

Jocelyn

Welcome to another season of the *Compose Like a Girl* podcast. I'm your host, founder, and composer Jocelyn Hagen. My Compose Like a Girl initiative amplifies female identifying composers, helps conductors diversify their concerts, and works toward more equality in music programming and commissioning. I've been sitting down for conversations with some amazing composers and I want to invite you into these deeper explorations of art and life. I hope you leave with some inspiration just as I did.

On today's Season 2 premiere, I'm sharing a recent conversation I had with Mari Esabel Valverde. I've known Mari for many years, and I believe she has always been an inspiring person. We're both graduates of St. Olaf College, and I adore her deep connection to text and language. I also feel that Mari's identity as a trans woman adds such an important perspective to all of these conversations we've been having on this podcast, and also the ways that her gender identity intersects with her creative process and art. Gender is only one piece of who we are, and I love how every artist I sit down with has their own distinct relationship and experience with it. Thanks for tuning in to this week's episode and enjoy.

Hello Mari, how are you doing today?

Mari

I'm doing alright. How are you?

Jocelyn

I'm doing fine. I'm excited to talk to you. I feel like this has been a long time coming.

Mari

Yeah! [laughs] We've both been really busy.

Jocelyn

Yeah, well, and we both studied both at St. Olaf and then also at the European American Musical Alliance program that takes place in Paris. And I loved that. What was your favorite part of that program?

Mari

Oh, so I went twice actually! I think my first time was more transformational, but my second time I kind of braved the wilderness and went out into the French speaking part of the world. [laughs]. And I remember having lunch at a Thai restaurant and hearing a Thai French person speak French and speaking to them in French was such a highlight! [laughs]

Jocelyn

Isn't that interesting? As composers we like sound, right? Just in general?

Mari

Absolutely.

Jocelyn

So the sound of language is very intriguing to me and the way that people speak is fascinating. Your biography states that you are proficient in Spanish, French, and Brazilian Portuguese. How did you become proficient in so many languages?

Mari

So I'm Mexican American and so my father's father is my most recent connection in my genealogy, I guess, to Mexico according to current geography. But I grew up learning or listening to Spanish. And my parents emphasized that I learned Spanish whenever it became a class in school, which was seventh grade for me. And I wanted to take French, but that didn't happen until St. Olaf. Actually, part of my process of falling in love with music had a lot to do with the French language because I bought a book of French art songs. And I would listen to the piano part recordings over and over and eventually I would study some of that music and when I was teaching myself how to play piano, I didn't have, you know, Mozart or Beethoven, it was Debussy for me as a starting point. And then when I was in college, I started listening to a lot of Brazilian folk and pop music and I guess that was the beginning of my study of Brazilian Portuguese. Really, I just loved the music and I wanted to be able to sing along and then I just kept on scratching that itch until I became conversational. [laughs]

Jocelyn

Oh, that's just amazing. I am just a typical American and I only speak English. I can sort of translate German when forced, but it's really, it's not a muscle that I ever used very often. Even when I was studying German, I just never got proficient. So that completely impresses me. And I also, you know, think a lot about how much we love sound and how the beauty of language is something I think about a lot when I'm setting words to music, and I'm sure you do too. How does this knowledge of languages influence your composition?

Mari

Language is a huge, huge thing for me. I have great reverence for every language, European, Asian, whatever. I have very little fear when it comes to other languages. But I also, like I said, I also have reverence. And I think that kind of goes hand in hand. If I'm learning a piece of music, for example, in Farsi then I'm going to make some phone calls and make sure I learn how to

sing the music correctly, or to the best of my ability. I use that example because here in Texas one of Abbie Betinis's pieces was on the audition list and it was in Farsi and, you know, of course some people don't care as much as I do, I'll just say that outright [laughs]. So I called a friend who was from Iran and I got him to record it and I listened to the text over and over and over and you know, Abbie includes an IPA guide and I created my own IPA guide and then I swapped notes and, you know, I'm really trying to figure out the soul of the text. And I take a similar approach when I'm composing. I wouldn't ever set a language that I don't, or I should say I wouldn't ever set a text that I don't know how to pronounce. That takes a while to get enough proficiency to have comfort with that. And I'm happy to do that research. And I think with the internet, it's pretty crazy how quickly we can get certain resources. And I really exercise that ability a lot [laughs].

Jocelyn

So, you know, moving from words now into poetry, what do you look for when you're picking a text to set to music?

Mari

Oh, I think the single most important thing is that there is movement in the text. I would say that I'm still a student of music and notwithstanding my Latin American background, I don't feel that I'm particularly rhythmically inclined and I think that's part of it, is that I think that a text and a language has a certain pulse and rhythm to it already. So when you're setting a text and you're reciting it, you're internalizing the text, whatever the language is, you kind of can get a sense for the pulse or the rhythm of it. And so text helps in making decisions about the rhythm of what you're composing.

Jocelyn

Oh yeah, definitely, yeah. And you told me once that you commission many of the poems that you set. Can you tell me more about that?

Mari

I wouldn't say many. It's just been like three. And it's because I work with a poet named Amir Rabiya, a multiracial, trans disabled queer poet and librarian. I've worked with Amir since 2015. My first project working with Amir was *Our Phoenix*. The poem was called "Our Dangerous Sweetness." And I think Amir's poetry, I mention all of the identity because of course that's who they are, but I think it informs their art and it resonates with me deeply because you know, notwithstanding being very trans, being very queer, you know, being non-white, their poetry, to me it speaks deeply to the human experience. And I think there is a universal tone to the poems that they write. So I have set their poetry to music multiple times. *Before Spring* is one of them.

Jocelyn

Can you tell me more about *Before Spring*?

Mari

I think probably the most overarching thing I can say about my purpose or goal as a composer is that my music is about unlearning shame. And I say that as a woman, I say as someone who's transgender. I say that as somebody who's racially ambiguous. I say that as a millennial. I say that as someone who doesn't come from enormous wealth. And I say that as somebody who is in classical music and works with people in classical music. So that's all to say that my life has been a process of unlearning shame. And the way that I would describe it is that I'm not supposed to exist. I'm not supposed to be possible. And that society in obvious ways and not so obvious ways put shame onto my body, my human body. And so when I'm writing music, especially when I have a text like the one that Amir wrote for *Before Spring*. Because it is sexual, but it is a process of removing shame from my body that I didn't put there that other people or society has put there through my life. I once described in a talk that being transgender, people think it's about putting on clothes and putting on like a character or persona, or trying to embody something. But I would describe it best as taking things off, being naked. Being trans feels like being naked, not being something else.

Jocelyn

Wow.

Mari

So *Before Spring* [laughs], the prompt was, from you know two or three years ago, because you know how commissioning goes. The original talk was we want to commission three composers, and we would like one composer to write about creation, life, and afterlife. And they gave me a choice. So I decided, I think afterlife would be, I don't really feel like I'm the right composer for that. And life seems too broad. So I was excited and I said, "I'll do the creation piece." And of course I turned around and I asked Amir, "would you write an original text for this project?" And, you know, they're trans, I'm trans. I'm not certain, but I'm like 99% sure that neither Amir or I can procreate. I don't know how much you know about medical transition, but that's part of it usually.

Jocelyn

Yeah.

Mari

Creation from a trans lens, it's from a trans lens, but I want it to be able to apply to everybody. And like I said, I'm all about unlearning shame. The poem that they gave to me is an untitled

poem. There was no title. But the Microsoft Word file said “erotic poems.” And they wrote two for me to choose from. So, you know, it's something erotic, it's something sexual. And I really wanted to do that because I'm trying to, in blunt terms, I'm trying to not feel bad about myself. And I don't mean to apologize for myself, I mean to be able to experience pleasure, I think, is like the highest and most radical thing for me. And maybe that's toxic, I don't know. Or pro-capitalist, you know, problematic in some sense, but I think true pleasure has to have safety. And safety is something that I'm always chasing. So with *Before Spring*, it's about creation. It's about what happens before birth and in a sense *Before Spring*.

Jocelyn

I'm loving hearing you talk about all of these things. Especially this idea of unlearning shame. Because there's everything that you're going through and have gone through in your life with being transgender. And then I also feel like in the music world itself, there's a layer of shame. So you have a double whammy of both of those things. And yeah, do you ever do you ever think about it on the music side too?

Mari

I don't know how much I think about it, but I think it definitely comes out. And I think it comes out as anger. The few times that I have had Reiki, my therapist, she would always cry in the middle of the session and I'd be like, “I'm sorry, I made you cry.” She says, “you have so much anger.” And I'm just like not even aware of it until somebody gives me a microphone. [laughs] Because I am unforgiving about things. I feel a lot of things.

Jocelyn

Yeah, well and your demeanor is more cheerful, you know, open and honest, but also just kind. At least that's my experience when we have conversations. I don't think I've seen that anger side of you. And maybe even if I did, I wouldn't quite know it? Does that make sense?

Mari

I think it goes into my music.

Jocelyn

Oh!

Mari

And I'm aware of it in a roundabout way because whenever I have the opportunity of being invited to a rehearsal or sent a recording of a rehearsal. I often remark that my music is too

beautiful. And there's probably a lot of reasons for that. I have a very Frenchy background, but I always tell them that my music is meant to be aggressive.

Jocelyn

Huh! Yeah, so digging into a different kind of emotion than is maybe reflected most of the time? Or do you want your musicians to see past the pretty and get to an underbelly of darkness or anger in there?

Mari

It's both. I want them to understand that truth is beauty. And that when you don't apologize for something, that there's something beautiful about how aggressive it is. You know, it sounds very masculine when I'm talking about it. You know, I think especially trans people are made to think about gender all the time. And I think being a feminine person and I think this would apply to really anybody who is a woman, gives you a license to be more masculine in your actions. Because people can't steal away your femininity. And for men, trans or cis or non-binary, you know, it's the opposite. They have the license to be more feminine and not have their masculinity stolen away from them. Now there are many men in our society that don't realize that. But those who have a positive understanding of their masculinity assert themselves in that way. And I think in my music I'm very, I'm very aggressive, you know? I feel like my music is sort of masculine. And I always, you know, think to myself that I'll leave it to the men who compose music to write the more gushy-mushy, flowery stuff.

Jocelyn

Yeah, well, it reminds me of something that Abbie Betinis once told me, and that was that, you know, one of her comp teachers, I don't know if she ever told me which one, but they said "You gotta be careful about writing this beautiful romantic kind of music because it'll be seen as too feminine and nobody will take you seriously."

Mari

I understand that fear, but I don't think that that is really a concern. I think people appreciate music and different kinds of music at different walks of life. So I don't, to me it feels scary to operate creatively from a stance of fear.

Jocelyn

Mm-hmm.

Mari

So I can understand that statement, but I don't think I necessarily agree.

[Audio of "Pulse" from Blue Dot Sessions]

Jocelyn

I listened to a lot of your music in the past couple weeks, you know, and I definitely hear the French music coming through. Oh, it is so evident! And also I love it. I love French music, so it just makes sense to hear you actually just acknowledge that out loud and say, "yes, this is my direct influence." And yeah, are there any others besides French music that you would say "yes, this is a direct influence on my sound or my art"?

Mari

I think the French composers early on, like when I was like 16, one of the All State audition pieces in Texas was "The Death of David" from *King David* by Honneger, who is, I don't think he's French, I think he's Swiss, but he was from Les Six, the group of composers. So he's French-y, even though he's Swiss. And you know, I really got into a lot of that music at a younger age. And then when I went to St. Olaf, I got sucked in by some Nordic composers, specifically like Stenhammar, Sibelius, Peterson-Berger, and Grieg. And my roommate who went on to move to Denmark and still lives there, he studied Norwegian at the school and then he studied Danish and you know so we were collaborating. I actually wrote two Danish songs for him. Now those Danish songs are on an album that is being considered, not nominated, but considered for the Grammy process.

Jocelyn

Woohoo! That's exciting.

Mari

So it's weird. It's really weird writing music whenever I was a student and those pieces are finally like getting air, oxygen, opportunity? Because I remember back then feeling like I wasn't worthy of anything. For a lot of reasons. And I still struggle with that to an extent, although obviously not in the same way. I feel like I've worked through that karma a bit. So there was Nordic influence, there was Brazilian influence, I'm sure, somewhere in there. And one of the pieces that I was commissioned to write was for Adams State University, which is in the San Luis Valley, which is in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. Hispanic serving institution, small music program. And I was asked to specifically set a poem called "Maps" by Yesenia Montilla, who is an Afro-Latina poet based in New York. And it had to do with immigration, separation, isolation. I'm telling you all of this because I had to write for guitar for the first time. [laughs] And, you know, people ask me, like, how do you go about that? And it's really the same thing every time. You find a piece of music that you love that includes that instrument. And if you can get a hold of the music score and just like internalize that. Try to understand what it can do, what you like about it. And having said all of that, because I had to write for guitar, I went on a search to listen to the *Siete Canciones Populares Espanolas* by Manuel de Falla. It is done a lot. And Spanish is

completely undervalued in the classical world. But in this case, a Spanish poet, I mean a Spanish composer wrote these pieces, you can find them for voice and piano, but the piano parts are very guitar inspired. I found a recording of a duo doing these songs, but it was cello and guitar. And I listened to it a lot. I followed the score. I could listen to that song cycle all day. It is brilliant.

Jocelyn

I want to ask you about your piece *Moonlight Quartet* for String Quartet.

Mari

[laughs]

Jocelyn

Why is that funny?

Mari

Just go ahead, I want you to finish. [laughs]

Jocelyn

[laughs]. Well, it is in my goal for this podcast that we listen to both vocal and instrumental works by all the composers that are featured. And part of that is just because so oftentimes the instrumental works are the only ones that that side of the classical world usually deems worthy, right?

Mari

Oh, interesting.

Jocelyn

So my idea is to really, you know, always have one of both so that especially since, you know, you're like me, you write a lot of vocal music, and it's frustrating when that always isn't seen as being equal to writing instrumental music. So I'm trying to balance that out with this podcast and feature pieces that are both instrumental and vocal. So that was the main reason for choosing the *Moonlight Quartet*, is because it's an instrumental piece. But do you have another instrumental piece you'd rather have me talk about?

Mari

No, I think this is a great piece.

Jocelyn

Okay. Well, tell me about it.

Mari

So it is a choral piece. [laughs]

Jocelyn

Oh! [laughs]

Mari

Well I transcribed it, I transcribed it for a string quartet. And I did it because a friend of mine in San Francisco, his sister, I believe, was getting married, and he played in my graduate recital, and he says "I really love this piece. Would you mind if I arranged a string quartet?" I said, "I'm glad you like it. I would love to go ahead and transcribe it for string quartet." There's a beautiful poem that goes with it. It's actually in Swedish. And the song is sung in Swedish. And so it has that like June time, midsommar like theme. And they, you know, the moon doesn't stay down very long in the summer. It's mostly sun. But you have this image of the moon and I don't know, I think Scandinavians think about the sun and the moon a lot more than most people. [laughs]

Jocelyn

Let's listen now to Mari's Moonlight Quartet, performed by the Her Ensemble.

[Audio of "Moonlight Quartet"]

Jocelyn

I want to actually go back to something you touched on in that conversation that we just had. And it was about you not feeling worthy with your music and how something that you wrote when you were younger is now getting some amazing attention and will be on an album and considered for getting a possible Grammy.

Mari

Nomination.

Jocelyn

Nomination. Yeah. That has to feel amazing, in one way, right? Because oh my gosh, this piece is doing something, but then also in the same breath or moment feel a little bit frustrating, right?

Mari

Yes, yes, absolutely. And I think that the frustration goes away. [laughs]. Thankfully. I think at the end of everything, at the end of karma is just gratitude. I really believe that. And sometimes I reach for gratitude sooner than I'm ready for it. But yeah, with those pieces, I will say this: I knew when I was writing those pieces that they were gems. And that was a word that a reviewer of the album used to describe my pieces. And I knew that. I believed in myself in the process of writing the piece. But, you know, that was back at St. Olaf. I really envy those days because that environment was so conducive to creativity.

Jocelyn

Mm-hmm. Yeah. It really was.

Mari

It's not a given to have community with people like that and to just be able to create. You have to really work for that on the other side of a degree. But I took the reins on it and I took advantage of it. I am so proud of what I was able to do at St. Olaf. And it was possible only because of St. Olaf. I came out as trans at St. Olaf. It was probably the first time in my life where I felt safe to be myself. And I remember struggling through writing those early pieces, but those are some of the most popular pieces. "Darest, O Soul" is another one of them. I wrote "Darest, O Soul" how many years ago? It was 2009 and I had just come back from Paris for the first time. So, you know, I had counterpoint on my mind. [laughs]

Jocelyn

Oh yes. Most definitely.

Mari

That's mainly what you get there as far as I'm concerned. At least for me, that's what it's like. Okay, we're gonna learn counterpoint.

Jocelyn

Oh yeah.

Mari

Or practice it. It's not a one and done. [laughs]

Jocelyn

Oh no, it's all counterpoint all the time. [laughs] Yeah.

Mari

Yeah.

Jocelyn

Well, thank you for all that. You're making me very proud to be in Ole today because I do feel like that was a very safe space and a wonderful place to learn and to figure out who you are. I think it's also where I figured out a lot of things about myself, too. I'm grateful that we have that kind of shared history, even though we weren't there at the same time.

Mari

Absolutely. It's an important place.

Jocelyn

All right. I want to talk to you a little bit about Texas. You know, so you grew up in Texas, you live in Texas. And you used this term in your email to me, the Texas Music Education Machine.

Mari

It is, it's a machine.

Jocelyn

Yeah, tell me about that.

Mari

Oof. Okay, here's where the anger comes in. [laughs] It's a lot of things. So I have to be grateful for my music education, specifically choir. I sang in honor choir when I was in sixth grade. And I have been in choir ever since! You know, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth, you know, St. Olaf. And then when I moved to San Francisco, I looked for a choir, I sang with a choir called the International Orange Chorale of San Francisco. And for those that don't know, "International Orange" is the name of the color of the Golden Gate Bridge. And then I came

back to Texas and, you know, searched for choral opportunities here. I mean, choir is my life. For better or worse. I think Texas does certain things very well. And as a professional, it's really frustrating. First of all, it's like anywhere in the US. The suburbs where there are more white families that have inherited wealth and invest in those specific school districts. These choir programs, they're like football teams, you know? I always explain it this way. Football is king in Texas. I don't care at all about football. But if you have football, then you have to have a marching band. And if your budget is big enough for a marching band, you get the barnacle of choir. And if your choir is big enough, you have the barnacle of orchestra. And I think because of that, band and choir is huge in Texas, and a lot of people are band kids and choir kids, growing up at least. But on the professional side, there's very little appetite for new music. And I became super aware of that when I moved to San Francisco because it is the polar opposite. Everybody has to have a premiere or multiple premieres on every single concert. It's part of the marketing of "come to our concert, this is going to be a premiere." That's what they value more than you know, I don't mean this in a mean way, but they value that more even if the music isn't like stellar or just like groundbreaking. Do you know what I'm saying? I feel like it would be an extreme way to say that they'll celebrate mediocrity. It's just like true justice is not finding diverse people and celebrating them, too. It's celebrating their mediocrity and also making sure that they are nourished along the way, just like anybody else would be. I shouldn't say diverse, I should say marginalized people. Because there are poor white people all over the country, too.

Jocelyn

Well, I have never heard it described that way of celebrating mediocrity. Because oh, we celebrate so much mediocrity in the music world just with a lot of, you know, white male composers that, you know, were writing things and it was automatically what was getting programmed or getting published. And not a lot of it was great! And that always kind of drove me crazy. It's like, why is this why is this white man getting so much more attention? When it's like there's all this wealth of other things that I think are of higher quality, you know, better music, more engaging music, music that actually is saying something, has something to contribute to a conversation, you know? That kind of music wasn't nearly as popular. And that was something that I kind of realized mostly in my 30s, I think, is like "Why is this happening?" And it's part of the reason why, you know, with our publishing company, why we've been so focused on diversity, but also bringing great music, and maybe even some mediocre music who's to know, but like that there's just more wealth of things to choose from.

Mari

You know, people ask me like, how did you learn this? How did you get into this? And I actually burst out. And this is again probably from the anger that I just have. That's just with me. But it's just like I've spent so many years of the past, I would say, fifteen years trying to impress people, trying to show that I'm worthy. That worthiness is something that I struggled with. And I want to take it back to your comment about mediocrity. So white men are not a monolith and this is why I said there are poor white people all over the country. We need to come to a point where people realize that it shouldn't matter what your walk in life is. You should be celebrated for your

mediocrity so that you have a path to excellence. And it's really hard to build that path by yourself. And I and I say that to the extent that I feel like I've had to do that.

Jocelyn

Can I just say how amazing that statement is and how much I agree with it and why it is really at the core of why I've taken on this initiative of Compose Like a Girl, which is not only this podcast, but the choral series and all this mentorship that I've been providing for women of all ages and all levels, just to get more feedback on their work, get more performances, so that they can continue to level up.

Mari

Yes, the composition competitions, the competition for commissions, everything is like you need to be your most excellent self. And that's not very helpful to very many people. It's helpful for people with the most resources. And you can say, okay, well, we want a Black composer or a woman who's a composer, and you have a you know, still you're gonna end up, the winner or the person you hire is gonna end up being a black woman with a lot of resources. So it's just like the diversity aspect to me is integral to everything now. However, what I'm trying to get to when I talk to people is that folks need to learn how to value, I should say not "folks." I think White men with the most resources need to understand how they can benefit or learn from opening up those resources to more people. I will say this, look, you asked me to be on your podcast. The people who have commissioned me, you know, I've had multiple lesbians commission me. To the extent that I've had male people commission me, they've usually been men of color that have gone out of their way to platform me. So I think those people are more, they more readily see me. If you're a woman or a person of color, I'm more readily visible than I am to a cishet white person because I'm not worthy of investment because they don't see how helping me helps them. So if we change the structures to help people with less resources even than me, then not only does it even the field, it creates a situation where cishet white men have to compete. And it demands excellence from them the same way the system has demanded excellence from anybody who's not cishet and white and male.

[Audio of "Under the Wire" from Blue Dot Sessions]

Jocelyn

There are so many of Mari's choral pieces that we could have featured on this episode, but I really wanted to share two movements of *Earth, Mother*. Even though we didn't get a chance to talk about it in our conversation, I really like this piece because it's so powerful and soulful. Great melodies and wonderful new poetry by fellow Compose Like a Girl composer Sherry Blevens. Also, it's just a fabulous performance. This recording is from the University of Michigan Men's Glee Club, under the direction of Mark Stover.

[Audio of two movements of *Earth, Mother*]

Jocelyn

Thank you, Mari, for this wonderful conversation today. It was wonderful to hear you talk about these things, and so openly and honestly. So thank you for all that.

Mari

Absolutely, it's my pleasure.

Jocelyn

I appreciate Mari's willingness to explore the depth of her emotions, especially anger. Anger is one of those emotions that women aren't really supposed to feel or show, which is ridiculous because of course women get angry. But that's not what I'm feeling today. Today I'm grateful to share this platform with composers I admire, like Mari.

Compose Like a Girl was produced by Justin Schell, Laura Krider, and me, Jocelyn Hagen, with special help from fellow composers Erica Malpass and Addie Struckman. The Compose Like a Girl theme music was composed by cellist Cicely Parnas. Thank you all for helping me with this vision. Thanks also to the University of Michigan Men's Glee Club and Her Ensemble for their permission to use their recordings on today's episode. You can learn more about Mari Esabel Valverde and her music at marivalverde.com and by following her on social media. Check out the links in our show notes, visit JocelynHagen.com/ComposeLikeAGirl, and follow us on Facebook and Instagram to listen to the music we talked about today, learn more about the Compose Like a Girl initiative, and check out past episodes. You can also find choral programming ideas by checking out the Compose Like a Girl Choral series through Graphite Publishing. You can subscribe to the Compose Like a Girl podcast wherever you get your podcasts. And if you're so moved, rate us on Apple Podcasts and share it with a few friends who you think will find inspiration. This really helps us create a sustainable podcast. Until next time, trust your instincts, be brave and unapologetic for your talents. Thanks for listening.