speak a little bit to what you're talking about, which is singing about things that are interesting to you. Things you want to talk about. So can you talk to us a little bit about that trajectory and then also what you're doing now?

Katerina Gimon:

Yeah, so, I mean, I think I've already sort of accidentally unveiled that trajectory. That was something I was going to mention, but it's sort of already accidentally happened that, I mean, my career is still evolving. I think I mentioned I've only been out of school for like two-three years. I'm in my - almost at my first year, full time freelance. And in that time, you know, I've gone through so much, so much has happened. I've written so much music. I'm realizing, you know, that there's different topics. I want to talk about. I want to start working with living poets. And I mean, there's a little bit of a backlog always because, I say I'm doing these things. You guys haven't seen it yet because unfortunately those things didn't premiere. But I mean, these things are already starting to happen in my music. And this led to a lot of different things. One project that I was telling you about, I think actually originated from a program that I did between the first and second year of my masters. Yes, it was a Lib Lab with a Renaissance Opera, which I think I mentioned in one of the earlier questions, and I wrote one mini opera every day with a different librettist and a different writer. And on the third day I met this fantastic writer-playwright named Valerie Sing Turnerr. And I think I should mention that, I mean the program artistic director of Renaissance opera, Debbie Wong, did an amazing job, making sure that everybody who was taking part in the program - there was three composers and three playwrights. She reached out to Valerie. I found out later actually talking to Valerie to make sure that there was, you know, diversity in the writers and who was there, otherwise the other two writers were men.

She wanted to make sure there were women there, there were people of color and everything. So, I mean, it was sort of interesting finding out that afterwards that she had actually specifically reached out to somebody who she didn't know and did the work to make sure that there was actually representation in the writers that were there. Funny enough, the composers actually were all women. That was the first time that has ever happened in a program that I was in. It was a one woman of color. And then me and one other woman as well, Kathleen Allen, who you might know, she's in Toronto right now as well. But on the third day, Valerie and I worked together and basically just immediately hit it off. She pitched me this idea. She'd been doing a lot of research with events that were happening at the time about sexism actually in harassment and Canadian parliament based on like actual stories, and one particular story of an intern who was harassed in parliament. So we went, we decided to go big and wrote a piece that was in Canadian Parliament, like question period. So it's a little bit of this bicker and kind of scenario

and you can actually go and see it. I have the reading of that posted on my website if you're interested in listening. But ever since we had that, we've been trying to make our next project happen. We hope that eventually it will be a full opera based on that Canadian parliament thing. But our next one, an idea that was born actually early this year, we met had some coffee, chatted, the working title is, Did I just say that? And it's a little bit about, about #metoo. It's about racial diversity and the fact that, I mean, lack of representation in, you know, traditional works of women of color, and the fact that women in general tend to be put in a position where they feel like they have to diminish themselves or silence themselves in this artistic world in order to get ahead.

So very heavy topics, but this story is a little more playful and deals with it in a comedic way. It's a short 10-15 minute opera is what we're thinking. Dealing with two roommates who are sort of navigating these things first sort of talking about #metoo. And then at the second part of it, they're dealing with this darker issue of race and the lack of representation. And they sort of think I was joking to you guys. They have a little bit of a diva off. One of the characters is a person of color and the other one is white and they have a bit of a diva off, that as they discussed, you know, lack of representation and like one argues, "uh, you know, just there is representation, you know, think about Carmen, think about butterfly." Like there, there are definitely roles of women in color, but of course, I mean they're written by white men, you know, they're highly problematic. So it's an interesting way to come at a topic that is actually, I think really needs to be talked about in the world of opera today. Because I mean, these operas are still being performed. So I think this is a fun accessible way for us to be able to tackle that topic in a way that will help people learn, help us talk about these issues. And maybe even be something later on, you know, as a very short opera that can even proceed things like those operas. So people can have it, you know, in context. And we can also get to a point where we have better representation in terms of race in opera. So very loaded, short opera.

Elizabeth McDonald:

We've been for all of the people listening, all three of us listening are just like wagging our heads in agreement with everything you've just said, especially in the time that we're in right now. It's so true and it's become so much more evident in this time. And I feel like we could do a whole separate conversation just on that aspect of things, and we want to, and we will. But we're going to actually wrap things up, two ways: the first way is we're going to do a speed round which is six questions, and it's kind of the idea of answering the first thing that comes to mind. Okay. Are you ready?

Katerina Gimon:

I'm ready here we go.

Elizabeth McDonald:

These are sort of related to music, sort of. It's sort of a fun way to get to know you a little bit differently. So the first question is, which is your favorite place in Canada?

Katerina Gimon:

I'll say Vancouver, because I'm here now. Sorry, Ontario.

Elizabeth McDonald:

That's okay. We're not offended. It's all right. Vancouver is beautiful, Most cherished music score?

Katerina Gimon:

Ooh. Probably a Murray Schafer score. I would say, why don't we say - is it Moonlight? The one with all the - it's a choir piece. I think it's Moonlight or Epitaph for Moonlight. That's what it's called.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Awesome. I'm pretty sure you're the only person that's going to answer that way, but it's good. That's awesome.

Katerina Gimon:

Just like drawing it with my hands. It looks like this!

Elizabeth McDonald:

Yesh, that's right. So visual, right. What's your favorite summer drink?

Katerina Gimon:

Kombucha actually, I've been really into it lately have been brewing a little bit myself, but yeah, it's pretty nice.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Nice, do you have a recipe you're going to share with us later?

Katerina Gimon:

If you'd like. Yeah, it's pretty simple, but it's great for summer.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Awesome. Morning, noon, or night for composing?

Katerina Gimon:

I'd like it to be morning, but it's usually noon or night in the middle of the night. I keep trying it doesn't work.

Elizabeth McDonald:

Fair enough. We all hear you. Musician, you would like to be stranded on a desert Island with?

Katerina Gimon:

I don't know. Can it be a composer? I just sort of want to talk to Murray Schafer. Can I do that?

Elizabeth McDonald:

Okay. Sounds good. And the last question, what professional singer would you love to write for?

Katerina Gimon:

How about you guys? Does that count?

Elizabeth McDonald:

Ha! We were not fishing! Fair. Fair enough. We'll talk after this is over.

We would love for you to share with our audience how they can best find your website, email, if you want to share it or how they can be in touch with you, social media, all of that kind of stuff. If you want to sort of share that in your own words, that'd be great.

Katerina Gimon:

Yeah, so my website is Katerinagimon.com. It's like Kate, and then Rina is how you spell my name. Gimon is like Simon, but with a G, and on my website, you can find links to all my social, you can sign up for my newsletter. If you want to go straight to my social, all my social handles are @Katgimon and you can also reach me by email at info@katerinagimon.com.

Elizabeth McDonald:

That's awesome. Thank you Kat, for joining us today, it's such a pleasure getting to know you and we're so excited to watch your career evolve. So thank you.

Katerina Gimon:

Yeah. Thank you so much for having me. This was really fun!

Kathryn Tremills:

Thanks for joining us for this interview with Katerina Gimon. We are going to wrap up with a recording of "Dream Land" a song for voice and piano sung by soprano Gabrielle Turgeon and pianist Jo Greenaway.