

Key Change Episode 10: Opera & Criticism – Part I

SPEAKERS

Anne Midgette, Robyn Grant-Moran, Julie Mclsaac

Julie Mclsaac 00:00

Hi, everyone. Welcome to Key Change: A COC Podcast, where we explore everything about opera from a fresh perspective.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:18

We're your hosts, Robyn Grant-Moran...

Julie Mclsaac 00:21

...and Julie Mclsaac.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:22

Welcome to Episode 10. Today we're talking about opera and criticism.

Julie Mclsaac 00:28

Okay, so, Robyn, this is something that is very much in your wheelhouse, I know it's near and dear to your heart, something that you care about deeply, it's something that you do. So, what's top of mind for you here, as we tackle this subject?

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:40

I'm really excited to hear about how the pros do it. I'm fairly new to the game and the reality of criticism in art is that it's shrinking: there aren't as many writers and the writers that are are all of a sudden responsible for so much more – you have to do editorial pieces and you have to do feature pieces. You don't really necessarily get to master any one thing and something like opera is very specific. So, how do we have meaningful conversations about opera when we don't have people with that contextual knowledge necessarily – or such deep contextual knowledge?

Julie Mclsaac 00:48

And I'm really curious about how someone comes to have that deep contextual knowledge that you're talking about: how do they develop their capacity to write about opera in a meaningful way? And just generally – like, as a dramaturg, sometimes people ask me, "How do you become a dramaturg? Where do you go to school for that?" and it's not like there's any one set path. And, so, I'm curious: how does someone become a media critic, what qualifies you/what prepares you to critique and artistic work? And then, as you know, actually, for this conversation, we spoke to two experts in the field, theatre critic

Karen Fricker, and classical music critic Anne Midgette. And, of course, we just had so much to talk about – fascinating conversations – that we decided to break it into two episodes for you, our listeners. So, you'll get half of that today. And we're just really hoping to give you a sense of the breadth of our conversations, and just so you can get a real feel for the past, present, and future of arts criticism.

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:58

So, today, we're going to start with our chat with Anne Midgette. Anne is the former classical music critic for The Washington Post. She spent much of her early career based in Munich, Germany reviewing opera, music, and art throughout Europe for the Wall Street Journal, Opera News, and other publications. She later returned to the U.S. and, in 2001, she became the first woman to review classical music for the New York Times on a regular basis.

Julie Mclsaac 02:51

Let's hear from Anne, Thank you so much for joining us, Anne. We're thrilled to have you here with us.

Anne Midgette 03:01

Well, it's my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Julie Mclsaac 03:03

And we'd love to know: what was it that gave you your start in classical music criticism? What drew you to that job and what was your journey there?

Anne Midgette 03:12

I have a good story about starting out as a critic. I was a novelist, I moved to Germany to write my novel and immediately met a lot of American opera singers because, of course, Germany is a hotbed for American opera singers. Particularly the 1980s, when I was there, there were many fewer apprentice programs in America, so, if you wanted a career as a singer, you went to Germany. I didn't really know that but I very quickly met a tenor of all things, and the tenor and I moved in together, we lived together for three years and, without that tenor, I would never have ended up doing what I did. I loved opera passionately but he was the one who sort of guided me into it. He had amazing ears and real knowledge of the voice and we spent hours listening to recordings and talking opera, he gave me all the right books, and it was really a wonderful, sort of, education rolled into a relationship. When we broke up, and I was suddenly like, "What will my life be without opera?" and I thought, "Hmm, if you want opera in your life, maybe you can find a better way than dating opera singers." I thought, "Great, I know: I'll become a singer, obviously!" That was not the right conclusion to draw but I did start studying voice at 24 – may I add, I was a little old to be starting! I had sung in choruses all my life. I studied voice passionately for about 10 years. Anyway, I did, as I was studying, began writing articles for this general interest magazine I was editing, including articles about opera. Opera News bought an article of mine out of that magazine, and then Opera News assigned to me another article. Now these were articles about opera. Of course, there's a big distinction between being a critic and being a reporter in the journalism world. I think readers don't always appreciate what a strong line there used to be, especially between a critic who is allowed to have opinions and make pronouncements about the art, and a reporter who's writing articles about the art. I always, as a critic, tried to make both of those things part of the job. In any case, Opera News, having assigned me these two big feature articles, on a time when

I was in New York, I was still living in Germany, I came to New York went to their offices, and they said, "We would like to make you our critic for Germany and Switzerland," and I looked at them with this huge gulp – I mean, most of my friends were singers – and, I said, "I can't be a critic," I said, "I don't have the background to be a critic. I don't have the knowledge, and I don't have the desire to be a critic." And Patrick Smith, the editor, said, "You'll learn." And I was in my 20s and I didn't really know how to say, "no" any more forcefully than that, and I was, sort of, jumping at every opportunity I got. And, so, I, sort of, thought, "Well, I guess I can try it." So, they assigned me my first review and it was of two operas in Leipzig: one was [Jean-Philippe] Rameau's "Hippolyte et Aricie," French Baroque, and the other was the world premiere of Karlheinz Stockhausen "Dienstag [aus Licht]," from the Licht cycle, his seven-part operatic cycle. To say that I had limited experience with both those genres would be putting it politely. I always say I jumped in the very deep end and I remember having a mild panic attack during the press conference, I thought, "What am I doing here?" But you can look it up: it's in the Opera News archive, my very first opera review that was published was about Stockhausen's Dienstag from the Licht cycle, which finishes, in the final scene, with a character called the Synthi-Fou, which is Stockhausen's son driving around the stage in what amounted to a, kind of, bumper car made up of synthesizers, wearing a, sort of, rainbow Afro-style wig. It was outside my experience of classical opera singing to put it mildly, and look what happened.

Julie Mclsaac 07:22

Yeah!

Anne Midgette 07:22

I told that story outside Carnegie Hall one night to somebody who asked how I got into criticism, and Patrick Smith walked up – the editor in question in that story – and he heard me tell this and he said, "You know," he said, "Many of these stories get, kind of, bowdlerized as time goes on," he said, "But that is actually how that one happened."

Julie Mclsaac 07:41

An accurate depiction of that.

Anne Midgette 07:43

Exactly.

Robyn Grant-Moran 07:44

I'm curious, like he talked about the divide between music journalist and music critic. Can you elaborate a little more on that, and what you feel the role of the critic specifically is in opera criticism?

Anne Midgette 07:59

Well, with the background I had, I always felt very strongly that the critic should also be writing feature stories and be informed. It's still a point... At the New York Times, the theater critic, for years, believed he shouldn't know anything about the business at all; he should solely, you know, give his aesthetic response to the work and he didn't want it clouded by knowledge of the business. I personally feel that, in many cases, knowledge of the business helps inform your aesthetic sense and, also, if you've been doing this job for 20 years, you know a lot anyway – like, it's very hard to be, sort of, pure and unbiased

and I'm not sure that view is all that helpful. Opera is, kind of, a specialized, niche audience; I think you want somebody with as much know-how as possible to be explaining this to readers. As for bias: all critics have bias. If we weren't strongly opinionated and loved the field, we would have no business writing about it. I think you have to be responsible about not allowing your personal feelings about somebody or some situation bleed into it too much, but it's also part of your job to let the reader know where your biases lie. I think the great goal of a critic is to write a review... Say I write a review saying that I loved something – this happened to me once and that was really proud – and somebody came up to me and said, "Oh, that was a great review, I would have hated that performance," and that's wonderful. And vice versa: if I write that I hate something but put enough information in that somebody else could read it and say, "Oh, I probably would have liked that," where your opinion is in there but you're conveying enough about the performance that somebody else can gather what it was like beyond merely what you thought – it has to go way beyond thumbs up and thumbs down. As to the larger role of a critic: when I started at The Washington Post after seven years as a freelancer at the New York Times, I was talking about this a lot to Doug McLennan who's the founder of ArtsJournal, and he said something about critics needing to be a gathering place – kind of like the watering hole – and I thought a lot about that and I really embraced that. I think that critics... our goal is to promote discussion; our goal is not to tell you what to think. People aren't stupid. You can't order people what to think. If you're writing about food in a restaurant, you can't say, "of course, you must like broccoli and you're stupid if you don't." Obviously, that's dumb but I think in music criticism, people really take that. I mean, I once wrote a piece about how I didn't love Brahms and people are still upset about that piece. And the idea that we all have to move in lockstep, and these pieces are all masterpieces, and we must all like them equally is very detrimental to our field and the people loving our field. It really is about giving other people tools to have opinions, and giving them something to argue with, and something to debate about. And I always say if you come up to me and say, "I really disagreed with you, and here is why," my job is done because my job is to give you the tools to help talk more about it, and to think more about it, and to care more about it. And if what you come up with is completely opposite to what I come up with, that's great, that keeps the field alive! If we all think we have to be in a corset, and move in lockstep, it really kills all creativity in the field and it's what leads to the audience feeling that they don't really have the authority to make a decision, which we see a lot, I fear, among opera and classical music audiences. People would come up to me after lectures and say, "Oh, I've been subscribing for 40 years but I don't really know anything about classical music." And I would say, "If you told me you went to the movies every Thursday night for 40 years, and then told me you didn't know about cinema, I would laugh at you." And yet in music, people really feel they're not empowered to have opinions.

Robyn Grant-Moran 11:53

As an emerging critic and late-blooming opera singer myself, I find that I have a boundary of "I will not critique opera," I write theater criticism but I will engage critically with opera, i.e. having this podcast and talking more about a cultural context. Do you find that there is an adversarial role or that you have to choose/pick a team: be a critic or be an artist? Is that something you encounter in your practice?

Anne Midgette 12:25

It has evolved a whole lot of thinking about that. Back in the heyday of journalism in the 1950s and 60s, say, you had to choose: you could not be an artist. Of course, Virgil Thompson, the critic of the 1940s and 50s in the New York Herald Tribune is the huge exception that proves the rule: he was an active

composer and a very influential critic, and not very principled about mixing the two – he really threw his weight around a lot. However, at the time I came along, my husband is also a former opera singer, former critic, and composer, and he faced this very directly in his career because he too was approached by the New York Times, a generation before I was, about writing for them. But that would have meant ceasing compositional activity – you couldn't do both and he chose not to. Today, there are so few full-time critics, it's not really a professional option anymore. I'm seeing a lot of people put together, sort of, composite careers and the boundaries are a lot more fluid, which is interesting and a little tricky because you really want to be able to write freely and to express your opinions freely about what you think. When I was starting out at the New York Times, I felt very green: I knew a lot more about opera than about other kinds of classical music. And, of course, you don't get to pick when you're at the New York Times, you're writing about everything: new music concerts, organs, bassoon recitals – you name it! And I guarantee you that every single classical music critic in North America has to review, at times, things that they are not expert in. Many of my colleagues felt they weren't that expert in opera, and I was sort of the opera person. When I started at the New York Times, one of my singer friends went to me and she said, "Anne, keep telling the truth. We need you to be honest, we need you to tell the truth. Don't varnish, don't whitewash your opinions." And I felt that that was a real missive from the music world. So, I was very careful to tell the truth and I quickly became an incredibly hated critic, I became really loathed for my truth-telling. I didn't pull any punches, and I was highly opinionated, and I was trashing people in the New York Times. This is a common mistake, too, when you're a young critic: you come out of the gate just full of piss and vinegar, and you've got all your ideals, and things aren't living up to them, and you're much more vehement. But I was so hated in the opera world for so long, and I was really kind of bewildered by it, "but my friend told me to be really honest!" I think over time, you know, as you're in longer, people get your measure more and I think, you know, some people will always hate me – there are people who just revile me. But I've also gotten notes from singers who got different levels of review from, sort of saying, "I appreciate that I see you recalling it like you hear it, and if you really like something, you're praising that too," you know. And there was one case – it was actually really funny – I think I could even name it because it's funny, if you Google back, it was Jamie Barton. And I was very cool about Jamie Barton at the beginning, and I just felt she was kind of doing a little shtick with the humour, and it was kind of a gimmick, and she wrote me after a recital that I had loved, and I went back and looked and it was actually true that every review, I warmed to her a little bit more. And, so, I went from sort of, "Eh, she's not that great," to "she is really fabulous. I had a wonderful time, she was funny, she won me over." And I hadn't done that deliberately; I try not to be influenced by my past reviews, I think that it's really important to be able to change your mind, to come to it as openly as you can. Obviously, some people you have in mind what you think of them, but I am not about having a platform and an agenda and advancing it. I think you really have to emphasize that you're a person. And, also, the performers are people, and sometimes somebody has a lousy night, and a great night, and you have to be able to accept that. So, over time, I found that being honest... you know, well being honest is the only way to go anyway, because you really can't live with yourself if you put something in print that you don't believe, right? That's pretty terrible. But I also remember a friend in the music business who was writing reviews and he said, "Well, I've just decided I'll never write a negative review. If I don't like something, I won't review it." And, okay, that sounds great, right? Why would I ever need to read those reviews, if I know that he's only going to write positive reviews? Okay, fine. So, I see his name on something, I'm like, "Okay, it's gonna be positive." You know, you have to really be engaging with the art and you can't just whitewash the art. This is a long, long answer to your

question, and I'm sorry, but there's one more important point, which is that a too nice review of a mediocre performance will ultimately alienate the audience for music more than an honest review – which is to say that if somebody who's new to opera goes to a performance, and it's kind of "meh", and they read a review that says, "Oh, this was really great, they worked so hard," the person will be like, "Oh, opera is not for me." But if they go to a performance that's really "meh", and they read a review that says, "This was really pretty 'meh'" – and I've gotten letters from people like this – "Thank you so much," it validates their taste, and it makes them want to go back and hear what I think is good, and see if they like it. The empowerment that comes from realizing that your judgement of it wasn't about the genre but about a bad performance is considerable. And, so, I do believe that tough love in the end builds audiences. I get a lot of reader mail saying, you know, "Nobody's ever going to come to our performances because you're so mean about them." And it's like, "No, they'll come when I say that it's good." I mean, my job is not to sell tickets either; my job is to give an honest, critical assessment and further the discussion. That said, if you give a rave review of something that you really love, and people know that you're honest, the ticket bump is notable. You know, then you're happy you sold tickets, because it's to something you really care about.

Julie McIsaac 18:38

You just mentioned genre, Anne, and I'm curious, having mentioned theatre a little bit and cinema a little bit: what is it about opera? What are those special skills or insights that you feel are required compared to reviewing other genres?

Anne Midgette 18:51

Well, the biggest thing you need to review is a way with language, and a pair of ears and a willingness to take it on. I mean, we're all, as consumers of art in the bigger sense, everybody is constantly, you know... you're learning new things all the time, you're refining your insights. Every time I look at a painting, it could be a very familiar painting, but sometimes you were really engaging with that in new ways. I think the critic gives a voice to that. I hope the critic is, as I said, an entry point for people to be developing their own perceptions. I felt very keenly, as I intimated in that origin story, that I didn't have the proper background: I majored in classical civilizations, which means I learned ancient Greek and Latin. I actually never took a music class in college, although I had a lot of music in elementary and high school. I never got a graduate degree of any kind and I felt woefully underprepared. And my husband has a couple of graduate degrees and is a composer, and has all the background I felt that I should have, and he was very emphatic and very helpful to me because I was starting at the [New York] Times and I was suffering terribly from imposter syndrome, about how what you really need is experience and ears and, you know, ability to listen. I certainly made some howlers at the beginning of my career that I could have forestalled had I had, you know, a degree in composition. But, um, it has interested me over time that my husband and I will hear completely different things in a performance but we usually arrive at similar places in our assessment, which is not to say that we like everything the same, but often a performance that we both really agree is wonderful, we will have liked for very different reasons and heard very different things. But each view is valid: again, there's not one cookie cutter way to hear it. And often, when you get a real expert writing about something – and I've seen this over and over again with freelance critics, too – you get too much into the weeds about it: a pianist writing about a pianist can get distracted, and technical things, or peddling things that really aren't so relevant to the overall performance, they're relevant for piano experts. I have certainly fallen into that

trap with opera where I used to get criticized by my bosses for being too specific and too hung up on things they didn't think were necessary, because the point of a review is to reach educated laypeople. You know, you want a smart person but you don't need a college, you know, specialized degree in that field to enjoy the review, and you can often keep sight of that better when it's something that you too have worked harder to gain. And, that said, I feel opera critics way too often fall back on the plot and, you know, describing the plot, and then what did the sets look like, and that there's not a real sophisticated appreciation among audiences or critics in this country, especially of the whole history of set design and production design, and what's behind the production, like a more thoughtful interaction with that, and then a more thoughtful interaction with the voices. If you read reviews from 30-40 years ago, they focused on the nature of the singing and the production. And now you know that the kind of review you read where everybody's kissed off with one or two adjectives – I've been guilty of it too, we get into that formula of, you know, "the smoky voice mezzo did Carmen," "butter pecan," – you get all these food metaphors of... "baritone sound of..." whatever. And it's really just one or two words, and it's too bad that we've lost the vocabulary to go more in depth with that.

Robyn Grant-Moran 22:34

Now, you were the first woman to review classical music regularly at the New York Times. Criticism is a bit of an old boys club and I'm wondering: did you face that and how did you face that?

Anne Midgette 22:49

Well, it was it was amusing and, sort of, bitter to be the first woman in the year 2001 – the thought that there hadn't been a regular female music critic at The Times was kind of shocking, and it was shocking to The Times, too, so they determined to find a woman. So, I always say I was sort of the affirmative action baby; they were looking only at women for that stringer job and I was the woman they picked. I did an article about it the next year, which just went up online – again, it was out of print for a long time – about being a woman critic because it was not something I'd ever thought about; I really literally never found barriers to doing what I did. I had wonderful mentors all the way along who were very supportive. I think, at that point, everybody was aware of the need for a woman, people were happy to support a woman coming up in the field. But I wrote in this article about, sort of, the stereotypes about women that come into play with the, sort of, "first woman" thing, and the idea that classical music is seen, as I mentioned before, a lot of audience members see it as this, sort of, privileged kind of information that needs to be interpreted by priests basically – it's this, sort of, you know, secular religious experience and you need the priest to tell you what you've seen and elucidate it for you and, of course, priests are men: we look to male authority figures. Conductors have been men, all these, sort of, archetypal images of patriarchal power are embodied in this tradition and classical music clings to its tradition. And we have certainly seen all the ways that women have faced obstacles all the way down the line in every aspect of this field, and a lot of those barriers are just beginning to dissolve in the 21st century, so: more female critics, we're seeing a lot more female conductors, a lot more female composers. That's changed in the last, you know, 10 years. Somebody else pointed out that we're seeing more female critics at the time when music criticism is no longer a very important field. I mean, there are only maybe 10 or 12 full time critics in America and that might be generous at this point – classical music critics that is. And a lot of the jobs have been folded into other jobs, you know: the arts reporter, you do theatre, you do restaurants, you do architecture, and you do the classical music concert. And that the rise of women can possibly be charted on a graph along with that decline in importance.

Julie Mclsaac 25:21

There's an interesting correlation to note between those two things.

Anne Midgette 25:25

Well, as has been pointed out, the sports section is never in danger; art sections of newspapers have dwindled, and arts sections in newspapers are generators of revenue and generators of advertising dollars. The quote that I quoted in this article I mentioned – which again, was written in 2002, it's not a new piece – but another writer suggested that the decision to cut back on arts writing and not on sports was not a question of dollars; it was a "guy thing," that the decision makers that newspapers tend to be male and they want their sports section. And arts coverage is very much like sports coverage, arts coverage should be like sports coverage: you have your feature stories about the players and the artists; you have your news stories about what's going on in the field; and then you have the game coverage, or the concert reviews. And, you know, you would never cut the game coverage out of the sports section because you want to know what's happening but the tendency in the art sections – and this has been true all the way through my career – is to cut out the concert reviews and just give you the stuff about the background of the person, as if you were covering a baseball team by only writing human interest stories about the players, which really wouldn't give you the feeling of the baseball season. Yes, it is extremely hard to think that you're going to get a full-time music critic job today, whoever you are, absolutely difficult. That said, I've gotten calls in the last... I mean, I left my job in November of 2019, so, but before I left, I was getting calls from people saying, "We want to hire a critic," you know, "Do you have recommendations?" from various smaller papers. I have been on the faculty since the inception of a organization called the Rubin Institute for Music Criticism, which is a competitive biannual institute held in San Francisco where, for a week, we get together, like, 20 graduate and undergraduate students who have some interest in becoming critics and do a critic boot camp kind of thing. And that institute has succeeded in placing a number of younger critics in jobs. So, it's not quite as bleak as it once was. I mean, I believe that the New York Times and The Washington Post are going to keep having classical music critics in some form, and the LA Times. The New Yorker, obviously, Alex Ross is at The New Yorker and he's the most famous classical music critic writing today, and he's amazing. But I think The New Yorker... I mean, Alex is young, he's going to be there for a long time but I would assume that they would keep that post going.

Julie Mclsaac 28:04

You've shared with us a little bit about how you've observed changes, in terms of the evolution of the role of the critic or the placement of the critic and the cultural conversation. Are there any other changes or evolutions that you've witnessed over the past 20-25 years that you feel that you'd like to share with us?

Anne Midgette 28:20

We review a lot less than we did – that's across the board, no matter what paper you're at, there are many fewer concert reviews – because we learned, through online tracking, that people just don't read concert reviews, they really were not getting read. Part of the problem also being that you can track readers very closely online and the online audience has a more national audience. And, of course, concert reviews are targeting a more local audience because people who can actually go, who are

getting the print paper are going to be local. So, your hands are a little bit tied to begin with. But the decline in coverage means that critics have had to adapt to a lot of different kinds of writing. I mean, the critics notebook has always been a staple, the notebook being the, sort of, critical opinion piece, which is incidentally the fourth thing that I left out when I was talking about the links between sports and criticism. The opinion piece is very important, you know, whether it's a notebook about Beethoven and his role, or a notebook about the Metropolitan Opera. And editors are very into those from critics: they want lots and lots of opinion pieces, not tied to a particular performance. And, so, there's a lot more emphasis on that for somebody coming into the field. My husband teaches a course at Juilliard [School] that used to be called Music Criticism, and he noticed that his enrollment was dropping off and he realized it was because nobody read criticism anymore, or saw its function, and he changed it to writing about music – I don't remember exactly what it's called but it's a course on how to write and talk about music. Well, of course, everybody wants that course because every musician now needs to be able to write and talk about music – you need to be able to do it from the stage, you need to be able to talk to donors, you need to be able to write your program notes. It's a skill that, sort of, morphed from the critical realm to the practical realm of people actually going out there and doing it. That's, I think, something that every musician now needs at his quiver – this "his" in "his in her" sense that needs in "their" quiver. This touches on what you were asking before, Robyn, about mixing up a career as a performer and a career as a critic: there are people who are definitely doing both and that's a shift that we did not see 20 years ago, that you would see a, sort of, freelance musician, critic, podcast or what have you.

Robyn Grant-Moran 30:47

Do you have any productions that have really stood out or made an impact in your tenure as a critic?

Anne Midgette 30:55

It's funny, I have my list of, sort of, top orchestral performances. Top opera performances is rough – there have been so many – but I will say there was this one magical year at the Washington National Opera, here I am in D.C., they did the revised version of Philip Glass and Christopher Hampton's "Appomattox," and then they did the complete Ring Cycle. And I had seen the Francesca Zambello Ring [Cycle] in San Francisco [Opera], having watched the genesis of it here but they ran out of money in Washington before the *Götterdämmerung*, so Washington didn't get the complete Cycle; San Francisco got it and then Washington took it over a couple years later. And that Ring Cycle, with the cast that had been working on it – for, in some cases, 10 years, developing those roles – it was an amazing experience. It was really remarkable, in your hometown, to see this Ring. And it wasn't local bias because, goodness knows, I was pretty tough on the Washington National Opera. It was just a really magical Ring Cycle. And to have it in the same season as the Appomattox, which was also one of my most amazing premieres – and as somebody who recognizes that Philip Glass's operatic output is very up and down, and there have been some great ones and there have been some not so great ones, and I've called them both – Appomattox, for me, was magical. So, that was a year that stood out and it was, you know, recently and it wasn't in one of the great opera houses. I mean, what my bucket list of opera performances was when I was 21, and I just moved in with a tenor and I was in Paris and was walking past the Palais Garnier and saw this enormous crowd and, it was because Pavarotti was singing that night and I had no money, so, I just went over to look and watch the crowd, and breathe in the operatic fumes and, somehow, ended up standing next to the world's only shy ticket scalper who

was holding up his tickets and nobody was noticing him and the crowd is melting away, and then somebody grabs two of his tickets, then somebody grabs one more of his tickets, and then we are literally alone facing each other at this auditorium in the lobby that is now empty, and he, kind of, looks at me and I reach in my pocket and I have less than \$20 and, you know, change in French francs and I said, "This is all I have," and he goes, "I'll take it!" and I ended up with a ticket and I was right by the stage and it was Luciano Pavarotti, and Daniela Dessì and Gabriel Bacquier here doing L'elisir d'amore [The Elixir of Love], and I remember I'd never been in the Palais Garnier before, I'd never seen Pavarotti on stage live before – it was really a magical night!

Robyn Grant-Moran 34:23

To circle back on how things are changing and evolving, one thing I face: everything's getting democratized. Anybody can put their opinions on a blog or on Twitter. Have you encountered that and what changes are you seeing and would you like to see?

Anne Midgette 34:45

I've certainly encountered a lot of misunderstanding of the critic's role: people really do believe you're there to sell tickets, you're there to give ratings you're there [to give] thumbs up, thumbs down, two stars, three stars – all of that stuff, which is pretty widespread. And, I mean, it's funny because I started at the New York Times in 2001, so, I think of my active, sort of, music critic phase as being the last 20 years, and, in that time, we went through blogs and came out the other end. You know, there was that point when everybody had blogs and basically blogs kind of lost their impact because everybody realized, at the same time, how incredibly much work it is to keep up a blog – if you keep putting that content out. Whether you're doing it for The Washington Post, where I had to produce fresh content five times a week for that blog, or whether you're doing it for yourself: if you wanted to build a readership, you had to have that kind of presence. So, the blogs that have lasted, many of them have become like magazines – I mean, parterre box or parterre.com, the classic opera blog – which has some wonderful reviewers – but it's become really, like, a magazine site: it has its own reviewers, and it runs reviews by a bunch of people; it is no longer, sort of, the brainchild of one person putting it out there, which has been an interesting evolution to watch. But everybody said, "Oh, blogs are going to be the end of criticism because everybody who has an opinion can put it on their blog," and the fact is that if you don't have anything worth saying, people aren't going to read it, you know? And if you do have something worth saying, then more power to you; you should be blogging and we should be reading you. I always had a very welcoming view toward blogs: I want the conversation to expand, I want lots of people to have a few points, and you just have to believe that, you know, as a paid professional music critic, your own viewpoint is worth having in that mix, and if it's not, then nobody should read you. I, kind of, feel that music criticism deserves its demise in some sense because if you look back at a lot of what was written in the 80s, 90s, 2000s about opera performance, about classical music performance, a lot of it is just not very good and not very interesting – very formulaic, it's not really good writing, and so it shouldn't exist. Andrew Porter's reviews, however, in The New Yorker are still wonderful reading years later – it has to be good writing! When you were asking about what the requirement for a critic is: you're writing a story, you want to tell people a story that people are going to want to read. And whether it's a happy story or a sad story or – you know, in terms of the content. And, also, the story: you don't know what the story is about until you've been to the performance. You see this very formulaic writing of "Okay, I'm going to give you the plot of the opera, and I'm going to give you the production," but the

story one night might be the soprano, and the story another night might be the production – you have to go with a really open mind about what it is that you would tell your friend in the bar after the show. You know, "What is it that you would come out saying," and that's what your review needs to be. So, I think the bloggers who have survived are all people I want to read. And, of course, some newspaper reviewers have become bloggers because their newspaper jobs have gone away. But I'm never worried about having a multiplicity of views out there because the strong voices always rise to the top.

Julie Mclsaac 38:13

Something that I really love that Anne shared with us is the sense that, if she's done her job "right," there's that space that's been left for the person who reads her review to insert themselves and what their hypothetical experience would have been. So, regardless of whether Anne herself liked or didn't like a production, someone could read it and go, like, "Oh, based on how she's contextualized it and what I've read, I would love that show," or, "Oh, I would have hated that show." There's that space for them!

Robyn Grant-Moran 38:39

So, when she talked about how she has this ongoing relationship with performers, and with directors, and companies, because she's reviewing over many years. Her relationship changes and evolves in leaving that space for the audience member who's reading – or the potential audience member who's reading her review – they evolve with her, too, and I just find that all very, very fascinating.

Julie Mclsaac 39:13

I was just thinking back to being a performer myself, like, back in the early days of my career and how someone from whom I'd received a negative reaction, I later got a positive review from years later. But that meant more to me because they weren't writing from a place of a vacuum; they'd watched me over a number of years perform, and, so, there was, like, this relationship that had progressed in terms of them responding to my work.

Robyn Grant-Moran 39:37

And that makes me want to ask you this question, Julie, because you were a performer, you're a director, you're a dramaturg now – you do a lot, your career has evolved: what's your relationship to criticism?

Julie Mclsaac 39:50

So, I think something I did in the early days is I did read the reviews and I read them when they came out and, in this context, maybe it came out and I still had two months of performances left – like, in a theatre context, for example. And then what? It's a slippery slope because then I found myself responding to what that one critic had said, – like, that criticism and trying to fix it or trying to address it and be, like, "No, I'm not that I'm going to be better, I'm going to fix it." And, so, I spent, sort of, two months focused on that rather than focused on all the lovely things that we had rehearsed and that the director had envisioned for that production. So, definitely a slippery slope. So, I learned my lesson from that. And then, as a performer, what I would do is maybe read them after the run of the show but once it had closed. But then, as a director, it's really different because I find that, as I'm building the production with my colleagues and as we're rehearsing, I have this vision in mind of what I hope we can achieve,

of what that storytelling experience can be. So, at every moment, I'm, sort of, judging myself against that standard or that vision that I have for the work, and I'm, sort of, keeping track of that and how close I'm getting to that finish line or where it's lacking – like, where I haven't figured it out, yet, or I haven't gotten there. And, so, in a way, when we get to opening night, I might be very satisfied with the work or I might be thinking, "Oh, I wish we could have fixed that. I wish we could have clarified that. I wish we could have strengthened that." And, so, in a way, I've kind of given myself a grade before the critics ever receive it – I already, sort of, know how I'm judging myself or how well I feel I've done, or what I might do differently next time. And, so, by the time those reviews come out, it's not, sort of, my personal way of judging things because I've already done that for myself, but it is an interesting conversation to then respond to or to then, sort of, view and witness sort of that conversation that's happening among the reviewers, especially if I've built this production thinking, like, "Okay, this production is saying, 'X,' it's all about 'X,' the theme of 'X' is going to ring out so truly," and then I read the review and they're like, "This production is all 'Y,'" and I go, "Oh, my goodness! What's happened with this disconnect?" And that's actually fascinating to then, sort of, reverse engineer and think back and try to figure out where that happened.

Robyn Grant-Moran 41:51

I suppose that could really easily happen because when you're creating the performance, you're creating the production, you are so in it...

Julie Mclsaac 42:01

You're very close to it.

Robyn Grant-Moran 42:02

...you don't have that distance, so then a critic can easily come along and say, "Oh, I get that thing. That thing you're trying to communicate: I get it loud and clear." Or, "Huh, what were you trying to say there?" Or find that the focus was maybe something else that you hadn't anticipated whatsoever.

Julie Mclsaac 42:27

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 42:27

But because you were so in it.

Julie Mclsaac 42:29

Yeah. Well, and something that Anne shared with us, too – and I appreciate this – is that she's aware of the fact that you can see a matinee on a Saturday afternoon and witness a different performance than if you went on Wednesday at 7 p.m., and that this is a live art form, that things can happen, and, so, things can be nuanced and different, or they can be very different. For example, if the star soprano was ill and there's another singer in that role – that's going to make a difference. And likewise, for myself as a director, like, I know, if I returned to see the production, the notes I might have for the performers on that day or for the stage manager might be very different than had I seen the Friday show.

Robyn Grant-Moran 43:02

Even something as subtle as the audience being different will change a performance. And, harkening back to our conversation with Michael Levine, like, if one little thing is just a hair off – if that light, if that scrim is just, like, a millimetre off – it will change how you perceive as an audience member, what your perception is. And, so, there's so much variation from performance to performance.

Julie Mclsaac 43:33

And I'd be really curious, like, Robyn: what is your take on how critiquing something that's live – like a theatre production, an opera production – how that differs from critiquing something that is not live – like a film, for example, or something where the art is separate from the artist – for example, visual art, where the painting is hanging on a wall, and it's complete, and it's separate physically from the artist who created it.

Robyn Grant-Moran 43:54

Yeah, like, I've never actually critiqued visual arts but the past two years, I've sat on the ReelAbilities Film Fest[ival] jury and how I look at the films is very different than how I look at live performance, because when I look at a film, it's done: the artists have nothing to do with it anymore. It's out there, they can't go back and change anything, and I'm looking at a whole package. Whereas if I'm looking at a live performance, it's really hard to separate the artist from the art. So, I have to be mindful about how I frame things. There was a horrible example of this: someone had reviewed "Der Rosenkavalier" and they said that Octavian was believable except for their puppy fat. And, like, you can't... that's not good criticism. Like, how someone looks, how they take up space: that's them. But then it gets into this question of, "What we're criticizing in opera criticism: we're talking about voices," and that's also the performer but that's what we're there to criticize. So, you have to set very clear boundaries and ethics, I think, as a professional around that because whatever you say, you're impacting that artist very personally.

Julie Mclsaac 45:37

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:38

They're impacting their humanity in a way that I don't think you are with an art form that is produced, and out there, and separate from the performer once it's done.

Julie Mclsaac 45:48

Because the voices: they're not disembodied, they're connected to actual physical beings who... maybe the review comes out on a Tuesday, then they need to go out on stage Wednesday or Thursday and perform again. And, also, about them being human: I thought it quite amusing how Anne brought our attention to the fact that the adjectives that are used to describe people's voice and how they're connected to food, like, "caramel" and "the whipped cream, sort of, coloratura" – it's the lexicon of opera descriptors – it's very true! And that's sort of a fun game for people to then go read reviews and, sort of, find your favorites and send them to us. Your favorite food analogies to describe singers voices. Yeah, and, like, that comes down to really the specialty of being an opera critic. Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:34

Right? To be able to have this lexicon and not just have a handful – like, "the smoky," "the velvety," "the honey-infused," but, you know, have a much broader palette. And, also, understand that opera is a live performance and you're speaking about someone who... they aren't separate from their art; the noise they're making, the way they move is them.

Julie Mclsaac 47:07

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:07

And that there's a historical context that's happening, that there's a cultural context that's happening.

Julie Mclsaac 47:15

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:15

And how that all fits together while you're talking about very real people who are doing things that they've trained very hard to do.

Julie Mclsaac 47:25

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:27

So, to have someone who covers musical theatre maybe isn't the right person for opera, unless they are opera critics as well.

Julie Mclsaac 47:39

Yeah, I hear you. Like, making a really good case for someone having that level of... that close knowledge and all that context around what it takes, for example, to bring a opera production to the stage, and all the subtlety and nuance around that. And, so, this is our moment of, like, giving out love to those critics who take the time to develop that understanding and that deep, deep context for the work that's happening. And it makes me think about how Anne got into criticism through this love of opera: the fact that she was in this relationship with this tenor – and I'm assuming she heard him sing all the time – and that she herself trained as a vocalist, as a singer. So, coming from that place of love and then evolving that into her work as a critic, and therefore having having that space, sort of, to love it but also to hate it, and to tell the truth about hating it if that's how it struck her.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:30

Well, and I think when we talk about us critics hating things, we should be looking at things being successful or not successful. Like, there are productions I have hated but they were incredibly successful. Like, they set out to do the thing they were trying to do but I just hated how it was done. And that is not indicative of a good or bad performance; that's indicative of me not fitting with the aesthetic of the director. And that's a conversation that I don't think is had about criticism enough and, so, when talking about contemporary criticism – and I'm just going to bring something up that we haven't talked about – the democratization of it with, like, "Why [read] critics when everybody can be

online?" Everybody can post in one way or another their response, and that's not invalid - those things are absolutely valid but there's an expertise that historically, you know... if we're creating historical documents for people in the future to understand or get value from it, they need to know the context in which things were situated beyond "I like this" or "I didn't like it."

Julie Mclsaac 50:02

The context. Yeah, the greater context.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:05

Yeah. And yeah, I just felt that that was something really worth mentioning.

Julie Mclsaac 50:10

No, it's great, because I'm just thinking about, like, what is the value of criticism in the arts, and I think you've just sort of pointed out part of it to us in the sense that years from now, hopefully someone can read this documentation, these reviews and not just get a sense of that personal reviewer's experience but also the greater context in which this work was happening. And I think something that I take away in terms of the value of it is letting the readers know that there's room for you to insert yourself in this conversation; that you have an individual point of view and your own unique experience and that is part of the conversation, too.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:41

Take that space that Anne carves out and use it because critics aren't arbiters of taste; critics are a good guide but not the be-all and end-all in any way whatsoever. We're the beginning of a conversation; not the end of it.

Julie Mclsaac 51:02

As we talk about criticism and explore what voices are currently represented in that part of the arts landscape, we wanted to mention something that came up in our chat with theatre critic Karen Fricker about a project that she's been working on.

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:14

To tease our episode with Karen later on this season, she's recently been involved with a really interesting project called Seeding the Future sponsored by Brock University and York University. The schools ask Black university-aged students for their response to "21 Black Futures," a powerful video series recently released by the Obsidian Theatre Company in Toronto and CBC Arts.

Julie Mclsaac 51:37

And, to catch up our listeners, 21 Black Futures is an anthology of 21 monodramas. The short one-person plays were written by 21 different Black playwrights, directed by 21 different Black directors, and performed by 21 different Black actors. And the resulting plays range from satire to sci-fi, and they feature artists from all across Canada.

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:59

As Karen shared, the responses gathered as part of Seeding the Future have been overwhelming. CBC Arts has been posting these responses to their site, we'll include that link in our show notes for this episode, along with the link to 21 Black Futures. It's definitely worth exploring both. Thanks for joining us for Episode 10. We'd love to hear your questions or feedback or even ideas for future episodes.

Julie Mclsaac 52:32

Either tag us on social @CanadianOpera or email us at audiences@coc.ca. You can also send us a voice memo, there's instructions for how to do that at coc.ca/KeyChange.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:45

We appreciate all the feedback we've received so far and the reviews you've left on Apple Podcasts. And, remember, if you're a COC subscriber or member, you have access to exclusive bonus content and extended interviews.

Julie Mclsaac 52:58

Next week, we'll be releasing a little bit more of our fantastic chat with Anne that we couldn't quite fit into today's episode.

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:04

So, if you're a COC supporter, keep an eye out for a link in your supporter newsletter on Thursdays.

Julie Mclsaac 53:11

And coming up on our next episode: we're opening up our audience mailbag for a special "ask us anything" edition of Key Change.

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:18

And it's been really cool to see the range of inquiries that have rolled in over the past few weeks.

Julie Mclsaac 53:23

And, of course, if Robyn and I don't have a ready answer for you, we'll be reaching out to a few friends for their expertise. So, you'll certainly want to tune in and meet our mystery guests.

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:32

Exciting times! I'm looking forward. Be the first to find out about free events and concerts from the COC by signing up for our monthly eOpera newsletter at coc.ca/eOpera.

Julie Mclsaac 53:55

Thank you to all of our supporters for making Key Change possible. This week we want to especially thank every COC member, subscriber, and donor for coming on this journey with us as we explore new ways to share opera's unique power.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:09

So, to make sure you don't miss an episode, subscribe to Key Change wherever you get your podcasts.

Julie Mclsaac 54:15

Key Change is produced by the Canadian Opera Company and hosted by Robyn Grant-Moran and Julie Mclsaac.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:22

To learn more about today's guests and see the show notes, please visit our website at coc.ca/KeyChange.