Peggy Glanville-Hicks Address 2023

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Transcript

Elena Kats-Chernin

I am incredibly grateful that I am able to make music on the lands of the Gadigal people, and I want to express my gratitude and respect for the Elders of all time and for the culture of this precious land. And I'm really proud to be part of this incredible community here.

The music community is very supportive, very generous and it wouldn't be where it is without the Australian Music Centre. And I want to very much thank them for supporting us. We know that if people look for a piece of music, they go to Australian Music Centre. That's where it is. Without it, they wouldn't know what to do, where to look for us. We would be invisible. So, for that, I really thank you, Australian Music Centre, and everyone who works or has worked there, and there's a lot of you here in this room who have passed through and made work experience at the Australian Music Centre. And I remember when it opened, so for me, that's a big history that I have with that institution.

Thank you, Cath, and thank you, Krista, for organising this event and also Marshall - for asking me to do this. It's an amazing honour.

Composing is my life. It's my life and my profession. And my love. I sit every morning with my coffee, with my manuscript, and a pen at my piano, and I think I'm the luckiest woman in the world.

How did I get here? Where did it all start? My childhood shaped a lot of my life. My mum always told me that everything happens for the best. And I believed her. She also convinced me that I liked cod liver oil. And she made me drink it every day. She was one of the first eye surgeons in Russia who repaired cross eyed syndrome in children. She was also a pianist. And she made my sister and I learn piano. She also made us learn ice skating because she wanted us to be fit. Not that we wanted to do it.

When I was 14, she sent me to Moscow to study at the wonderful Gnessin Academy of Music. And that meant that I only saw my family three times in the three years, for just a few weeks. So I was always in the dormitory, away from home. My mother was my first inspiration. She was an intelligent woman, humble, very humble woman, very generous, had a golden heart. And she was always determined that my sister and I knew music. I knew from the time I was little that composing was much more important to me than playing piano.

I was born in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. My father was an engineer, and when I was four, we moved to Yaroslavl. Not because we wanted to but because the government sent my parents to work in Yaroslavl. It was a town on the Volga River, 360 kilometres from Moscow. It was often a place where very famous soloists would come to rehearse their performances, rehearse for their tours. People like Sviatoslav Richter, Emil Gilles, the incredible violinist David Oistrakh, a beautiful pianist Bella Davidovich. Fantastic people. I learned a lot from just going to those concerts.

I couldn't speak until I was three. And when I did speak, it was not a good speech at all. Lots of impediments, and it was a very broken language. So, my sister was my first teacher of speech. She practiced with me lots of vowels, and the reason I can actually communicate today is because my sister taught me, patiently, day after day after day, because I just could not pronounce things at all. My parents were worried. They were worried that I would never learn to communicate. But then, in Yaroslavl, my sister had a piano lesson. I was four, and I watched her take that lesson. And after the teacher left, I played all the pieces. And then my parents were not worried anymore. They immediately arranged for me to have lessons.

But I got bored very quickly. I played through all the materials that we had at home, we had a lot of music books. We had Chopin, we had Schumann songs, Schubert songs, Gounod, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev. We had lots of literature. And I was always having my feet on the ready to collapse books because my feet were not, of course, reaching the floor. I was only four and I was really - even in my class at school, in which we had sports, where you were standing in the order of your height - I was the very last, and I hated that. I was always the smallest.

I was always bored playing other people's music after a while, so I decided to play my own. And I was improvising for days. And that was my very favourite thing to do.

When I went to sleep, and when I woke up, I always saw a tapestry that was hanging on the wall right next to the bed. That tapestry was Uzbek made - it had vibrant colours, beautiful patterns, and whirling kind of shapes. And that tapestry is in my head even till today. I feel that it nourished my music then, and even today as well. I feel that kind of ornamental music, or ornamental shapes, and also, the human invention, how much patience somebody has to have to crochet something like this, to make it by hand. All of this was made by hand. And I still have that tapestry in my house. At the moment it's just covering a television. I kept it all these years.

Composing can be a dangerous profession, especially for a small little girl at home alone. I was at home one day, my mother was at work, and I wanted to say hello to a neighbour. So, I climbed onto the window, the windowsill, on which the books, all the music books were on that window, and the books started to slide down. And I was sliding with them. And so, I fell and I hit my head on the radiator. And I did not feel pain, but when I touched my head, it was full of blood. Sorry, it's a bit gory. Then I ran to the neighbour, and she called my mother. And then a car was sent from the hospital where my mother worked and then the surgeon sewed my head.

This story has relevance because I was prone to accidents. I nearly drowned once. I fell a lot - a lot on the back of my head, and I think sometimes that shaped my music somehow.

Interestingly, accidents are not a bad thing in music. I feel, somehow, that the accidental things that happen in the music, when, for example, you play piano and you accidentally hit a note, which you didn't mean to hit, even if it's a note with friends - as we know it, where you, you're not supposed to hit that neighbouring note - I think it's a happy accident, often.

For example, I wrote a piece called Purple Prelude in the 90s which has a harmonious texture, but at one point there is a clash. And at first you're shocked, that clash doesn't seem right. But then I repeated that clash. And without that clash - I tried that too - the piece felt bland. It lost its distinctiveness. It didn't have something unique about it. So, I felt that that clash just was meant to be. It was meant to be part of that piece. So, it stayed and it's always there. And people sometimes ask, do you really mean it? I say, yes, I do. And look, it's there for four times, not just once.

Anyway, for the next ten years, my time was divided between running to music lessons, taking a bus there, then taking a bus to the ice skating. And occasionally, I played in a concert, and I won some small prizes, but I was never interested in being known. I was extremely shy, and I'm still very shy.

When I was fourteen, I was sent to Moscow, as I mentioned before. Until then, for ten years, I was running to school and to the ice skating. What I also want to mention is that the first lesson at the ice skating was to learn to fall. That's another thing that's important in composition. The trainers would say, '1, 2, 3, fall.' Just enough time to raise up, and then again, '1, 2, 3, fall,' and then it went for an hour like that.

What it meant is that, as a composer, I'm not scared of falling or failing. And I think that's important because when you write a piece of music, you're putting your soul on the line. And you're risking things - you should be risking things - to a certain extent. And having those lessons, how to fall, it's still in my head the whole time. It's really, really useful.

So, I went to Gnessin Music College, which was a special place for learning harmony and counterpoint theory. We had fantastic teachers. Some of the teachers there had written the very textbooks from which we were learning.

I lived in a dormitory with three other girls in the room. We were always wearing the same clothes. We didn't have much. Sometimes we were sharing one cup between four of us. And we were always fighting for the piano. And I was lucky because one of us was a violinist.

Often, in the music, I like to have limits set for me. And it was, in a way, I think, coming from that college where the teachers were telling you what to do and we had to write four-part dictations and sometimes sing a Bach invention where you play two outer parts but you sing the middle part. You learn those things and I loved having freedom outside the cage. It was something that I really enjoyed.

Later, when I wrote a piece called Eliza Aria, for example, for Meryl Tankard's ballet Wild Swans, my aim was just to give myself limitations and just to use three chords and nothing else for a long time. The way this piece happened is - we had a beautiful soprano called Lisa Crosato in Melbourne Ballet Centre - we were rehearsing and improvising and trying things out. And then one day she said, 'You have to write me something, I'm just here and I have no material to do anything.' And she said, 'You have until tomorrow, it's my last day.' And I said, 'Okay'. So, I had one night to kind of percolate. And in the morning, just before we started, I had an hour on the piano before everyone else came in.

And I just decided I'd use something really hard to sing, because she was cheeky asking me for a piece. She should get her challenge. And so, I wrote this piece which is extremely hard to sing. What I noticed with a lot of my works – and, as one of them – Eliza Aria has brought me a lot of joy over the many years, since it was written 20 years ago – it is not a usual kind of melody, it's a study. It's a voice study. And a lot of the pieces that I had varied success with, or some recognition, they are all kind of studies. They're not real melodies, they're not song melodies, they're not notes one after another, you can't really sing them, even though you do sing Eliza Aria, but it's extremely hard to keep the pitch going.

Everything changed in my life in 1975 when we moved to Australia upon an invitation from my father's sister, my aunty Maya, who was, by the way, a concert pianist. But here in Sydney she worked in a factory because that's what happened to migrants, a lot.

The world outside Russia really fascinated me. I was so excited about what's going to be happening when I arrived here. I was very lucky to be accepted in this very institution (Sydney Conservatorium of Music). And I had two shocks happen. So, the first shock was, I had to choose my own subjects. In Russia, you were told what to do. You were told, you do this, you do that, then and then, in this room, and this is what you do. Here, I had to choose what I needed, what I wanted to do. I didn't know what I wanted. So, it was really a hard learning process. And I got used to it, but I also had friends, students who helped me. My English was very limited as well, so it was a little struggle. The second shock was a good one. I found this miracle machine called photocopier. And suddenly, I didn't have to write things out by hand. And for ten cents, I could make one sheet repeat itself. I thought, 'Oh!' So that was a fantastic thing. Although today even that is obsolete.

At the Conservatorium, I studied piano and composition as a double major. I was extremely lucky to be discovered by the late great musicologist Richard Toop. Many in this room would probably remember him. He had just been in Europe, working with the iconic German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, and shortly after his appointment and prior to his arrival at the Conservatorium (and he was legendary before he even arrived), we already knew this amazing man was coming. He came to a concert in which I wrote a piece, and it was the craziest, absurdist piece. In one hand I was playing mouth organ, with the other hand I was playing piano. I also had an oboist playing along. And the whole piece was based on mathematical logarithms. I was very interested in maths at the time. After the concert, Richard came up to me and said, 'Would you like to be my student? My composition student?' And I said, 'Oh, would I? What a question.' I didn't say that, but I was very thrilled. So, I became his first and, for one year, his only composition student. Afterwards, there was Gerard Brophy, there was Michael Smetanin, and a lot of more, more students who profited from his knowledge, incredible knowledge.

Now, the lessons with Richard, how were they? I came to his house where he lived with his family. And it was in a rented house in Woollahra, belonged to a very, very, very famous Australian painter. The lessons were about three to four hours long. I would be listening to recording of Stockhausen performed by this orchestra, but then by that orchestra, and then some piece by Boulez, some piece by Xenakis, and Lutoslawski. All the while, he would be making dinner. And the dinner, usually, his best dish, was grilled aubergine. Sometimes with a steak. And always lots of drink, as those would know who knew him. It was so much fun to have lessons with Richard.

When I had to play my piano exam for my graduation, I said, 'Richard, what do you suggest I play as a concerto?' He said, 'You, with your little hands, write your own.' And I said, 'okay.'

So, I went to task and wrote a piece for strings, three trombones, and percussion, and harp. And I played with my little hands, and I called it Concerto No. 0 because I didn't know it was going to go anywhere, and it never did. But it exists on a cassette. And it actually helped me win a German Exchange Academic Scholarship, so it was good to have that recording.

Much, much later, when I came back from Germany - and I'll get back to Germany in a second - in the 90s, I was very fortunate that Richard volunteered to write the libretto to my first opera, Iphis, and it remains one of my most treasured collaborations. Richard's words were sharp, short, singable, to the point, but most importantly, very few. And that makes a very big difference as those who know opera, opera can be very wordy and it's very hard to understand words when they're sung. So, what's the point? I find - I'm allowed to say this right now. So, for me, the less words the better because then you can repeat them. You can do lots of things with very few words. When you have lots of words, you've got to fit them all in. That's quite hard.

When I graduated in 1980, I received a two-year scholarship to study with avant-garde composer Helmut Lachenmann in Hanover. Similarly, he also loved food. Luckily. So, I had lessons at his family, in their apartment, we would have again three-to-four-hour lessons, but every fortnight.

During his lessons, he didn't tell me, do this, do that, make more flute here, less horn there, make a longer section here, which is kind of sometimes how composition is taught. He would say, he would ask, 'Why? Why this and not this? Why that and not the other?' And then finally, 'Why?' Then his wife Yukiko would cook tempura, wonderful things. She is a concert pianist. She played a lot of Lachenmann's work. She was a great antidote to his strictness. He was very strict. And actually a little scary. So often I was quite deflated after the lesson. And so, Yukiko made it better with food. Later I understood what he meant. He meant a lot of times that it's the material that makes a difference. It's not just writing something. You have to think why you're writing something. And why you're making these notes come together. And why not those notes.

So, one day I had to write a piece for flute and viola for some students in my class in Hanover. In German, flute is Flöte and viola is Bratsche. So, Helmut Lachenmann said, 'Why don't you write a piece for Flatsche, a mixture of the two?' And I thought, that's interesting, it was like a puzzle. He talked like this sometimes. And I said, 'Ah, I understand. I have to make my own material, which becomes my instrument, and it's called Flatsche'.

So, the Flatsche became a kind of glissando figure in flute. It stopped with the Bratsche in the top register on the kind of sharp note. And that was my material that later became the piece called In Tension that I wrote for Seymour Group. Now Seymour Group was a group of chamber music that was established in the 70s and they were fantastic. They did a lot of new music, and it was my first ever paid commission. I remember till today how much I got for it. Not much but was good because it was my first. It was just something so special. I don't think any composer in this room will forget how the first commission worked, how much they got for it, when it was performed, what was the piece. It's something that just stays with you forever and it's the most important memory I think you have of your professional life. So, that was a fantastic time.

I also managed to earn some money while working in the theatre for a few years in Germany. I learned a lot about dance, how the sound works, how the sound works for the actors in the drama. My favourite was to make set change music because there you could be very loud because you had to be, because you had to cover the furniture sets moving behind the curtain. I love doing functional music, music that actually has a function.

I lived in Germany for 13 years. I decided to go back to Australia. And just before I left, I was commissioned to write a piece for Ensemble Moderne. I was commissioned by the Centre for Multimedia and Technology in Karlsruhe in this fantastic complex that they just built. This piece called Clocks for playback and ensemble for 20 instruments, became my calling card when I came back. I was very lucky that it was recorded because in those days it wasn't a given that you could just record something. We had, yes, sure, we had Sony Walkman, some of us, and occasionally that was the only thing we had. I was lucky somebody recorded it on a DAT recorder. I don't know if anybody remembers what that is. And it was very, very lucky because somebody did two recordings but only one of them worked. So, I was very lucky to have a recording of Clocks and that introduced me to Richard Tognetti, who then took up that piece, and to Barry Kosky who then commissioned me to write a piece.

However, when I came back with my three sons, I really didn't have enough work, so I started to do secretarial course. Anybody who knows me knows it's a hopeless, hopeless endeavour. Luckily, two

weeks into that course, I was saved by the Conservatorium, which offered me a job to teach composition. One of my students of that time is right here, amazingly. So, I taught for one year composition at this very place. I was, I feel very privileged that I did this.

I very much enjoyed the interactions with students. What I did not enjoy is the administrative part of it. Reports, lots of things, preparation for lectures. I think I was one step ahead of everyone, but that's about it. I had to really, really work hard. And that left no time to compose. And I think that's probably why in the end I didn't stay with it.

But one of my favourite mechanisms for teaching was to grab a recording of some new music piece from the time of the 90s and listen to it and dissect it and ask the students what they like about it or what they don't like about it. Sometimes I would stop the recording and say, what do you think happens next? What would you do? And that kind of active engagement is the one that interests me. It always interests me, even in the concert, when I sit in the concert and I listen to a work, I think, 'Ah, it's going this way, I wonder what they are going to do next', or 'Ah, they did this, I would never have thought of that'. And I would go somewhere else, and that I think is very exciting. What one can do with the same instruments, let's say it's a piano trio and you would do one thing, but another composer has a completely different idea. I find that exciting. That's why I love interactions with other composers because we are all so different, and yet, we sometimes work for the same instruments and for the same ensembles, and it's just extremely fun. I love life to be fun, of course.

At some point I had to let teaching go and continue writing. I was very lucky because having then no work again, I was extremely lucky to be offered a residency at the Peggy Glanville-Hicks House. And I'm very grateful that I had the time with my boys to be living there without worrying, you know, about some costs. And later in that year after I stopped teaching, it was incredible time for me to be in this cool suburb of Paddington in Sydney. I mean, just fantastic place. And to feel the spirit of Peggy. I felt the spirit of Peggy there. I wrote a lot of music on this beautiful grand piano. I still remember its fantastic sound, the house's beautiful lamps. The house has such beautiful character.

I then managed to buy a house in Coogee. Now, what was great about the house in Coogee is that I could play piano all day long. Finally, after being in apartments, I could play piano night and day, and that was extremely important to me. I started getting commissions. I started feeling more secure, even though I had only hand-me-downs for furniture, and the first item on my list to buy was an iron. And that is for someone who does not like ironing. I don't know anybody, anyone who does. I'm not good at it either, but I had to have it for my children's uniforms.

Everything changed in my life in October 1998, when my middle son got sick. When Alex went into a catatonic state at school, I was called into emergency at the hospital, and he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. He was 13. From that point on, everything changed. My experimental music was no longer desired in my house because it would make him anxious when I played it.

So, I had to change my language. I had to change my writing because I write at the piano, I improvise, and he would be listening because he was at home all the time and I was his carer. So, the way to continue composing was to change my language, the style, and write more harmonious, more calm. That was the time when I wrote Get Well Rag, for example. And later on, I wrote a piece called Blue Silence. That was not just for him, but for anyone with schizophrenia and their relatives. I also wrote a piece called Village Idiot, that was based on a poetry by a poet who has had schizophrenia, Graham Doyle. And somehow, it's shaped my life since then. To the point that I know that he's very restricted in his life, and I feel that I need to be restricted too. So, my life, those who know me, pretty much consists of work, only of work. I don't do much outside. Of course, I meet my

friends. I love a good meal. I love having social life, but I can't really do much else because I feel it's my obligation to just compose. And that's kind of fills the day and I feel I'm doing my son justice by doing that.

So, luckily, I love composition.

So, what is composition? Composition, I prepare the night before. For me, it's very important if I clean the table, clear the table or the piano for the next morning, it's very important that it's set up so that I don't have to start setting up before creating, so I have to start where I finished the day before. So, it's kind of a ritual I've had for the last 30 years and it's helped me to absolutely not have a block because I feel the block is often just not wanting to open the piano or open the book or open the pen.

Sometimes I even leave a pen opened - now that's a crime - but I do. There's lots of sketches that I write, lots of wild, crazy scribbles that land on the floor. And I just let my fingers wander. I don't believe in bad ideas. Every idea will have its day. But that day may not be today.

So, I compose all the time and I try different possibilities. I sometimes find something really banal. Sometimes I do it on purpose. I say, 'How stupid can I be? Let's do something really silly.' And then I twist one note or I change the rhythm a little bit. And suddenly it's not as silly anymore. So, I find that is kind of an exercise that I just love. I think it's just kind of a child within me. that likes to do that. I love not knowing what's ahead. I love imagining a performer playing a piece. So, I think, 'Ah, what would be the first thing I would like to hear? What would be the last thing I would like to hear? How will it go and develop?'

I often said I'm a miniaturist at heart, and then I find myself writing these humongous pieces. For example, recently I wrote a soundtrack for a silent film for a very large orchestra, or I've just written an opera - and I'm kind of going through operas at the moment, quite a few.

I'm lucky to have had wonderful commissions and projects and every project is different. So, the great thing is that the life of a composer is varied. It's never the same. It's never bland. It's never, never, never boring, ever. For example, when I was writing an album for Tamara-Anna Cislowska's Unsent Love Letters, I was trying to avoid strong melodies. I was trying to write vague melodies, vague harmonies. Harmonies that don't feel the pull to go from dominant to tonic or go from one key to another. They just floated and that was very important to me. The sense of air and space is another thing that's quite important to me. Even though my pieces are quite often very busy, my wish is to write spacious pieces, and I'm still searching for that.

Often, I start with a short score if I write for orchestra, which means I write a piano draft so that later I orchestrate it. It's like writing black and white, and then you put colour into it. And it's just giving you the structure, especially for multi movement form, I think it's really important to me to feel how the piece is going to go.

But also, for practical reasons, orchestral score, you can only see a snippet on a page. When you have piano score, you can see a lot more. And I write short, very much shorthand, sometimes it's just one line, and chord symbols. So right now, I'm working every day through about 600 pages of something because I'm checking things and editing things and refining things and then I also keep asking questions:

Why?

Why this and not this?

Why that and not the other?

And then finally... Why?

And questions that lead me forward and questions that keep me grounded. Why this note and not that note? Why this register not that one? Why this key or this instrument at this spot in the piece? Why did I get to be a composer and get a job?

And the answer is I don't know. I don't know why. But I will never stop thanking my stars for the luck and opportunity that came my way.

Music has a magic. Magic to create things that never were before. Sounds you have never heard before. To connect people that never met each other before. To express thoughts and ideas that have never been real before.

And to take your mind and heart across borders that they never thought they would cross. And now that I have written all these pieces, and have been to all these places, and have had all these concerts, and have yet a lot of music to write. I still try to believe that everything happens for the best. And I hear my mom saying it to me all the time.

And I still drink my cod liver oil. And it's still really yuck.

Thank you.