

S2E01 Foreword: Decolonizing Music

Guest: Dr. Nina Penner

[00:00:00] **Alison Innes:** [00:00:00] Welcome to forward a podcast where we explore how the humanities connect with today's issues. I'm your host, Alison Innes, and each episode, I bring you a conversation with the researcher from Brock's faculty of humanities.

[00:00:24] I think of when I say the word opera, if you've never had the opportunity to experience opera, you may think of it as depicted in Downton Abbey, when Dame Kiri te Kanawa performs for the wealthy Crawley household dressed in their finest in a lavish setting. Or perhaps you think of Ronnie and Laretta in 1987 Moonstruck. But what does opera look like today?

[00:00:45] What stories are being told with opera and who is telling them? How is opera and classical music generally responding to social justice movements like Black Lives Matter? My guest today has been asking those questions and examining those [00:01:00] issues in the teaching of opera and music history. Dr. Nina Penner is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Music and specializes in opera, musical theater and film music.

[00:01:11] This past year, she has been teaching the music and global cultures and music in Western cultures courses at Brock. Dr. Penner is also the author of the recently published book, storytelling in opera and musical theater uh, released from Indiana University Press. The book is an exploration of how sung forms of drama, tell stories, how music can orient spectators to characters, point of view, and how performers choices affect not only who is telling the story, but what story is being told.

[00:01:39] So welcome Nina.

[00:01:40] **Nina Penner:** [00:01:40] Thanks for having me. I'm really excited about this.

[00:01:42] **Alison Innes:** [00:01:42] I am looking forward to our conversation very much. I have to confess though, I do not have a strong background in opera. Um, so a lot of, a lot of this is new to me as well as, uh, to our listeners. So how did you get into studying opera and musical theater [00:02:00] in the first place?

[00:02:01] **Nina Penner:** [00:02:01] Well, I was a music student at the University of Toronto. Uh, I was studying clarinet performance and I just happened to be. Um, uh, cast in, uh, some opera productions, I mean, as a clarinet player and in the, in the orchestra. And I enjoyed it very much and I wanted to see. Uh, what it looked like on stage, cause in the pit often you don't get to see what's happening on stage.

[00:02:27] Uh, and then in my history courses, uh, I was, we're interested in learning about, about opera and, um, University of Toronto had a really lively group of people who were both performing it and studying it academically. So, uh, that's basically how it got started.

[00:02:43] **Alison Innes:** [00:02:43] So you have been involved in performances then as a, as a musician?

[00:02:49] **Nina Penner:** [00:02:49] Yes.

[00:02:50] **Alison Innes:** [00:02:50] And what is it about, about opera that, that attracts you to it?

[00:02:55] **Nina Penner:** [00:02:55] Well, it's the, um, the multimedia aspect that there's [00:03:00] just so many different components to it. Uh, it, you know, um, one of the links that, that, um, that you, um, you know, um, shared with this podcast was, was saying that is, you know, offer is the, um, was the one of the first multimedia arts combining, um, You know, storytelling through acting, uh, gesture, dance, uh, set design, uh, costume design music.

[00:03:27] Um, yeah. So, um, and then just the, the stories of opera are larger than life. Um, the inclusion of music, I think adds an emotional depth that you don't get in some other art forms. Um, and also just the, the singing. Um, I mean, you get some of these components and say cinema, but they're, you know, some form of drama.

[00:03:51] And I think that really heightens the uh, emotional expression in operatic stories.

[00:03:56] **Alison Innes:** [00:03:56] So I understand that the genre of opera dates back [00:04:00] to Italy around 1600, um, where, where did it come from? What did it arise from?

[00:04:05] **Nina Penner:** [00:04:05] Well, um, the, yeah, Western opera came from really this group of, um, aristocrats in Florence called the Florentine comparator.

[00:04:13] And they got together, just discuss Greek philosophy and theater. So people like Plato and Aristotle, and they believed that music not only represent emotions, but through representing them, could arouse these emotions and spectators. And they also believe that music could affect one's world character. So listening to the right kinds of music would make one, a better person.

[00:04:33] And then listening to the wrong kinds of music might lead to world corruption. Um, so the comparator was thinking about the music of their own time. Uh, uh, you know, like Renaissance madrigals or polyphonic compositions with many different, uh, intercut musical lines. Yeah. Fairly independent musical lines.

[00:04:53] And they, they didn't think that this music was really having this power, so they wanted to [00:05:00] recreate Greek drama. Um, but the texts, uh, of Greek plays, they survive, but, um, You know, and we know that this text was sung, but we don't really know much about what it sounded like. So in saying that they recreate a Greek drama, um, I'm not suggesting that it, uh, the first operas really sounded very much like, uh, what Greek theater sounded like so that the musical components were pretty much newly, um, newly invented, uh, though the stories, some of the stories are, are, you know, date from, uh, uh, Greek mythology.

[00:05:37] **Alison Innes:** [00:05:37] I didn't know that that. So, so it's just a continuation of, of using drama and music. It was just the next development in the, in the chain, so to speak.

[00:05:48] **Nina Penner:** [00:05:48] Yeah, this wasn't the first form of theater in which, uh, there was, uh, you know, that was a song.

[00:05:55] **Alison Innes:** [00:05:55] So do we see opera in other cultures as well. Like I, [00:06:00] my experience with it tends to be the, the European, um, version of opera, so to speak. Um, so do we have opera from Chinese cultures, African cultures?

[00:06:13] **Nina Penner:** [00:06:13] Yes. Uh, yeah, there's a very rich tradition of, uh, Chinese opera. Um, I've just been preparing some material for my music and global culture class on, um, traditional forms of Japanese music. And, um, a lot of these are, are sort of operatic form, like Noh and, um, Kabuki have, uh, music and drama and dancing and singing um, so are, are sort of operatic type form.

[00:06:44] **Alison Innes:** [00:06:44] So what's the relationship between opera and musical theater, like is musical theater kind of another evolution on from opera or because it's still using music, tell a story, but it seems to have a very [00:07:00] different vibe. Like I'm just thinking of the massive popularity of Hamilton, for example. And I don't recall seeing kind of that for over an opera recently.

[00:07:11] **Nina Penner:** [00:07:11] Right. Um, so in the 19th century, some drama in Europe was simply called opera. Some operas were more popular than others, but there wasn't this distinction between opera as a higher form and musical theater as a more popular form. This distinction arose in the 20th century, along with a broader distinction between classical music and popular music.

[00:07:34] So opera continue the traditions of classical music, whereas musicals, drew inspiration from the popular music of their time, be that jazz rock or more recently hip hop. Um, now there are some other distinctions today between opera and musical theater. For example, opera is still performed without electronic amplification.

[00:07:55] So it requires singers with training in classical, uh, [00:08:00] singing technique. So in the 19th century, especially singers learned how to project their voices, um, over these increasingly large orchestras, um, that were accompanying opera and singers learned to also expand the natural range of their voice, particularly for women in the upper registers.

[00:08:20] Um, whereas musicals call for a different sort of vocal training. Not that they don't require vocal training, but that it's just. Um, the demands are different. Yeah. Because they're, they're going to be miked. That's a different sort of musical accompaniment, um, different musical styles, right? Uh, it's very different.

[00:08:39] You know, hip hop can be very virtuosic as a Lin-Manuel Miranda showed in Hamilton. Um, but that's a very different kind of virtuosity to the virtuosity featured in opera. They also have a different economic models. Uh, so opera companies are non-profit organizations, whereas Broadway is a money-making enterprise of course.

[00:08:58] Um, so these distinctions, I [00:09:00] think are somewhat breaking down. More and more opera companies are programming musicals, um, and opera composers, especially in America and in Canada are incorporating influences from musical theater.

[00:09:12] **Alison Innes:** [00:09:12] So is, would it be fair to say then that when opera was being performed in the 17th, 18th centuries, That it was the musical theater of its day? Like what was this, something that was accessible to all classes of people or did it tend to be the purview of particular classes?

[00:09:35] **Nina Penner:** [00:09:35] Um, yeah, opera was. Was the, um, you know, a big part of cultural life in Europe from the 17th century, um, you know, up until the 20th century, I mean, the very first operas, uh, were performed at court or at public I'm sorry, private parties for aristocrats.

[00:09:53] Um, but so that's like around 1600, but even just a few decades later, the first public opera house [00:10:00] opened in Venice and anyone could attend that. And tickets were at different price points to allow um, a larger portion of the population to, um, to attend.

[00:10:10] **Alison Innes:** [00:10:10] Okay. So then people would be kind of humming along or singing in the streets, just like they do with their favorite Hamilton tunes.

[00:10:19] **Nina Penner:** [00:10:19] Yeah, very much. So there are examples like in the 19th century of composers, like Rossini and Verdi, um, you know, holding back certain numbers that they think will be really popular and only rehearsing them, like in private with just the singer. Um, because they don't want, you know, the organ grinders to get access to this music and start like playing it before the opera even premieres

[00:10:44] um, of course there, you know, once it premieres, then they want, you know, they want that to happen, but they, they, they want to be the first people to present this music.

[00:10:54] **Alison Innes:** [00:10:54] And I guess without, um, recorded music people's experience of music in the [00:11:00] home and people's access to music would be different would be focused on live performances then wouldn't it?

[00:11:06] **Nina Penner:** [00:11:06] Yes, of course. Um, yeah, so, so people would not only be exposed to operatic music in the theater itself, but also people would buy sheet music and play, you know, uh, favorite arias or, um, sequences from the opera on, on the piano. And then, you know, someone would sing along or the person would sing themselves.

[00:11:31] Uh, and in some ways, I mean, that's actually how I got exposed to musical theater. I actually, I grew up in the Niagara region. Um, so it was sort of a trek to go to Toronto, to see a show. It's not something like we did all the time. Most of the times, actually I saw musicals where, you know, a local, um, high school or a theater, a local amateur theater group would put on a musical.

[00:11:54] Um, so a lot of the shows. Uh, like, you know, Phantom of the Opera, for my, for my day, you know, Phantom [00:12:00] of the Opera and, um, Les Miserables, the shows I

was playing them, you know, on my piano or listening to the, you know, the, uh, Broadway cast recording before um, I actually even saw the show in person.

[00:12:16] **Alison Innes:** [00:12:16] Is it fair to, to say that opera has a bit of a reputation for being like a high art form that's more for wealthy people or people who can afford to travel to, to larger centers to, to see these, these kinds of, of, um, performances.

[00:12:36] **Nina Penner:** [00:12:36] Yeah. I mean, that's definitely, um, I think the public perception and in some cases that's correct.

[00:12:43] Um, yeah, I mean, it is, it is an expense to attend an opera though. I mean, I was, it's also an expense to attend, you know, um, a, a pop concert or, uh, um, Uh, sports, uh, [00:13:00] sports game live. Yeah, I mean, in some, in some cases, opera companies I think could do a lot more than they have to make the art form, um, appealing to new audiences.

[00:13:11] I think there are, you know, people are taking that a bit more seriously more recently.

[00:13:16] **Alison Innes:** [00:13:16] So, um, what's happening in the opera world today? How, how is the opera world responding to issues like Black Lives Matter?

[00:13:27] **Nina Penner:** [00:13:27] Well, I mean, it's been a major, wake up call about the failure of prior diversification efforts.

[00:13:35] Um, you mean there, it's obviously the classical music industry more generally has been aware of, um, its diminishing audiences, its audience being formerly white and, and aging. Um, and there have been some, you know, small steps to try to correct this, for example, scholarships, for people of color. But the issue, you know, was something like that, you know, which we should do is [00:14:00] that.

[00:14:00] You know, these people come into a racist environment and aren't taken seriously about, you know, by their teachers and colleagues, and then they quit. Um, or, you know, an organization might hire a token person of color, but then that person is isolated and they might not be given any power to affect change within the organization.

[00:14:18] So, um, I think there's an awareness that we need to get more creative, get more radical, how we're thinking about the future of the industry. So I heard a paper recently by Christopher Jenkins at Oberlin conservatory. He gave his paper at the American society for aesthetics conference. And basically it was trying to answer the question why aren't there more black people in classical music.

[00:14:44] And, you know, he works at a conservatory, so, you know, and he's trying to increase the diversity of his, uh, department, but, you know, and just, he was talking about the, the, the difficulties towards doing that. And he thinks the problem that is that the issue has been approached as [00:15:00] an and here I'm quoting Jenkins, a project of assimilation in which other communities are expected, not only to appreciate, but to adopt and replicate those aesthetics rather than a project of integration in which aesthetic approaches are blended into a synthesized new product end quote. So he's basically arguing that true

change needs to involve aesthetic change, that these prior efforts that have been done, um, didn't address like the content of classical music, what is being performed and how it is being performed.

[00:15:37] Um, so he's arguing that we really need to, that you know, one of the reasons why, for example, we don't have more black people in classical music is that they don't see themselves represented in the organization. The symphonies are not performing not playing almost any contemporary music at all. Let alone contemporary music by black people.

[00:15:59] Um, [00:16:00] And the performance style and the, the, this, the very experience, you know, you go to a symphony orchestra and everyone's wearing like 19th century, um, you know, tuxedos. And, um, it's a very like formal atmosphere. Um, you know, people have to clap only at certain moments. It's only certain ways that you can express your appreciation of the performance.

[00:16:22] Um, so yeah, we really have to rethink the entire concert experience and. Yeah. What pieces or what works are being performed?

[00:16:33] **Alison Innes:** [00:16:33] Um, is there, is there a history, like have, have Black people been involved in opera since the beginning in, in some like, have, have there been particular roles or do, do we know of particular Black artists from the past or has it always been, um, very, very white.

[00:16:53] **Nina Penner:** [00:16:53] Yes. I mean, especially in America, uh, there have been a lot, you know, there's a history [00:17:00] of, uh, Black opera singers. There are also some, uh, Black opera composers, uh, fewer of those.

[00:17:07] **Alison Innes:** [00:17:07] So there is there, there, there is, uh, there is a tradition.

[00:17:10] **Nina Penner:** [00:17:10] Yes. So there are, there are works uh, we, we can perform from the past, but to be honest, I think we need to be thinking more future directed, you know, um, commissioning new new works by people of color.

[00:17:25] And some companies are doing this, uh, actually during the pandemic, um, uh, the Nashville opera commissioned a new piece called "One vote one". Um, that was, you know, and it wasn't just a Black singers. It was, it was, you know, a Black creative team as well. Um, and the musical style is very similar to what Jenkins is describing.

[00:17:50] Um, some operatic influences the singers have operatic training, but drawing in influences from, um, African-American, uh, musical [00:18:00] traditions, like, uh, jazz, like R and B. Um, so, and so this piece, uh, was, you know, released during the pandemic. So it's, it's, you can now purchase, uh, you know, um, the rights to, to stream it on your own computer.

[00:18:15] And it was released, um, gearing up to the American election. So it was about, um, a young Black woman who feels that um, the, uh, political system in America has failed her that she, they just like her vote doesn't matter. Like she could cast her vote, but like

none of the parties, um, represent, you know, are going to take any meaningful action on issues that are important to her.

[00:18:38] Uh, and then she gets these sort of visions from, um, Black women activists of the past telling her, you know, we fought, fought for your right to vote and, you know, so you need to exercise that right. Um, and, and then of course it ends with her going to vote. Um, and yeah, so that's a recent example of a [00:19:00] company, um, you know, commissioning a new piece, uh, that's reworking, um, prior conceptions about what opera is and could be.

[00:19:10] **Alison Innes:** [00:19:10] And that's engaging with a really, a very contemporary issue.

[00:19:14] **Nina Penner:** [00:19:14] Um, yes.

[00:19:16] **Alison Innes:** [00:19:16] It's not a romantic story set in the distant past.

[00:19:20] **Nina Penner:** [00:19:20] Yeah, exactly. Exactly. There's no romance at all. So, I mean, a lot of operas obviously do, do have a romantic element, but that's not necessarily the case.

[00:19:28] **Alison Innes:** [00:19:28] Yeah. Yeah. So, um, when some of those, um, great operas from the past, like Verdi or, you know, um, when, when operas were performed, um, historically, were they engaging in contemporary issues of their time?

[00:19:49] **Nina Penner:** [00:19:49] Yes, very much. So, um, Verdi is actually a really good example. Um, there. I was recently teaching La Traviata. [00:20:00] And that's a funny story that he, so it's based on a contemporary novel, that's about, um, this, uh, love affair between an, um, an upper-class man and this prostitute. Um, and he wanted to set that into an opera, but the .

[00:20:13] All operas at this time had to pass the censors. So when he submitted the libretto, they're like, oh no, this is too shocking. This, even though, even though the prostitute died, so he wasn't suggesting that they could go off and get married and becomes accepted into like, you know, mainstream society. She died at the end, but they're still like, oh no, you know, this love story between this upper-class man and this prostitute, we can't have this.

[00:20:38] Um, so they're like, oh, you have to set it like, you know, a hundred years in the past and then that's okay. It's like, not as long as it, he wasn't presenting this as like a contemporary story, then that would be okay. Uh, and yeah, there's also, some of his offers were more, much more political. So, um, a chorus from his opera [00:21:00] Nabucco.

[00:21:00] It was adopted by the Risorgimento who were fighting for, um, Italian liberation of certain parts of Italy that were under foreign domination and then the unification of the country, but the Italian people, they saw themselves and those historical people and adopted this, this chorus of Pensiero as this anthem for the Italian unification movement.

[00:21:23] **Alison Innes:** [00:21:23] So then the idea of using opera to address issues like, um, voting and voting rights and accessibility, um, and social justice issues around Black Lives Matter, that's very much in line with opera.

[00:21:43] **Nina Penner:** [00:21:43] Yes. Yes, historically. Um, we, I think we sort of got away from that somewhat in the 20th century with this, with this division that I previously mentioned about, you know, classical music being this art music kind of rarefied thing.

[00:21:59] And then, um, [00:22:00] popular music being the music of the people, the common people and addressing, you know, current issues. Um, well, another thing is just the proliferation of, um, old works in the cannon. So that's, that's the issue really is that in the 19th century, um, at least in the early 19th century, most of the operas that people would have went to was, were offers that were just created their premiers or revivals of works that were created just, you know, 10 years ago.

[00:22:29] Um, just like musicals are today. Well, sort of, we're getting more and more revivals there too. Um, but anyway, um, Uh, but then in the 20th century that changed or, or beginning in the 19th century that that started to change and, uh, opera started to, um, you know, just, just be performing the Mozart, the Verdi the Wagner, uh, rather than looking to contemporary composers, whereas [00:23:00] musicals were able to become more current because they were, um, you know, they were always performing the newest hit.

[00:23:07] **Alison Innes:** [00:23:07] Now I know when you did our Brock Talks, uh, last semester, or I guess back last fall now, um, you were talking about a performance of, was it the Messiah?

[00:23:24] **Nina Penner:** [00:23:24] Yes. Um, well that actually hadn't happened. It hadn't happened, but, um, but yeah, but it, um, I think in the question period, I did talk about a little bit about it. Um, so Against The Grain Theater in Toronto, uh, is, is this indie indie opera company, um, that previously just had a sort of local following. Um, but they made this version of Messiah that was uh, released on YouTube, uh, in December, uh, for free actually you had to register, you had to sign up, but then, but it was actually, um, released for [00:24:00] free. And, um, uh, they had a sort of watch party on a certain date in, in mid December, but then it was available for about a month after that.

[00:24:10] And it garnered over a hundred thousand views, um, in like, over 40 countries, which is pretty amazing for such a small company that if they had done this in person, um, you know, they would have maybe gotten like 2000 people, um, to see it probably less than that, actually. Um, so that's pretty, that was pretty amazing. Um, And the, the conception of the piece was, was really interesting.

[00:24:39] Joel Ivany of Against The Grain, teamed up with the Indigenous director Renelitta Arluk and, um, all of the soloists, uh, they engaged were either Indigenous or, um, people of color. And some of them had um, little experience in Western art music or were, you know, currently, uh, [00:25:00] working more in popular music, folk music, um, various forms of Indigenous music.

[00:25:05] Um, and what was interesting to me about this project was that it was the singers who took the lead .A lot of time in opera. When you, you know, they have these new, um, sort of edgy productions, it's the director of this, usually this white man who decides what is this what are they going to do in this, this cutting edge new production, but it was really more the singers that took the lead in, you know, they decided what language they would sing in.

[00:25:33] They didn't need to sing an English. Um, so we have performances in French, Arabic, Inuktitut Dene and Southern Tutchone. Um, they also, uh, decided the interpretive frame for their performances. So in some cases, these translations have a somewhat minimal relationship with the original text, at least in terms of, uh, its sort of spiritual context.

[00:25:59] Um, you know, a [00:26:00] shift from Christian to Indigenous cosmologies in some cases. So, um, as an example, uh, Diyet from Kluane First Nation, um, you know, it was initially reluctant to appear in this production because, um, you know, she, wasn't working in Western classical music, uh, and you know, her mother was, um, part of the residential school system.

[00:26:24] And, you know, she just saw this, you know, performance of this Western piece, this Christian Western piece as, as, um, you know, playing into this, colonial this perpetuation of colonial attitudes, um, you know, and. And it just called to mind that cultural genocide of the residential school system for her. Um, but then, you know, they told her that she could perform this in Southern Tutchone, uh, which is, you know, a language or very few, um, fluent speakers today.

[00:26:58] So she collaborated with her [00:27:00] grandmother, um, in creating a translation. Um, that they didn't need to, it didn't need to be in a Christian context. You know, they, they, they took it, they took the piece Oh, Thou That Telleth Good Tidings to Zion, which is about, you know, the, how good it is that, you know, Christ is coming.

[00:27:16] Um, and they took that as a celebration of the Creator and the land, and they filmed it on this, um, in, um, her hometown, um, in, um, I believe in Northwest Territories and it was just, it was a really, really beautiful, a beautiful piece of, of the, uh, the larger, the larger work.

[00:27:38] **Alison Innes:** [00:27:38] So is, is, is this part of a larger movement or is this just kind of the, the, the beginning of incorporating Indigenous voices?

[00:27:47] **Nina Penner:** [00:27:47] Yeah. So, um, you know, a lot of companies are doing this in different ways. Um, so Against The Grain, their mandate is to perform generally, um, traditional operas, like, you know, by [00:28:00] Mozart, by, um, uh, Handel in this case. Um, but then rethink how they are performing them. So, um, you know, they'll perform them in English, um, set in the present day, trying to make connections with current issues.

[00:28:16] Um, they also perform in unconventional venues. For example, they've presented a version of Puccini's La boheme in a bar, right. That they actually recorded that on video. And I think that's still viewable online. So I'll, I'll include a link. Yeah.

[00:28:30] **Alison Innes:** [00:28:30] Yeah. Well, we'll, we'll put some links to some of this in the, in the show notes for, for our listeners to check out.

[00:28:35] **Nina Penner:** [00:28:35] So, so yeah, so this I, so this is sort of one approach is to take the classics, but then rethink how we're performing them. Who is, you know, who are we casting as singers and in the role of director, um, and you know, trying to make these pieces speak to current issues. Um, so I think that's definitely something we should do, and continue doing in the future.

[00:29:00] [00:29:00] But I also think that we also need to, um, commission new pieces. Um, so for example, like with Messiah, I would've liked to have seen. Um, Against The Grain think, uh, take a more creative attitude towards the score. Like many of these singers that they, um, particularly the Indigenous singers that they contracted to appear in the, in the, in the production.

[00:29:24] Um, you know, they, they were also songwriters. They could have, um, you know, asked these people to compose some new music, um, you know, have maybe some Handel and then some like, Some, some new, new musical compositions as part of the piece. I think that would have, um, that was somewhat of a missed opportunity there.

[00:29:43] So I feel like going forward, we really need to have a lot more emphasis on new compositions, hopefully by, you know, people of color telling the stories that they want to tell and the ways that they want to tell them. I mean, that's another issue that's come up in some of these conversations. [00:30:00] Um, I was just recently listening to, uh, the podcast of the Canadian Opera Company, um, called Key Change.

[00:30:07] And they were interviewing, uh, Ian Cusson which is currently, uh, who is currently their composer in residence. Um, and he was talking about that, that, you know, he's, um, Been, you know, recently contracted to compose some new, some new pieces. Um, but in some cases, you know, people not without naming names, some, you know, some people have, um, you know, had very specific ideas about what he should do.

[00:30:33] Um, whereas, I mean, some suggestions I'm sure welcome, but, but, you know, um, it would be great if, if people were given a bit, a bit more, um, Uh, leeway to create what they, you know, a piece that represents, um, their community today.

[00:30:52] **Alison Innes:** [00:30:52] I imagine that the idea of tradition is probably very strong in opera and classical music.

[00:30:58] **Nina Penner:** [00:30:58] Yeah. Yes. [00:31:00] Um, yes, the tradition, um, carries a lot, a lot of weight and, um, I think opera companies, I think it's, it's hard for them to. Um, take, uh, to, you know, to, to embrace new works and take a new direction because so many of their, their patrons are, are, are old and they, you know, they assume that these older people, they want to see the familiar pieces.

[00:31:27] And to some extent that's true. I mean, if they can, they just completely stop starting Verdi there'll be a problem, I think, um, with our existing base. Um, but I think, um,

Yeah, they think they need to incorporate more and more new pieces to bring, to bring a new audience to opera.

[00:31:47] **Alison Innes:** [00:31:47] Yeah. Yeah. And to create those opportunities too, for Black and Indigenous artists.

[00:31:54] And we haven't talked about, um, about other minority artists, um, as well.
[00:32:00] I'm sure there, I'm sure there are others who, uh, of other, um, ethnic backgrounds who are also struggling in, in opera to, to find their place. So I want to ask, um, because this, this connects, uh, I guess with what you've been teaching this past year, um, you've been teaching a revamped course on music history and looking at it from a global perspective and an, and, um, a multicultural perspective rather than what some of us may, may remember from our school days.

[00:32:36] Um, this focusing just on the Western European, um, composers. So what what are some of the issues, um, with the teaching of music history? Because I, I imagine that that is very much where people's exposure to classical music and opera begins, um, in high school and university, um, [00:33:00] music, history classes.

[00:33:02] **Nina Penner:** [00:33:02] Yes.

[00:33:02] Um, So Brock reworked its core history sequence a few years ago before I was hired. So I was sort of, um, so this wasn't my, my brainchild, um, but I think it's a, it's a very important, um, important development for Brock. So it used to be, um, the history sequence used to be solely focused on Western classical music.

[00:33:23] Um, but now students, um, music students take one year of music and global culture. And this course is by the way, open to non music majors as well. Um, and then one, one year of music in Western culture. Um, and when I was in school, Western music was, you know, neatly separated from all other forms of music, including popular music, um, from the west.

[00:33:49] And there were some classes in these other types of music, but these were generally electives rather than core courses or courses that were deemed, um, you know, required for all students. [00:34:00] Um, but today we're realizing that the way we've taught music history has upheld the colonial ways of thinking. First of all, in this neat separation of the west, from the rest and, um, this upholding of Western classical music as the most important type of music, because that is what, you know, everyone had to take.

[00:34:21] And these other musics were just like you know, elective fun electives. So today many musicologists are attempting to integrate our study of Western classical music with jazz and popular music and all of these forms of Western music with other musical traditions around the globe. You know, this makes sense from, in terms of our current globalized world, but it actually also benefits our study of music from the past.

[00:34:47] So I'm by coincidence this week, uncovering, um, Claude WC and Toro tech and Mitsuda in my two courses. And you know, there's a lot of connections between them. So, uh, WC was [00:35:00] a French composer of the late 19th century and early 20th century.

And, but he, you know, he heard some music from Asia, um, at the 1889 Paris world's fair and was really influenced by it.

[00:35:11] And, you know, incorporated certain elements in, in his work to our tech and Mitsuda was a Japanese composer of the 20th century. And he began composing in a Western classical style influenced by WC among other people. Um, and then started combining these influences with traditional Japanese music. So studying music in Noh, and Kabuki theater, not only helps us understand Toro tech Mitsu, but also collect WC.

[00:35:36] **Alison Innes:** [00:35:36] Okay. So why. Do you like, what, what do you think is, is the reason that, that, that the teaching of music history has been kind of dominated by, by what some might call the quote unquote dead white men of a classical music?

[00:35:53] **Nina Penner:** [00:35:53] Well, I think it really stems from the way music scholarship has been carved up [00:36:00] into fields.

[00:36:01] So scholars who study the role of music in society have traditionally been divided into two fields. Musicology, which is my field, uh, focuses on Western classical music though within the last couple of decades, it also also also includes popular music. Uh, and the methodology is a sort of historical approach combined with interpretation or close reading.

[00:36:25] Now, um, I think music is somewhat unique in having a completely separate discipline of ethnomusicology. Um, you know, we don't see this say in theater studies or, um, You know, English, literature, um, or art and ethnomusicology is directed at, um, music of basically all of the other world's traditions. And they have a completely different methodology.

[00:36:50] They're primarily trained in anthropological methods of sort of field work, interviewing people, observing, uh, cultural practices and writing [00:37:00] about them. Um, rather than taking a historical sort of approach. Or analytical approach. Um, so since I was trained in musicology, um, I really only learned about Western classical music.

[00:37:14] Uh, there was some effort to incorporate women when I was in school, but almost no effort to incorporate people of color. Um, yeah. And, but today, I mean, thankfully this distinction between musicology and ethnomusicology, I think is breaking down slowly. I mean, I think it will be, um, because of this death, the logical difference.

[00:37:35] It will be sometime before it completely, um, you know, goes away. But, um, But, but there are some signs of things changing. So, you know, beginning with this questioning of the separation between Western and non Western music, uh, but even methodologically, there are some difference. Um, you know, these differences are breaking down.

[00:37:56] So musicologists are now conducting ethnographic work. Um, [00:38:00] for example, um, interviewing musicians, um, and African musicologists are visiting archives and doing more historical work. I want to come back to when you were talking about performances.

[00:38:12] **Alison Innes:** [00:38:12] Um, and I'm just wondering if you have any thoughts on how the pandemic is changing people's access to an experience of opera and classical music. And, um, and I'm also thinking about that in terms of education, because then that gives people, uh, either formal or informal education, um, exposure to different kinds of performances and composers and that kind of thing. Um, so yeah, I'm just wondering what, what your thoughts are there with this massive shift that we aren't to online and virtual that, that we've expanded?

[00:38:49] **Nina Penner:** [00:38:49] Yeah. I mean, I think there are some exciting, um, opportunities. For, yeah. The against the grain example of the Messiah is a really great one [00:39:00] because you know, this, um, this company that, you know, that has traditionally just had this local following in Toronto is suddenly like, whoa, Yeah, catapulted to a world stage, um, you know, reaching a hundred, a hundred thousand viewers all across the globe.

[00:39:17] Um, so I think there's a lot of opportunity for even small companies, um, to expand their following if they're doing, you know, exciting, exciting work, um, and also, you know, accessibility that, um, That viewing some of these things, um, Messiah was, was free. Of course they were encouraging also people to donate.

[00:39:36] And did get a lot of money from it, um, from it as well. Um, but you know, other things I've, um, you know, uh, yeah, one foot, one was I think about it was less than \$20. Uh, to stream it. Um, so that's a lot less than the cost of an opera ticket. Um, and, uh, I think there's been a lot of interesting opportunities, [00:40:00] um, for, for companies doing innovative work, another, another person, another company that.

[00:40:05] Uh, has been doing some interesting things over the pandemic, uh, has been, um, LA's the industry. So they, they produced a piece called Sweetland that, um, premiere just before the pandemic, um, uh, shut angel to shut everything down. So it was sort of, the pandemic was still an issue, but they did, you know, it hadn't.

[00:40:25] It was before the shutdown. Um, and then they, they were wa they wisely recorded one of these performances. They, they told the audience don't come, but they, and they still did it for a camera crew. And then they put it up on Vimeo. And again, you can, you can stream it for about \$20. Um, and you know, I would have never seen this piece, right.

[00:40:44] I'm not going to go to the LA just to see this piece, even though I know I had been familiar with her work and I've wanted it. See it, so that was my opportunity. So I think, um, Yeah, I think it's been, I think [00:41:00] it's, it's going to really help some of these smaller companies, like, because they can, they can tap a much broader market of people all over the world.

[00:41:08] They don't have, you know, that was previously, I think the issue that you'd only have opera companies in big cities, because that was the only place that had a large enough population, that there would be enough people who are interested in opera. Uh, but now you don't necessarily have to confine yourself to just, um, Your own physical people that can drive to your, your performances.

[00:41:30] **Alison Innes:** [00:41:30] Yeah. And it gives, it gives children and young adults the opportunity to see people like them doing opera, right? Yeah.

[00:41:42] **Nina Penner:** [00:41:42] Yes. That was one thing with Sweetland. It's a story about co colonization. So naturally the inclusion of Indigenous voices was very, very important, both in the conception, um, and also performance.

[00:41:55] So I would. Um, highly recommend Sweetland. I think it's a really, [00:42:00] um, it's a challenging piece, obviously. Um, but it's, um, I think that is, it's a model for the kind of collaboration that I'd like to see going forward. Well, it sounds really, really exciting. And you've got me excited too, to check out some of, some of these performances.

[00:42:17] **Alison Innes:** [00:42:17] As, as I said, I don't have a lot of. A lot of opera, um, experiences, but, um, it is definitely exciting to, to see that the field is responding to some of these changes and, and, um, diversifying, um, onstage. And I suppose all of the backstage and the supportive organization, it's, uh, not just the, the, the, the folks on the stage.

[00:42:44] **Nina Penner:** [00:42:44] Yes. Yeah, I think that's, I think that's pretty key. That, um, as I was saying, yeah, there is a long tradition of, of, uh, people of color in performance roles. But I think what we don't have a tradition of is people of color [00:43:00] in leadership positions, as, as composers, as directors, as you know, general directors of opera companies, we need to see more of that.

[00:43:09] **Alison Innes:** [00:43:09] Yeah. So before we go, I want to, um, give you a chance to tell me a little bit about your book, because this is, uh, newly, newly released. I think it just came out 20 20 . Is that right? Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Um, so you, um, in that book, you're looking at opera and musical theater, um, what are some of the general ideas that, um, that, that you explore there?

[00:43:36] **Nina Penner:** [00:43:36] Sure. Um, So basically it's, it's a book about how opera tells stories in comparison with other media. So I look at things like, uh, the role of narrators and opera, a lot of offers are based. I mean, almost all offers are based on some sort of pre-existing work often, you know, in sense of at least the 19th century often that was a literary work [00:44:00] with some sort of.

[00:44:00] Formal narrative narrator structure. Um, but then how does that translate to a stage format where these sorts of narrator figures are, um, perhaps a bit awkward or difficult to incorporate? Um, but then what, you know, even if you don't have this narrator figure on stage the way you know, what about the music people have often thought about the orchestra as this sort of.

[00:44:24] Um, commentate of force on, on the work. So I have a chapter on, um, the role of the orchestra in, um, operatic storytelling, but because of my background in, in performance, I wanted to talk about the realities. Of, you know, what happens in the rehearsal room when they decide, okay, you know, this opera does not have a narrator, but we're going to insert one or menial kind of promote this character and sort of stage it as if this person is telling the story.

[00:44:53] Or what about what if we even changed the score in substitute this piece of music for that one? [00:45:00] Um, and that's actually happening somewhat. Uh, increasingly and, um, so I wanted to discuss, um, yeah, productions and performance practice issues as well. So I have several chapters about, uh, about that.

[00:45:18] **Alison Innes:** [00:45:18] Yeah. And do you get into the, um, Emotional aspect of, of music, how it's, how it's used to generate emotion.

[00:45:28] **Nina Penner:** [00:45:28] For sure. For sure. Um, yeah. I have a, I have a chapter about, um, the concept of point of view and how, um, how the music particularly can orient us to per particular characters points of view. And I think that's one of the ha what's one of. The most powerful things about opera, um, you know, in comparison with say other other art forms is the sort of, um, yeah, as I mentioned before, um, her started the emotional, um, emotional power of these stories and the ability for [00:46:00] opera to, um, get us to empathize with characters.

[00:46:04] That we would, maybe the, you know, if we met this person in real life, we would have trouble empathizing with them because they're just so different. Their experience is so different from us or maybe they have, um, they've made, you know, unfortunate choices in their lives. Uh, and we would just sort of like, oh, well, that person is just, um, that's too diverse from my own experience.

[00:46:24] But through opera, you know, um, through the music. We can, um, relate with those characters, I think, um, and this has, I think a lot of potential for growth for both good and bad, I think. Um, but, but you know, for good of allowing us to see the world from. The perspective of an indigenous person, you know, say like, as in sweet land, as you know, they have these indigenous characters and, you know, and then the colonizers come and you know what that, you know, trying to imagine what that encounter [00:47:00] would have been.

[00:47:00] **Alison Innes:** [00:47:00] And finally, one last thing I want to ask, um, So if our listeners haven't had experience with opera and maybe want to dip their toes into it, after listening to our conversation, do you have a particular performance or, um, work or theater or opera company that you would recommend our listeners check out as a way to get started?

[00:47:26] **Nina Penner:** [00:47:26] Okay. Um, well I think. I think I'd recommend, I've already mentioned a few of these people, but, um, but yeah, I mean, I'd encourage people to check out new pieces by, um, yeah. The industry, the sweet land, uh, Toronto's tapestry opera so we're a local fall, um, company Toronto's tapestry offer has been doing interesting things during, during the pandemic.

[00:47:52] Uh, people who are interested more in, um, uh, sort of more traditional musical experience might be interested in, um, [00:48:00] I guess the grand theater. So, you know, you have familiar music, uh, uh, bias in Mozart or Handel, but, um, But in a more updated setting in English. So there's no need, you know, for subtitles or to read a plot summary, um, before you attend the larger companies, I think have been being slower to adapt.

[00:48:23] Uh, and you know, haven't been putting out so many things during the pandemic, largely because of. Um, issues with unions and logistics. Uh, but the Canadian opera company has been doing some interesting things. Ian Kusama is currently court composer in residence. Uh, he's just completed a new piece for young audiences called Fantasma, and that was supposed to be premiered by now, but, um, uh, soon as social distancing is over, I'm sure that that will be in production.

[00:48:51] Okay. Um, so I'm looking forward to that, but in the meantime, you can, um, look at other pieces that you saw he's written, uh, he's composed a new aria for Harry [00:49:00] Summers, Louis Riel. Um, so this is kind of a long story, but anyway, this piece is from the sixties and it had this aria that appropriated from them, Niska people of BC without permission.

[00:49:12] Um, and it was used inappropriately. So basically there's, it's, it's a really important Canadian opera, but there's a section of it that's unreformable today because of this moral issue. Um, so Kusama compose, a new aria that would replace that. That REI in future performances of the Ruby owl and that aria has been recorded.

[00:49:32] So I can include a link to that. I was very impressed with it. So I'm looking forward to hearing more by crew song.

[00:49:38] **Alison Innes:** [00:49:38] Excellent. Excellent. Well, thank you so much for your time today. I've really enjoyed our conversation. And, uh, like I said earlier, I am looking forward to checking out some of these, um, some of these performances and companies, myself to expand my own understanding of opera and what it is and who it's for and who's, who's making it. So thank you [00:50:00] very much for your time.

[00:50:01] **Nina Penner:** [00:50:01] Thank you.

[00:50:03] **Nicole Arnt:** [00:50:03] Thank you so much for listening to Foreword. Find all of our footnotes links to more information transcripts and past episodes on our website, Brock you a forward slash humanities. We love it to hear from our listeners. So please join us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram at Brock humanities, please subscribe and rate us as well on your favorite podcasting app. So you will never miss an episode. Foreword is hosted and produced by Alison Ennis for the faculty of humanities at Brock university. Our sound design and editing is done by Nicole errand. Theme. Music is by Kali D mom.

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