

Sound Expertise – Season 2, Episode 3 – Diversifying Music Theory with Ellie Hisama

TRANSCRIPT

Prepared by Andrew Dell'Antonio

SPEAKERS

Will Robin, Ellie Hisama

Ellie Hisama 00:00

I would have classes which were nearly all male students. And I would have maybe two female students. And this happened over and over, and was very distressing to me because music theory is sometimes understood as a more STEM-ish course and women drop out of it. And to me, there's a lot of joy in doing music theory and being a music theorist. Just as I would say women embraced modernism and didn't feel that it should be left to men composers.

00:31

[Music]

Will Robin 00:53

So, I'm going to make a sweeping generalization, but I think it's fairly accurate. The world of music theory is largely one in which white male scholars analyze music by white male composers. Whether in college classrooms or academic journals, music theory has long been a space that has lacked diversity. That said, many music theorists have been actively working to combat these failures in the discipline. And my guest today is among them. This is Sound Expertise, and I'm your host Will Robin, and this is a podcast where I talk to fellow music scholars about their research, and why it matters. Today I'll be talking with Ellie Hisama, who is Professor of Music at Columbia University. Literally minutes after we spoke in January, it was announced that she will be appointed Dean of the music faculty at the University of Toronto starting this July. She's the author of a ton of important scholarship, including the book *Gendering Musical Modernism*, a pioneering analysis of music by women composers, such as Ruth Crawford Seeger and Marion Bauer. Our conversation touches on a bunch of different areas related to the work of diversifying music theory. But for right now, I want to draw your attention to two important and intertwined themes. The first is the active work of diversification, bringing music composed by women and composers of color into the classroom, as well as supporting music theorists from underrepresented groups. This work is absolutely vital, and we'll be talking about it. The second theme, though, is equally important: The work of understanding the history of why music theory has remained so stubbornly white, and so stubbornly male. If you follow music academia at all, and I hope you do, you know this has recently been extraordinarily controversial. Last summer, the theorist Philip Ewell, who has presented and published on structural racism in the discipline was unfairly attacked in the pages of a music theory journal for doing so. I'm not going to get into more detail as that situation has now been widely litigated. And there are some links to more info on our website, soundexpertise.org if you need to catch up, but the response to Ewell from certain circles in music theory was deeply dispiriting, and at times, clearly unethical. And what it revealed was how difficult and

how necessary it is to unveil the history and present-day reality of racism and sexism in our disciplines. We have to understand the structures that have perpetuated discrimination in order to dismantle them. This is also at the core of recent scholarship by my guest today, Professor Hisama presented on the same panel as Professor Ewell, that ignited so much controversy, and she will address her equally important contribution to this conversation. understanding why gender discrimination has remained so entrenched in her discipline, and who has contributed to that discrimination, including the composer and theorist Milton Babbitt. In some ways, this conversation stretches back to issues we addressed at the very beginning of this podcast in our episode with Loren Kajikawa. But now let's hear a new perspective on these issues from Professor Ellie Hisama.

04:10

[music]

Will Robin 04:22

So I'd love to start by talking a little bit about a powerful early experience that you've described in some of your writing, which was encountering Ruth Crawford Seeger's String Quartet in school. What was it like for you to hear Crawford's work at that point? And what did it mean for you in the context of your studies at that point?

Ellie Hisama 04:41

Sure. So I actually heard her String Quartet as an undergraduate in a music theory 7 class. So it was with Joseph Straus, who, as you know, published a book on Ruth Crawford Seeger, and it was amazing to hear that piece, the power and the musical imagination behind it. So it just knocked me off my feet. And then it was like a lightning bolt. This was the first piece by a woman I had ever studied. So this was in 1988-89, where it was less common. But I still think given the way music curricula are shaped, it's still pretty rare to have music by women as a regular feature of music theory or music history courses.

Will Robin 05:26

Right? What was it about that piece, I mean, both in terms of the author, who the author was, but also the sound of the music and studying it that really spoke to you?

Ellie Hisama 05:36

The third movement of the Quartet is extraordinary, of course. So I had never heard a piece constructed that way, in which the first violin just waits to enter until later in the piece, and I just viewed the video of it -- it was the Del Sol quartet Library of Congress video recording. So it was so interesting to see it on video, because then you can see the players and the different voices. But just hearing it on LP, as we did in those days, made me think that she was rethinking the sound of the instruments by throwing the cello and the viola in these higher registers, sometimes in treble clef, gave this very different sort of sounds...

06:25

[Music]

Ellie Hisama 06:25

... so I think she was a music experimentalist in how she thought of, and conceived of instruments as having possibilities that I had never heard before. So the third movement was so unusual and so interesting, and so beautiful. And the climax, which I write about in one of my chapters of *Engendering Musical Modernism*, I always have loved when the voices reach that peak, the pinnacle, and they tumble down. And it always seems to me like sledding or the joy of like tumbling from a high place, lower down, as if you're rolling down the hill. So I think it's a brilliant conception for the piece. And I just was very moved by the piece. And then the fourth movement with its dialogic quality, with the two voices and the playful back and forth, and to me a very strong sense of conversation, which was imbued in the way the voices speak to each other, and sometimes don't seem to hear each other, but sometimes share material, it seems to me to mimic some types of human interaction.

08:25

[music]

08:25

Ellie Hisama 08:40

So that piece was one that really showed me how composers can sometimes conceive of music in ways and convey meaning without a text specifically,

Will Robin 08:52

right? And about the idea of, you know, what was it like to actually analyze a piece by a woman having not done it in your studies thus far?

Ellie Hisama 09:02

Yeah, so for the fourth movement of the quartet, as you know, is a serial 10 tone work. So that was fun. Also, to see how differently she used the 10 tones of the 12 possible tones of the chromatic scale in a way that was quite different from Arnold Schoenberg and the second Viennese School modernists I had been studying. So she has this set of rotations, as you know, with voice 2 taking the first note of the 10 note series and knocking it to the back, and the second note becomes the lead note. So she has a very linear sense, which is quite different from Schoenberg, whose quartets I also studied. And the third movement -- just trying to figure out how to write about that piece was quite a challenge because I didn't really feel that set theory as it had been taught to me was adequate for the piece, so I write about that, that was the first piece that I analyzed by her. So I have this idea of twisting of the voices as sound strands in time. So I thought of a visual on verbal metaphor, which I thought would encapsulate the way I heard the string voices intertwining with each other throughout the piece, and then how it relates to its composer as a woman. So I think I could have written an analysis which didn't acknowledge any sense of difference in terms of gender by the composer. But for me, I heard gender imprinted quite strongly because it was so interested in this composer I'd never heard of, never heard of her music. I read Matilda Gaume's essay, Judith Tick's essay was not yet published. And I heard the voice of a female composer in all of its glory, and frustration and pain and exclusion, in that string quartet. Something I was really interested in pursuing in graduate school, I didn't have the tools at the time as an

undergraduate. And then in working on my dissertation, I feel I came to some ways to think about how to hear gender in musical writing.

Will Robin 11:18

Yeah, I mean, what was that process? Like of ... you know, this was a period in which there are all these different scholars coming to do this. I spoke with Susan McClary for the podcast a few weeks ago. And, and you know, how did you develop that way of hearing gender in a string quartet?

Ellie Hisama 11:34

So I started working on the analysis of that quartet with David Lewin. So I was a music theory student at Harvard. And he was very open minded to feminism and maybe external sources impacting one's work with the notes, which at the time was certainly not welcome in the field or widely embraced at all, I think maybe there's some opening up of the field since then, which was 1989-90. I then actually studied with Susan, at University of Minnesota. So that was an amazing experience, because she is so attuned to music, in terms of notes, and how the notes work together in this very powerful, complex way. So I was so influenced by her way of approaching music, I first took a course with her on Monteverdi madrigals, at the University of Minnesota. And then she taught a course in postmodernism and music. So from that course, emerged my piece "Postcolonialism on the Make." So I think it was the combination of studying with Joe Straus, studying with Susan McClary, and also having a background as an English major at University of Chicago. So I completed a degree there before I switched to being a music major at the Aaron Copland School of Music. So I had tools to analyze texts as words. And I tried to bring some of those ideas into my study of music,

Will Robin 13:07

Right. Were there are feminist theorists that were influential for you in that period, in terms of trying to analyze that work.

Ellie Hisama 13:14

Yeah. So I read *Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar, very early text, and Elaine Showalter's work. So I was interested in trying to find ways to think about texts in general, in a very, maybe not necessarily verbal sense, do close readings of them and combine those approaches with music analysis as I was constructing it. So I talked about Edwin Ardener's idea of these muted voices, based on women being muted in a subdominant structure within a larger societal structure. So that seemed to me to encapsulate what was going on in the string quartet 1931 the third moment. So I think my approach has been pretty eclectic. And that I don't follow one particular school of literary theory or cultural criticism, but it's kind of ad hoc or pieced together as I find something that I feel works.

Will Robin 14:21

How did you move from the analysis of this piece towards a larger project that engaged with this idea of what you call gendering musical modernism?

Ellie Hisama 14:31

So I was interested in analyzing both movements of the quartet, which I did in the book, and then I was always interested in her pieces *Chinaman Laundry Man* and *Sacco Vanzetti*. So two very political

pieces based on current events at the time, so the status of a Chinese immigrant laundry worker and of course the tragedy of Sacco and Vanzetti in Massachusetts. So I included my reading of Chinaman Laundryman, which is also a serial work, nine tone, moving from the 10 tones of the Quartet. And I thought in order to talk about gender, I would think about other composers, and then one whose name intrigued me was Marion Bauer. So I first learned about her through Milton Babbitt's lectures in Madison, in which he talks about Marion Bauer, a former teacher at Washington Square college and says something to the effect of I will do everything to make the world remember her. So I thought if this woman was so important to Milton Babbitt, whose work music thinking made a huge impression on me that I would find out more about her. So there was, I think, practically nothing published on her, not a lot of her work was published. So an archive is at Mount Holyoke College, where I happened to be in 1994-95, at the Five College Women's Studies Research Center. So I like to study pieces in depth rather than do many pieces in less depth. So that's why each chapter is devoted to one piece written by a composer. And then when it came to move from the dissertation to the book, my series editor was Ian Bent. And he suggested having a third composer, so I had an interest in many composers and thought about different possibilities and came upon Miriam Gideon, who coincidentally taught at Brooklyn College, where I ended up teaching myself 1999 to 2006. So I was interested in her because of her excription from the Academy at the time of the Red Scare, so she and her husband were pretty much pushed out of university settings. And then her music is very much very poetic in terms of the things she's interested in. And just the issue of her being a woman composer, so she was the only living composer I was working on. And sadly, she passed before I could interview her. So she died in 1996. And I just finished my PhD in 1996. So I wasn't able to talk with her in person. But she was someone who in interviews would always say -- Don't call me a woman composer. I'm just a composer, which you still hear people say because they don't want to be pigeonholed into the label of this or that. But then going through her archive at BMI, I would find that she actually referred to herself as a woman composer. So she would say, isn't it incredible that the only woman composer who has done this is not recognized in this way. So I think her public persona was to push away at the label. But she did think of herself as a woman composer. There's a very beautiful quote after a composers' forum concert held here at Columbia, I think it was 1956. So she talks about being a woman composer, and she talks about women poets, and having this sense of difference. So she talked about both not being a woman composer and being a woman composer, which always intrigued me.

Will Robin 18:36

So between these three composers, they share between them, and also with a lot of other women composers, a shared set of social conditions that are affecting how women become composers and the opportunities that they have or don't have, and musicologists can very much ... it's not that hard to historicize that and develop an analytical framework to understand their lives. But how did you figure out how to develop a broader analytical framework to understand their music? What is the ... Is there a toolkit, a larger analytical framing that you figured out to understand the relationship between these different pieces as well?

Ellie Hisama 19:19

Well, for me, I had to incorporate social and cultural context. So to me, it's not really possible to do that feminist criticism of works in a vacuum. So if you have a piece by a woman composer, I wouldn't say necessarily, it will yield a feminist reading. So I would say because there's so much great variance

between women as composers in the music they write in terms of so many things, their particular upbringing, training, attitudes, experiences, and their music that they choose to write. And some composers change quite dramatically throughout their lifetime the styles that they embrace. To me, there's not a single method that I can pull out. And to me it's very much generated by the composer and her music.

Will Robin 20:20

So it kind of flows out from the work, you're not developing some kind of broader technique that can be dropped, you can slot other pieces into or something like that.

Ellie Hisama 20:29

Yeah, I don't think so. And one thing that I've been interested in is, sometimes techniques are constructed for specific pieces and situations, but whether those techniques can be then brought to bear on other pieces and situations. So I always have been curious if anyone else would do a kind of twist analysis of another piece of music. And there are certain connections that the Crawford String Quartet has to other works. So Elliott Carter's music, who acknowledges influence by her, he wrote me a nice letter when I was organizing that Ruth Crawford Seeger festival about his influence by Crawford as a young composer,

Will Robin 21:13

One of the larger points that the book seems to make, is, you know, modernism, has this -- musical modernism at least has this reputation for being a kind of male dominated, and maybe even misogynistic space? And you're complicating that by showing that there are women modernists, right? How does this change our understanding of musical modernism?

Ellie Hisama 21:35

Yes. So as I say in the book, I really didn't agree with Katherine Parson Smith's take on modernism as an exclusionary discourse, one that women weren't a part of. So Ruth Crawford is a perfect example, someone who was modernist, not only a modernist, but an ultra-modernist as she would describe herself. Or in terms of Marion Bauer, I guess she had a more tonal spirit to her writing, but I would also call her a modernist in terms of her Toccata, which is one of the pieces I talk about, in that just the positioning of the hands of the pianist is so tight and interesting, in terms of these two agents that move through the piece in a relationship to each other. And that the piece is dedicated to Ruth Crawford seem to me also incredibly interesting.

Will Robin 22:30

So, you know, music theory, as you mentioned, in the classroom, still has a strong reputation for you ... white men analyzing music by white men, you know, you had a different experience, but it took you a little while to have that experience in your undergrad ... and how do you take what you've learned, through your analysis and through this work of gendering, the kind of analyses you're doing, into the classroom? Like, what are the ways in which you try to figure out a different kind of curriculum for music theory?

Ellie Hisama 23:06

Yeah, that's a great question. It's one I've been thinking about since I got my PhD in 1996. So I guess it's my 25th anniversary.

Will Robin 23:14

Great! Congratulations!

Ellie Hisama 23:16

Actually, I taught when I was an undergrad ... sorry, I taught when I was a graduate student starting in 1993. I subbed for Fred Maus at University of Virginia. So it's been scarily longer than 25 years. But anyway, so I've always been interested in bringing pieces which aren't canonical to the classroom. And when I first came to Columbia, which was in 2006, I would teach music theory three and four as my rotation. And I would have classes which were nearly all male students. And I would have maybe two female students. And this happened over and over and was very distressing to me, because music theory is sometimes understood as a more STEM-ish course and women drop out of it. And to me, there's a lot of joy in doing music theory and being a music theorist. Just as I would say, women embraced modernism and didn't feel that it was -- it should be left to men composers. So I would try to bring different pieces to the course. So both teaching the canonical works that students were expected to know, and I think are still to some extent expected to know as they go forward out of a music major, but also works that I just thought were interesting, or students would learn something from, and should be part of what they were interested in doing and playing also. And then something happened. I would say it was around six years ago. So I walked into music theory three on the first day and it was all women. And this has happened to me ever since. So we at Columbia have Barnard college students, women's college, which is the sibling college across Broadway. And the students from Barnard would take my section of music theory. So I would assign pieces by, say, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, Clara Schumann, Lili Boulanger, etc. And one day I saw a student write in` the margin. Great a piece by a woman exclamation point. So that encouraged me that someone was noticing. It wasn't just another piece by an obscure composer that Professor Hisama is again giving to us. You know, it's like eating vegetables when you want to eat cheesecake or something. But there were students who really were excited by this. And my most recent experience teaching music theory was music theory 4 just this past fall, I again had an all-female class of students. And I thought, since this is the capstone course of the music theory sequence, we have four semesters which pursue harmony, counterpoint, analysis, composition, etc, that they have studied the Canon quite well and quite thoroughly, so I would open it up to pieces that are outside the canon. So I would introduce pieces to them that were mostly by women or BIPOC composers. So we studied Harry T Burleigh's Deep River arrangement, which has some incredible augmented sixth examples. So this is chromatic harmony. And also think about performers as interpreting music. So Marian Anderson's really beautiful interpretation of Deep River. So thinking about music as performed, and not only sitting and residing in the score, having meaning being given to us through notes on the page, but also through the body who sings, or plays the piece of music. So for the midterm assignment, the students were given a choice to pick someone they didn't know a lot about and to do a presentation and an analysis paper and all of the students, all five students chose a work by a woman composer, and they commented on that at the end of how different and refreshing it was to do that. And I would also find out one of the students is a violist, so I would find pieces for viola. So of course, Rebecca Clark has a beautiful Viola Sonata, which she chose Rebecca

Clark for her project. So I would try to connect the student and her interests, and a lot of them just gravitated to women, because they had never really done so before.

Will Robin 27:51

I mean, I imagine it must feel like a different kind of classroom than it did, you know, 10 or 15 years ago for you -- like what does that feel like to have a classroom that's primarily women as students working on women composers? You know, it's ... that seems like, when we think of what music theory has historically been, it seems like a totally kind of radical revision.

Ellie Hisama 28:12

Yeah, it is a very different feeling. So I think ... and I asked the students once, why are you all women? They said, because we take your section, because we want to learn about women, or we want to learn about pieces that we don't know anything about that that is exciting to us. And Barnard has a very strong feminist component. So every student I've had from Barnard is very much centered on thinking outside traditions, including what's taught and how it's taught. So when I go to teach music theory 3 or 4, and it is all women, or I would have maybe one, one or two male students who sort of got the vibe of the course, and, you know, did not dominate it in any way. It's just a different sort of sense of learning and conversation. So I would find I didn't have to worry about exerting authority. Because there was already that ready for me that we want to learn from you, as opposed to, you don't look like a music theory Professor because you are not a man or you are not white. So that has never been articulated in, say, student evaluation. But I would have a strong sense if a student has a very belligerent attitude and is just not receptive to what I'm saying, interrupts me or the other students. It's just a very different sense of learning and authority. And sometimes I think students would rather me sort of come from above and hand them packets of information and have this very strong sense of a point structure and grading and that's how I grade so I think the student who want to learn from me have found me and I found them, so now it's a happy situation, but I would say it hasn't always been that way just because of the way music theory has been taught.

Will Robin 30:13

Right - you know in terms of diversity there's introducing women or composers of color, classical composers, and studying those works. How do you deal with the question of genre diversity in the music theory classroom -- introducing jazz, hip hop, popular music -- and what kinds of skills do students kind of develop if you deal with different genres and different kinds of analytical tools?

Ellie Hisama 30:37

Yeah so for music theory 3 and 4 I have sometimes done popular music study and analysis, and i have also taught courses which are entirely devoted to popular music analysis, and it tends to be electives, because it's not part of our curriculum currently, but i found that students appreciate my finding out what music they're interested in and trying to incorporate it into the course. So when I first taught music theory -- it was music theory 2 at University of Virginia -- I asked the students what they were interested in music -- like i just had them give me a playlist and sometimes I'd try to use those works and to find like a deceptive cadence in Simon and Garfunkel, or Joan Armatrading, whose music brings up such interesting issues of gender, sexuality, tessitura etc. So I think for students today they're really interested in performance and recordings as opposed to making a course based on scores, which is the

way I studied, so I think for studying music theory and thinking about issues which are very present in their minds such as gender formation or gender performance, that having, say, a female singer with a very deep voice brings up different issues of gender expectation and timbre, depth of sound which they usually haven't had a chance to think about if they have been only focusing on the score.

Will Robin 32:25

Right. I wanted to talk a little bit about another classroom experience that you've been engaged with and written about, which is this really fascinating public outreach project that you worked on for young women of color in in New York. It's called For the Daughters of Harlem. Can you talk a little bit about how that project developed and what it entailed?

Ellie Hisama 32:48

Sure. So For the Daughters of Harlem was a project that began in 2017 so there was a seed grant proposal, it was called the Collaborative to Advance Equity through Research and it came out of the Obama White House, was quickly snuffed out when there was a change of administration, but the seed had been planted at universities across the country; so Columbia was one of them and my colleague Farah Jasmine Griffin and former colleague Alondra Nelson came up with this granting initiative, in which they would have smallish grants -- I think we had maybe \$5,000 -- from the program to have something connect research to equity. So I worked with Lucie Vágnerová, who has a PhD from Columbia, and she and I and Zosha Di Castri, who is a current colleague of mine in composition and also Miya Masaoka who's director of the sound arts program. We worked together and decided to invite young women of color from public schools to campus in order to share some of the resources that Columbia has which are often just inaccessible to someone if you don't have a Columbia ID -- you can't get into the building, you're not allowed to use the equipment, you can't get into the library without special permission -- so these issues of access were really on my mind because Columbia has something called Manhattanville which was a controversial construction project at 125 street; so it is a gleaming beautiful building on the corner of 125th and Broadway, and there was a lot of displacement of residents in this project. So my feeling was if we are pushing Columbia into different corners of the city and making people leave their businesses and homes... There's another current project in which there was a McDonald's also at the opposite corner of 125th and Broadway, it was really a community center. I talked to a Akemi Kochiyama, granddaughter of Yuri Kochiyama, who lives in Harlem, Akemi lives in Harlem. And she mentioned that is really a site where people gather to talk and be with each other. And Columbia razed it and it is now going to be a hotel, I believe that I heard. So there is a lot of taking up space, because space is at such a premium in Manhattan. And my sense was that it is not meant to be... It's not meant to be a generous gift to the community. But it's reparations for what Columbia has done

Will Robin 35:51

The project that you worked on.

Ellie Hisama 35:53

The projects, yes.

Will Robin 35:55

And so what did it include? I mean, you talk in an essay that you wrote about it like you, it's not just getting, you know, these young women to come in and be composers, capital C composers, you're trying to get them to work with this equipment, work in sound. Can you talk a little about like, what the parameters of the musical experience they were having were?

Ellie Hisama 36:13

Yeah, so we wanted it to be research based, and not merely giving them new tools and software and equipment. Although that was certainly a part of it. So we had them read some of Tia De Nora's book, *Music and Everyday Life*, which has been a very influential book in some corners of music studies. And ... so these were young women from high schools, there were some eighth graders who wanted to participate as well, but basically, maybe age 13 to 18. And I think the book is accessible to people who are not necessarily college students. So we tried to translate it and give them portions which they could relate to their own lives. So we talked about, how is music part of your life? How do you perform music, listen to music, relax to music, and then we shared some of the ideas from her book. And I think that chapter "Music as a Technology" specifically, and we got some incredible responses from these young women. So we had a kind of seminar in the first day on the first morning, just to think about different ways that people interact with, engage with music, and how music is woven into their sense of self in a very strong way, although maybe they haven't articulated it or articulated it with a group of people or with teachers, and musicians. So that, for me, was a powerful piece of this project. So it's not just about bringing people in, saying this is how you use this machine, and now we're going to listen to your piece, but to think about what they were trying to achieve when they were in the studio, when they had a guitar, when they were singing, when they're trying out a new lyric and recording it. So we had the discussion and then they would go into small groups into various studios, and then we would have them rotate from person to person. So Courtney Bryan was one of the people they work with. She's an alum of Columbia's DMA program in composition. They worked with David Adamchik who is also a composer and sound recording engineer, Zosha Di Castri, Miya Masaoka. And then we had this also a second time, we had some students return, as well. And we had ... we tried to gauge how they felt about the project. So we would know what to change, kind of student evaluations at the end. And some students said, we want more, like we want this every week. I guess it's a little difficult to think of how that could be every week since so much time went into just one day, but then we had it again for two subsequent weekend days. And I was thinking and talked with Lucille about this, having some sort of summer program, maybe a six-week program, because there's often so little for students at that age group especially, and parents still need to work. So could we offer something which could be possibly extended through a multi week program? And then could we find funding also to pay people who would be running the program? So we did have payment for all the graduate students who were helping us and the external teachers and mentors.

Will Robin 39:45

You know, one thing that's striking and I think you point this out in what he wrote about it is like, Columbia's Computer Music Center is historically this very kind of elite white male space. You know, going back to its founding as the Columbia Princeton Electronic Music Center with Milton Babbitt in the 50s. Can you talk a little bit -- like what was it like to transform, reclaim the space and off -- you know, make it available and usable to the kind of people who are not being allowed to participate in Columbia electronic music 50-70 years ago?

Ellie Hisama 40:19

Yeah for me it was really moving to have different people populate the space. So when i was a music student you would hear about the CPEMC and the legendary people who went through it, and i had no idea that there were any women associated with the CPEMC now called the CMC or the computer music center. So we had photographers for each day of the workshop, and for me that was really important, to have an archive of what went on, so we had both video recording, audio recording through our Soundcloud which is publicly available, and photographs. And to see these spaces which were primarily populated by men -- but not exclusively: so there's a famous picture with Pril Smiley in it in the background, I think Davidovsky is there, Babbitt is there, and so there were women who were present and very much part of the Center but whose stories have been lost -- and I think I mentioned or perhaps not that we're organizing a symposium called unsung stories at the CMC which will be held in April which is to address this very issue of what are the hidden histories of the Columbia Princeton Electronic Music Center.

Will Robin 41:48

So you know the projects of diversifying the music theory classroom or drawing attention to unsung voices, you know, these are difficult... as someone who's done them in my own classrooms -- these are kind of difficult projects, but they're also i think relatively uncontroversial. At the same time, drawing attention to actual discrimination, either historically or right now within the discipline, ignites these huge controversies as we've seen with Philip Ewell's writing in the last six months and the kind of fear that erupted out of that, and you presented on the same panel as professor Ewell, at the Society for Music Theory in 2019, about discrimination. I was wondering if you'd talk a little bit about that paper, which is now being turned into an article, and what you were trying to do with it, and what you're trying to contribute to music theory and our understanding of it.

Ellie Hisama 42:47

So the talk i gave was part of a four person plenary session at the Society for Music theory, and my paper was titled Getting to Count, and i was interested in talking about a few things, but including barriers to inclusion posed by people's ideas about gender, people's idea about sexuality, and more precisely sexism and homophobia as they inform the world of music theory and relatedly composition. So that paper was difficult to think about, and it was one I resisted writing for a long time. So part of the paper, one section of the paper involves an interview i conducted with Milton Babbitt in 1997; so I was one year out of the PhD; he was connected to Gendering Musical Modernism in three ways; so first, I used his idea of order inversions in my analysis of the Crawford String Quartet, the third movement; in writing about Marion Bauer he had been a student of Marion Bauer, so it was because of that, that I got interested in Marion Bauer; and then I also knew that he and Miriam Gideon studied with Roger Sessions at the same time. So I set up an interview with him, and I tried to talk with him about Miriam Gideon's music, and he didn't really want to talk about her music, but he repeated to the theme of her looks; her attractiveness, her impact on him. So it made me feel very uncomfortable, and this was a man I respected very deeply from having studied his works. I studied theory with Joe Straus who has done a great deal of work on Babbitt, I've taught Babbitt's music in my 20th century courses many times, listen to so many performances of his music. And yet he was saying things which were quite deeply disturbing to me. So not only that, but he also returned repeatedly to speak about homosexual

composers and their domination in the field of music in terms of determining who would get awards, who would get recognition such as the Guggenheims, the Pulitzers, etc. So that also I found quite disturbing, and I wasn't sure of my place in a interview situation. was I to begin discussion of homophobia and sexism with my interviewee, or should we just return -- try to turn back to Miriam Gideon's music. So I never succeeded in getting him to say very much about Gideon's music. And after the interview, I used what I could of the discussion and then shelved it because it was something I didn't want to think about. So I shelved it for quite a few years. So 1997 to 2019. And there was a book I was asked to blurb about archiving practices. And one of the chapters I was struck by, it said, cassette tapes last maybe 25 years. And that made me think this recording of the interview with Babbitt in 1997. I should really digitize it or it will disintegrate. So we have a wonderful music librarian, Nick Patterson, at Columbia who helped me digitize the tape. And I listened to it again after many years, and I had forgotten the extent to which the homophobic remarks were there -- because it was not just once or twice, it was about many people, including Dan Weber, Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, so many people whom Babbitt considered to be in control of the goodies that he didn't get for a long time. And then, in reviewing that interview, I saw that he actually had gotten all of them. So he got the MacArthur, he got the Guggenheim, he got many, many sorts of recognitions and awards that say, Miriam Gideon never got. So that was part of the paper, but not all of it. So I was interested in the larger question of women's exclusion from music theory, which I would see every time I stepped into a music theory classroom, and in the Society for Music Theory. So as a tenured woman theorist, I've heard so many stories of people who have come to my office, people who've confided in me, people I have worked with and who have left the field to pursue something else. It's happened many times. And around the time of my thinking about this paper was the "me too" movement. So many women decided to describe their past experiences of harassment or sexual assault. And I decided that I would allow the voices of women to be part of the story, very much influenced by my colleague, Michele Moody-Adams's work. So Michele Moody-Adams is a professor of philosophy here at Columbia University. And she gave an incredible paper at a conference called Black Women Philosophers in the spring of 2019, and she referred to Dr. Martin Luther King's insistence on having people know about the trauma suffered by African Americans as a way to elicit concerned compassion for their situation. So if you see Emmett Till's body, then you cannot look away and say that there is not racism. So I wanted to record some of these stories which I had heard but not put into print. So I read some of these stories in my paper at the time, everything was anonymized, because no one wanted to have their name attached to the story. And I'm told when I was reading that there were many people in tears in the audience, which, frankly, startled me because every time I've told these stories myself, to the men who run music theory, there have been no tears. And I'm not sure why that is. It's like men don't cry, or are they feeling anything, or I don't know, but I received many, many notes from people who said they were in tears, and they felt that I was reading their story, although they had not spoken to me. So that was another piece of the paper. And then the last piece, which was not in my plenary talk, but it was in the version that I shared with you, is about Patricia Carpenter, who taught here at Columbia University and Barnard College for many years. And I tell her story as well, in trying to get people to understand what some women -- I'm not saying all women, but some women -- have experienced in the field of music theory, which has resulted sometimes in their continuing and making great contributions as she did, In other cases for women to have left the field, Jill Brasky as an example, I tell her story, She now works at Georgetown University and has left the field of music theory. So my point in sharing these stories is to give some

texture to these numbers, which are just hard to read, like, why is it that women remain 1/3 of the Society for many years, and that number seems not to be going up?

Will Robin 51:13

Yeah. I was on Twitter when I think -- I guess, as you were giving your talk, and you know, some couple people tweeted kind of slightly cryptic allusions to the Babbitt material. And the response was, suddenly it seemed like everyone in the world was sharing their favorite anecdotes of being buddies with Milton Babbitt. And, you know, it's, it's striking. ... I think you made clear in the paper, your goal is not to cancel Milton Babbitt. But it's also clear that if that's the response from ... that there's still so much work to be done even to just be able to open up a space to talk about harassers as harassers or people who say sexist remarks as people who say sexist remarks, to make the field a more equitable place.

Ellie Hisama 52:05

Right. So with Babbitt, as I mentioned, I just felt... I felt very strange when I was conducting the interview, and I felt so uncomfortable. I just left it and I could have left it forever. I could have let the tape disintegrate and not given that paper but given a happier story about music theory. But I thought, there's no way that the field is going to change unless some people tell their stories. So I wanted to make it clear that I'm not calling Babbitt a harasser I have never heard that from anyone I've spoken with. But I do feel that he has profoundly shaped the field of music theory and also contemporary composition, as Michael Uy's book *Ask the Experts* also shows when he talks about Babbitt's involvement in the CPEMC. And so I do not think that we should just forget about Babbitt and stop listening to his music and to frame him in these terms. However, I do think it's time to acknowledge and think about many people, including Babbitt, but there are many, many people who have shaped a discourse, a field, and it has, in some ways been very exclusionary. So it's thinking about, for example, Aaron Copeland, whose music has not really been a strong part of say, a 20th century analysis course or the Society for Music Theory. He is someone who is part of say a SAM -- Society for American Music -- discussion, but I think it is because his music is not accepted or promoted as necessary or important. And Babbitt is part of that discourse. As someone who was a very powerful personality, a brilliant man, taught many students, was beloved by many, as the Twitter reactions show. But I think we need to think not just about individuals and individual comments, but about how these attitudes are really shaping so much of what we do, how we think, but how we often don't reflect upon that.

Will Robin 54:30

Right. Well, thank you so much. This was really helpful and I learned a lot. I appreciate you taking the time.

Ellie Hisama 54:36

Thank you.

Will Robin 54:42

Many, many thanks to Ellie Hisama, who is professor of Music, Music Theory and Historical Musicology, at Columbia University, for that fascinating conversation, please visit our website soundexpertise.org to learn more about her work, including her Music Theory Spectrum article that we discussed. It's not out quite yet, but once it is, we'll have a link to it. This coming weekend, April 9 and

10th, Professor Hisama is also overseeing an online symposium. *Unsung Stories, Women at Columbia's computer Music Center*, which you should definitely check out. As always, if you like our editing and music, check out the work of our great producer D Edward Davis on Soundcloud at [warmsilence](#), and follow me on twitter [@seated_ovation](#). Next week, I'm very excited to continue the conversation we started today about pedagogy. I'll be talking to musicologists Andrew Dell'Antonio and Sarah Haefeli about teaching music history. Many thanks to Andrew as well for doing amazing work transcribing our episodes to make them more accessible, those transcriptions are up on our website. Finally, to close I've got one specific favor to ask. If you're new to the podcast, or if you've been a longtime listener, please share this episode or your favorite episode on social media and give us a review on Apple podcasts or on your platform of choice. We'd really, really appreciate it. Alright, that's it for now. See you next week.

56:19

[Music]