

Key Change Episode 13: Opera & the Body

SPEAKERS

Julie Mclsaac, Krisztina Szabó, Jennifer Swan, Robyn Grant-Moran

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 00:23

Today on Episode 13 of the podcast: we're exploring opera and the body. When people think about opera, they're often envisioning the artistic aspects: the sets, the costumes, those amazing high notes.

Julie Mclsaac 00:35

But there's a lot that happens, over the course of years, to hit those high notes and to make those memorable performances happen. In fact, there's a whole host of full body training that goes into preparing singers for the stage.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:47

We touched on this in our "Ask Us Anything" episode a few weeks back: a group of high school students asked "How are singers heard at the back of the house without using any microphones?" We chatted about this with performer Jonathan Christopher. We also connected with Head of the COC Ensemble Studio Liz Upchurch for a quick lesson on sound frequencies, and how the human body can operate as an instrument.

Julie Mclsaac 01:10

And today we're digging deeper with COC Performance Kinetics Consultant, Jennifer Swan, and Canadian mezzo-soprano Krisztina Szabó. With both of them, we're excited to learn more about how performers use their breath and bodies during performance, and we'll also explore some new holistic ways that artists are being trained for opera performance.

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:29

Up first is our chat with Jennifer Swan. Jennifer has been a Performance Kinetics Consultant with the COC since 2012. But she's also worked extensively with both dancers and athletes, including Canadian Olympic ice dancers Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir. If you remember their award-winning "Carmen" routine from 2013, that was Jen's choreography!

Julie McIsaac 01:51

With singers. Jennifer specializes in refining, strengthening, and training the breath in very subtle yet concrete ways, with techniques that have evolved from her extensive background in dance and Pilates. We began by asking her what her work entails when she's in training sessions with the artists of the COC's Ensemble Studio.

Jennifer Swan 02:21

Part of my role at the COC, when working with the singers, is to try to embrace a philosophy of "listening to understand" rather than "listening to reply." So, in simple terms, that means that I meet my Ensemble members, in the space in real time, with their immediate issues. I think it's important not to disregard their training, before working with me, to instill a sense of personal autonomy. And the idea at the end of the two-year training process at the COC, is that the singers leave as active "change agents," if you will, in charge of their physical recruitment for breath. And that sounds like a really simple, kind of, concept, but the reality is – what has become very clear to me over the years is – that most of the singers arrived with very little sense of physical process, and the demand of physical process in sustaining their house – and their house being, of course... or their housing, if you will, their body, what supports the actual talent that they arrive, you know, at the door of the COC with. It was very curious to me how much of their training was presented in metaphor and subjective imagery, and the reality is when we give ambiguous physical cues, you get ambiguous physical outcomes. On one occasion was in a masterclass where a female singer, being encouraged to sing lower and have more "foot" in her sound, was encouraged to sing through her "whoo-hoo."

Robyn Grant-Moran 04:16

That's a metaphor I've gotten regularly in my vocal lessons as well. I know that one well.

Jennifer Swan 04:23

Isn't that crazy? So, that one really is... Well, so many things: one, the identification of what the "whoo-hoo" actually is could be problematic; and then the cue in and of itself doesn't really give any clear physical instruction what to do with the "whoo-hoo," to manifest a change, if you will. So, one of the things that we would do at the COC, under my instruction, would be separating the difference between core training and core strengthening, specifically working on a pelvic floor recruitment of the TA [transverse abdominal] muscle being your core strengthening; and then the core training being the ask that follows – meaning, the larger, bigger asks of your work. The body demands a certain kind of clarity, and I do think that dance – like opera – being interpreted as an art form sometimes, unfortunately, falls prey to the idea that things need to be more mystical and "arty" than concrete and pragmatic. And I tend to lean heavily on the side that process needs to be as pragmatic as possible, so as to assist the singers that we're working with.

Julie McIsaac 05:55

Can you talk to us a little bit about your previous work with dancers or with athletes, and what you were drawing on to then offer to the singing training?

Jennifer Swan 06:02

What was clear to me [is] that the way we train core training and dance with athletes, the way we recruit muscles, the timing of recruitment, and the uniqueness of all of those things to each specific body was a skill set that I could bring to the table. It also became clear to me that there was undoing that needed to be done, in many cases, before doing could take part and, again, a skill set that I'm really comfortable with. Fast forward to today, and I have been given the most incredible opportunity by my colleague, Nina Draganic, to create a think tank, if you will, at the COC Ensemble Studio; I have been given every opportunity to create and develop a syllabus for physical movement that is connected to the immediate on-site training of opera singers. Were it not for the broad-reaching scope of Nina's vision, I would not be asked to do this podcast, to have the opportunity to work with the numerous Ensemble members that I have, or to have the joy in working with my colleagues, Liz Upchurch, Wendy Nielsen, Steven Leigh, to name only a few. It is a unique opportunity that the COC took an enormous risk to be the first one-off in Canada to develop and support this kind of training. I am enormously grateful.

Julie McIsaac 07:43

Could you tell us a little bit more, Jen, about what's been so special in your work here with the Ensemble Studio?

Jennifer Swan 07:49

With the opera singers, there was this unique place for me to learn, as well, how to silence the mind and encourage them to be physically present with the work, and allow for the curiosity of the work to reprogram proprioception, and then reprogram the intellect around the process of training breath. So, a huge part of the job would be actually not attending to every question that is presented, but rather asking people to physically do, feel, and experience, and then express what that was. That's a very unique approach to opera singing but not a unique approach, obviously, to dance. It is also quite one-on-one, as you can imagine, and, of course, the other part of all of that is the personal intimacy: one of the things that opera, and dance, and sport share is that they are the instrument. So, there's a fragility about that that we have to be very cognizant about when we work with them: our corrections resonate in a different way because they are the instrument. So, your comments live for a longer period of time, and in a much more relevant way with dancers, athletes, singers. Part of my background was working with Scott and Tessa, the Olympic skaters, and it was as true for them as it is for my Ensemble members at the COC, and my little five-year-old ballerinas.

Robyn Grant-Moran 09:42

Just thinking about figure skating in general, conceptually it's wild to me: like, you're dancing on ice with knives on your feet. So, there's something that does not compute but I'm [in] awe when I watch it. You have the choreographers who figure out their routine, and they understand it's a very rigid structure that you have to hit these marks, and then you have marks to aim for above and beyond. You're working in this very rigid framework, creating this beautiful artistry, all with knives on your feet. How do you augment all the other plates that are spinning, so to speak?

Jennifer Swan 10:24

My role in both the Olympic ice dance world and my role in the COC operatic world is virtually the same: I, in both situations, have the opportunity to work with a really talented ensemble team and, in both worlds, they function in a collaborative manner. So, there are multiple players. When you talk about the marks that have to be met: there is a jumping coach, there is a choreographer (which I was), there is the overseeing skating teacher/instructor, and then there can be a variety of other individuals based on whatever the piece might be, i.e. in the world of opera, a diction specialist – well, it might be somebody who is a specialist in the hands from flamenco dancing, to make a comparison. What is common about my work with both is that I have the pleasure of dealing with the connective tissue that lives between all of the snapshot photographic moments. So, I was once asked what made Scott and Tessa so uniquely different, and why they were Olympian winners, and the answer for me, without question, is that they skated the connective tissue – meaning that between A and B is where life lives. Between Jump A and Swivel Turn B, it's the space between those two entities where the audience breathes with you, where there is a connection, where the thread of breath and movement intersect. the thread of intention, forward direction, where the honesty of the artists lives. And what has been so exciting for me is being able to celebrate that concept with individuals in what would seem decidedly different realms, but yet not. So, there's something about having the opportunity to work with people who are wanting to be courageous enough, to challenge perception, to want to falsify belief, rather than reinforcing belief, and the individuals in all of these worlds are so ready and able to do that, and that process lives with breath, in my opinion. Now with Scott and Tessa: clearly, I was able to also choreograph – which is a singular role, if you will, from the dance world – but because they aren't dancers, then that breath support, that connective tissue, becomes the thread of the dance world to their world, and similarly at the COC. From time to time, I also explore staging and movement with the singers, when there are asks on the stage that seem to impede their ability to make their best sound. You know, we'll investigate that and explore that, and try to find physical solutions that will meet the high standard of the artistic director or the choreographer from the main stage.

Julie McIsaac 14:19

Yeah! Well, this is really resonating with me, Jen, in the sense that when I watched Tessa and Scott skate, and when I think about having witnessed some of your work with the Ensemble artists, is that the through line of storytelling can come to the fore. So, there's the sense that there's a continuous flow of storytelling or artistic expression that is being supported by that very subtle work, and that's very gratifying as somewhat as being that from that director position, or that dramaturg-storyteller position, that's so exciting when an artist can bring that.

Jennifer Swan 14:49

I agree. And what I love about what you just said is that breath is supporting action, and I do think that that is so important to understand that, ultimately, what is significant and what draws an audience member to a performance – be it on ice, or on the stage dancing or at the opera – is the honesty with which the intention is being delivered. And if breath can be part – albeit a small part – of carrying that intention to the audience, it's very gratifying to see that work play out in all of the multiple forms of storytelling that I've had the opportunity to work in, and it certainly is when they are the most successful. And, so, I just think it's so important that we give them more autonomy and more ownership, and it's

really interesting how it frightens, even the singers, to be given that. I always say to all the girls at studio (I'm digressing for a second) but I will say, you know, "It's not about getting to stay out late; that's not a right. Your right is what you put in your body, who you let touch your body, how you train and shape your body." Those are huge responsibilities and they have that from day one, right? But we don't celebrate that as being a huge thing; we, sort of, remove that from them.

Robyn Grant-Moran 16:22

I think it's such a beautiful message for anybody who sings or dances who is listening. In working with the young artists of the Ensemble Studio, you often talk about how Liz Upchurch, the Head of the Ensemble Studio, and Wendy Nielsen, the Head Vocal Coach, are the ears in a training session, and you're the eyes. What are you looking out for during the physical act of singing?

Jennifer Swan 16:46

It's been very interesting when we're in the room. Often when either Wendy or Liz hear something in the sound, I have also detected something physically. So, what I'm watching for is how the body is responding to the production of the sound, and by that I mean I am looking at deviations in the spine, simple things like shoulder lifts, heel lifts, when people want to sing high finding the body getting elevated and out of their support. Sometimes it's simple things where the mouth becomes more distorted, or the jaw starts to respond to an uneven or unsupported vibrato – things like that. Keeping in mind that I have an opportunity with Ensemble members to work with them privately every week, so, I start to have, through my own training with them, a real understanding of their body mechanics. So, they're not a completely foreign entity to me when we are all integrated – you know, working collaboratively at the same time. That doesn't mean, though, that these things can't be seen in one-off situations and masterclasses because I have had the good fortune of touring in North America to do this work, and, over time, these physical deviations are much more consistent than one might think across multiple singers, both male and female, and different voice types, as well. So, that's how we find and hone in on the point of change that we want to... or the point of inflection, if you will, that we want our singers to work on with us.

Julie Mclsaac 18:53

So, Jen, we've been talking a lot about how singers make music and how they move in making that music, but we're curious: what music moves you personally? What's on your playlist right now?

Jennifer Swan 19:03

I love Bruce Springsteen's old stuff, I love Tom Waits' vocally distressed voice, I love Sufjan Stevens, and currently, during COVID, I have really been over the moon to hear a former student of mine, Iain MacNeil posting the most stunning, stunning acoustic renditions of songs. I think that he has partnered with friends and family at different times. That has brought me tremendous joy through COVID and reminding me of really spectacularly lovely time spent with him.

Julie Mclsaac 19:44

Wonderful! Thanks so much, Jen, for joining us today.

Jennifer Swan 19:47

You guys were lovely. Thank you so much!

Julie Mclsaac 19:57

Robyn, I'm really curious: because of your training as a singer, what are you thinking about in the wake of our having just had that great conversation with Jennifer?

Robyn Grant-Moran 20:05

What really struck me was how the breath is so dynamic and moving in her model of body usage. It's not the be all and end all, but the breath is really what energizes the performance; it's much more fluid. And I've been taking music lessons, in one way or another, pretty much my whole life, and breath has always been really important. Everyone really has their own unique and distinct ways of speaking about breath.

Julie Mclsaac 20:32

Yeah! I love what Jennifer was saying about how, you know, artistic endeavors are poetic and magical, and were inspired by the music and all that, but that high-level exquisite performance that we're all aiming for, there's a lot of concise collaborative communication and pragmatic strategy that has to work its way in there in order to make that happen, and it's a fine balance that, you know, you need that bespoke approach, knowing that no singer will respond to the same note in the same way and different spaces and stagings require different things. And happily, someone who can give us some insight into the requirements of different stagings is mezzo-soprano Krisztina Szabó.

Robyn Grant-Moran 21:10

Krisztina is an accomplished mezzo-soprano who's known for her range, singing everything from Baroque to contemporary music. She began her professional opera career with the COC Ensemble Studio in 1998, and she has been a familiar face for COC audiences ever since, having appeared in several of the company's productions over the past two decades.

Julie Mclsaac 21:30

In addition to her experience as a performer, recently Krisztina was appointed Assistant Professor of Voice and Opera at the University of British Columbia's School of Music. Given her background as both a singer and a teacher, we are looking forward to exploring the topic of opera and the body through Krisztina's unique lens.

Robyn Grant-Moran 21:47

But before we begin, we want to mention, during her time in the Ensemble Studio, Krisztina sang the title role in "The Rape of Lucretia," something that does come up in our conversation. The production isn't explored in great detail, given the specific focus of today's episode, but there's still mention of sexual violence, and so we'd like to offer this content warning.

Julie Mclsaac 22:17

Krisztina, really great to have you here with us today. Now, we're curious about performing on stage, you know, accompanied by live music, it's an incomparable feeling. And could you describe for us – for

you, the best you can – that sensation that you feel when you are making and embodying that music onstage? What does that feel like?

Krisztina Szabó 22:36

Well, I have to say it is one of the most remarkable experiences to be on a stage at the COC making music in that space. Space definitely influences how you produce sound. So, as opera singers, we are trained to make maximum volume, maximum resonance, and when you're singing at the COC, you have the gift of a wonderful acoustic, but you're also trying to fill the space with your sound as much as possible, as opposed to a smaller venue where you can have a little more intimacy. In a space like the Four Seasons Centre [for the Performing Arts], you have a 2,000-seat, you know, audience and all those faces looking at you and being with you in that experience. So, the adrenaline is very high.

Julie McIsaac 23:28

And I've sometimes heard people talk about that distinction between that adrenaline that feels, like, that excitement and that adrenaline that feels like that, like nervous or anxious energy. Do you have any experiences or, you know, stories to share with us about riding that wave?

Krisztina Szabó 23:44

Absolutely. Um, I have to say a lot goes into the preparation. So, the more prepared you are, the more rehearsed you are, the more grounded you feel. You will always experience adrenaline no matter what show is going on, but I like the fact that, you know, you can rehearse several weeks in advance and we've rehearsed, when the adrenaline hits in, your body can take over in, sort of, an automatic pilot feeling. How I manage my adrenaline, I have to say, I was thinking about this, I have a few stories from the COC very specifically. Two particular instances: the first one was singing "Erwartung" with the COC. I've never done a one-woman show ever before doing my debut singing that role at the COC, and, you know, you're wrapped in a straitjacket, and you're left on stage – that is the first scene in the show. So, I'm left alone, trapped in a straitjacket – not, like, super trapped because it's loosely bound but, you know, the assistant stage manager would, you know, tie me up and then leave, and there was this moment of, "Oh my God, I am by myself here on this stage, this empty stage... Is this going to be okay?" So, yeah, you know, and then the curtain goes up and you see the darkness but you see also, sort of, bodies out in the audience, so, then the room gets bigger, and then the light goes up on [COC Music Director Johannes Debus], and it was the most terrifying feeling, but as soon as the first chords started to be played that sense of like, "Oh, yes. I'm going to be okay, we've done this before." Having to breathe through it, I think that's the most nervous I've been, because when you're doing a show with other people, you feed off the energy of other people; there's a comfort and a familiarity and, you know, "strength in numbers," so to speak. But when you're left alone on stage, I don't think I've ever experienced anything quite like that adrenaline rush and fear, frankly. And I'm not someone who gets afraid, necessarily; I don't I suffer performance anxiety. So, that was very unique. The second store I had was doing "Love From Afar," where I had to enter from beneath the stage in a big cloth. So, I was preset under the stage and this massive sheet – that would span the entire stage once it unfurled – was, sort of, wrapped around me. So, there's also a claustrophobic, sort of, feeling as they lift up – the dancers on stage would pull each end and then I'd, sort of, be unveiled. But there's a moment where I'm literally surrounded in sheet on all sides of me, and then that moment of, "Okay, is everything going to work as I come up?" and that adrenaline of, again, you're so alone in your process in that moment

and then, once you're revealed, you're in it but there's that moment before everything begins that can be truly terrifying it and that one is another one that definitely was nerve-racking for me.

Julie Mclsaac 27:12

So interesting, because I think about many of us who are audience members – so, who are they're receiving the performance and receiving the music – and, for us, it's a communal experience, you know? We know we have those audience members on either side and there's this huge orchestra, and it's a very populated experience. So, to contrast that with what you're describing about the aloneness or the isolation that you feel in those moments is really fascinating!

Robyn Grant-Moran 27:33

Yes, so I'm curious about the physicality of the difference between a concert performance and an operatic performance – like, a fully staged opera. Because in a concert, you know, you're wearing a beautiful dress, you're standing quite still, relatively speaking, you're not running around. But in a fully staged opera, like you said, you could be in a straitjacket, you could be coming lifted up through the floor, you might be running around or singing laying on your back. Can you talk about the physicality of that a bit?

Krisztina Szabó 28:08

Absolutely. Um, I love the physicality of opera because there's a freedom that you have, you know? Standing still in a concert performance is actually challenging; you can't move. So, I often will finish a concert and think, "Oh, I can't feel my feet," because everything's frozen in place. Whereas in an opera, you can fully embody that physically. So, yes, there are absolutely challenges depending on the staging and I've had some definitely challenging moments, but I love the physicality because I can fully be in my body in a way that I can't be in a concert performance. I have had some fun challenges in COC productions: back to Erwartung, we had these quick changes between scenes; the lights would go down, and we'd have to run into the next position. So, running and singing is not my favorite! So, as soon as you run your breath gets a little high in your body, so, trying to get your breath back down lower and feeling more grounded – not winded to start your next phrase, especially in an opera where again, it's a big sing, big orchestra – you have to feel grounded and your breath has to be grounded. So, those quick bursts of running is not my favourite to do. Doing "[The] Barber of Seville," running up and downstairs of the classic COC set of The Barber of Seville, also not my favourite. So, maybe running is not my favorite for staging and operas. Other than that, it's pretty fun! We've worked with a wonderful fight director at the COC, and I'm gonna forget his names, but it's James something [Binkley] and he's wonderful. So, I've worked with him on The Rape of Lucretia, which is extremely physical, and also "The Handmaid's Tale," also extremely physical where I was playing Offred in "the time before" and being hauled around by people, and screaming, and then singing. So, it was really wonderful to have someone who could work in the physicality into the role, so that I was able to then sing well as well, so. But it's actually quite thrilling.

Julie Mclsaac 30:12

Krisztina, we think that was James Binkley, who's likely the fight director that you worked with?

Krisztina Szabó 30:16

Yes.

Julie McIsaac 30:17

We'd love for you to explain to the listeners a little bit: what is it that a fight director does, and how do you, as a singer, collaborate with them in bringing that staging to life?

Krisztina Szabó 30:26

A fight director will come into rehearsal when there's any sort of physical contact within the staging. So, I've seen him help stage fight scenes – and that includes sword work, physical fights. The first time I worked with him was for The Rape of Lucretia. So, we had to stage a rape scene, which was incredibly physical and my colleague, Andrew Tees, had to literally haul me over his shoulder at one point, throw me down, and then... James's job is A) to make it look realistic but also to make it safe for the singers, so that we're not injuring ourselves, we're able to sing – which is always the priority – and to do it safely but also realistically. He was instrumental in making those scenes come together and make a plan for you as well. So, there's always a very, very specific plan. And then we would rehearse with him in terms of, like, getting the scenes set, but then he would come in to make sure we were sticking to the plan, and it was working well, so, we were always working it in. He would check for safety, we would do a light run of the scene just to make sure that we were having the right contact points, that we were always safe, and that we were feeling comfortable. He was wonderful and he's very, very specific and I always really enjoyed that about his process.

Julie McIsaac 31:53

Now, Krisztina, we're curious. So, you're an accomplished performer, you've appeared on the COC stage many, many a time. But, in addition to your artistic practice, you're also a teacher, and we're curious: over the course of your career, how have you seen opera training develop with respect to performance and the understanding of the entirety of the human body, the full human being? So, the training beyond the vocal cords. Could you talk to us a little bit about that?

Krisztina Szabó 32:18

Absolutely. Um, I've been singing for 22+ years professionally and it's changed a lot in that time: there's definitely a lot more emphasis on bodywork in opera these days, making sure that we are fully integrated in our bodies. It was a lot about the voice – I mean, even, um, you know, we, kind of, joke about the "park and bark" that opera used to be, you know – there's no more park and bark; you have to be an excellent actor on stage and that means to be physically your best. Opera roles onstage these days, it can be physically demanding, so a singer has to be in touch with their body, how it works best. And I've seen a lot more emphasis on body work in terms of the link between "[the] Alexander Technique," also just training, going to the gym, and being physically fit, your your body's optimum physicality, yoga – there's a lot more emphasis on these, sort of, alternate bodywork ideas within singing, and that was definitely evolving throughout my career. And then, also, the demands emotionally for singers, you know? We are sensitive creatures and we're being asked to be vulnerable on stage. For me personally, it was always an opportunity to access emotions that I maybe wouldn't necessarily be able to reflect in real life, but you're also processing things in a different way on stage, and deeper. So, the emphasis on making sure you're emotionally okay and that, for me, has definitely

been more of an emphasis throughout my career, doing that emotional work – whether it be a therapist, or a coach, a life coach, someone that gets you, sort of, in your body again.

Julie McIsaac 34:10

it's really interesting to think about this "holistic approach." So, in addition to the voice, what are all the other, sort of, branches of the tree that are helping to bring the full human, the full performer to the fore?

Robyn Grant-Moran 34:21

You mentioned the Alexander Technique. I've practiced the Alexander Technique, I've taken regular lessons, it's a postural protocol, and it's about efficiency of accessing your body, getting maximum return for minimal effort, for the least amount of wear and tear. And I'm curious [about] how that impacted your practice?

Krisztina Szabó 34:44

I haven't done a lot of Alexander Technique. I did do a few sessions in a summer program with the Queen of Puddings Music Theatre, where they had an Alexander Technique person come in and we did sessions. And it was revolutionary at the time for me: she literally, like, moved my limbs into an alignment and I have never felt so aligned in my life. And it was delightful. That was quite profound for me. There's a few concepts from Alexander that have really resonated for me: the idea of the spine supporting and that each vertebrae stacks on one another, and that sense of space in between each vertebrae. I've been doing specifically a breathwork course – her name is Allison Jean Taylor – and she's wonderful. And the first session, the question she posed to us – because as singers we talk a lot about breath support – and she posed, "How does breath support you?" which flipped the switch. And it was an exploration of breath that I haven't thought about as a singer, and, you know, I've been doing this a while! But the space within you and how that breath actually informs your structure, to be supportive as you walk through life. Because as singers, also, we're all about delivering out – everything's about "out, out out." We're very frontal. And, as a teacher, I've talked a lot about 360 breath, but what does that actually mean, and how do you experience it in your body in a way that actually supports you as you produce sound, as you just walk through life? And that felt very revolutionary.

Robyn Grant-Moran 36:28

And I'm wondering for you, as a singer, if you have any standout memories of being viscerally or physically impacted by music? When you are impacted physically or viscerally while you're performing, how do you negotiate that, so it doesn't impact your performance itself?

Krisztina Szabó 36:46

I'm always viscerally affected by music. If you're talking about volume, there's nothing quite like the "Ride of the Valkyries," you know? Getting that full impact of the orchestra. I enjoy those moments that you literally feel the music rushing through your body as a whole experience. That's why I'm in this business. And then, you know, there are other moments where your colleagues on stage, whose wonderful voices are extremely loud, and you're thinking, "I might go deaf in this ear from you at a later point." I don't enjoy it quite so much. For me, the making of music process is a visceral experience: to be singing with other people, to feel the vibration of that other person's voice in your body, to feel the

vibration of the orchestra passing through your body, it's really thrilling. So, I don't think I get distracted by it; I think I just enjoy and ride the wave.

Robyn Grant-Moran 38:00

Are there times where you get overwhelmed by the sensations?

Krisztina Szabó 38:06

Yes, absolutely. Um, for me, emotionally overwhelmed. There is something quite moving about that visceral feeling of music in your body. I'm an extremely emotional person, so I've learned to manage that by allowing myself that moment of overwhelm and then to just incorporate it and move through it. Otherwise, I'd be weeping all the time, and I've actually learned to sing while crying!

Robyn Grant-Moran 38:37

That's a really difficult thing.

Krisztina Szabó 38:39

I know. I know. But, as I said, I'm an extremely emotional person, so I've had to, sort of, train myself – not full sob but be able to, like, be crying and still sing. It's just keeping your breath low for sure. But the tears and, you know, your nose running when you start to cry – that's actually what interferes more than anything... for me!

Julie McIsaac 39:03

All that moisture! I mean, a certain amount of moisture's good, but there's a cut off point at which it stops being useful.

Krisztina Szabó 39:10

Yes.

Julie McIsaac 39:12

So, right before COVID hit, Krisztina, I know you were at the COC performing in [Engelbert] Humperdinck's "Hansel & Gretel," which also involved some members of the Ensemble Studio, and you've worked with artists from the Ensemble on the workshopping of "Fantasma" – so, their upcoming Opera for Young Audiences – and now, being a graduate of the Ensemble Studio yourself: what's it like being on the other side of that training?

Krisztina Szabó 39:33

It feels very strange that I am, you know, 20 years past my Ensemble years; it feels like yesterday that I was still a young artist. So, there's always a sense of family, you know, now I'm sort of, like, the aunt or the mom of the group; I've graduated to that but it still feels like we're part of the same family. I feel a deep sense of connection to the COC and the Ensemble Studio and, if anyone needs me, any career advice or vocal advice, I'm fully there for an Ensemble Studio member, I would give them anything because I know exactly how that process is and the challenges that they face. Maybe I shouldn't be saying that publicly!

Julie McIsaac 40:17

You might get a lot of emails!

Krisztina Szabó 40:19

Exactly.

Julie McIsaac 40:20

But I'm curious, Krisztina, if you could, sort of, look back on your Ensemble self, you know, 20+ years ago: what do you wish you had known then that you know now?

Krisztina Szabó 40:30

Oh, wow! I don't know, I feel like I learned so much in those... I was in it for three years, and I knew nothing coming in there; I had been in England just prior to that experience and at the Guildhall [School of Music & Drama] and I wasn't in opera school. I had a different trajectory to the performing career, so, I knew very little coming into it. I learned a lot about time management, and vocal management, and managing people and personalities, and then there was the music! The music, learning how to survive three coachings a day, and it was overwhelming at times – there were times, you know, that I ended up weeping, there was a lot of crying involved because I was overwhelmed by the schedule, overwhelmed by the process and just trying to survive it. What I would say to my younger self is, "Maybe don't take everything quite so personally," and that "It's going to be okay, you're going to get through this, and it's going to make you the artist and human that you are today." And even our idea of breath support, you know: we're moving away from calling it "support" because there's a rigidity in the word of support. So, "breath energy" is the term that vocal pedagogy is leaning towards now.

Julie McIsaac 41:50

And in terms of vocal pedagogy and the students that you're working with and coaching now, Krisztina: could you share with us a little bit about what you're enjoying most about having that opportunity to teach, and then, with that, maybe something that's bringing you joy and inspiration in terms of this next generation that's coming up?

Krisztina Szabó 42:08

Well, I'm really enjoying, at the moment, my new position at the University of British Columbia. We are teaching in person, which not everyone can say at the moment. And there is, again, something about physically being in a room with other singers that you just don't get through a screen, so, that is giving me joy. And I realized that connection is extremely important for my students: I think I'm the only person that they see in person at the moment for their, you know, lessons, weekly. And, again, you respond to people's energy, you respond to people's voices in a room, in a different way than you would through a screen, so, I have the good fortune of that visceral experience right now. In general, this is my eighth year of teaching, which feels very strange – again, it feels like yesterday that I just started. As a singer, you're, sort of, so internal; you're in your own process, you're a little selfish, you know? And everything's, sort of, an internal, internal, internal. As a teacher, you have to make that process external for your students in order to explain how that works. And to articulate concepts that I had, you know? I took it in and ejected how I got there. So it's been quite a process for me to be able to articulate those things to my kids. But what has struck me the most is how much I care about their success; I care more

about them doing well and feeling good about themselves, and feeling good about their voices than I do about my own. You know, I do feel a little like a mom in that regard. You know, I have a daughter and I feel the same way about her; I would give anything for her to feel that, you know, empowered in what she's doing. So, it's been really exciting to be part of someone else's journey, which I didn't really think about, really, until I was in it with the teaching.

Julie Mclsaac 44:14

Yeah! Well, as someone who's witnessed you on stage, and in the rehearsal hall, Krisztina, I'm looking forward to that return when I might witness that and hear you again. But, at the same time, it's exciting to hear about your work with these young artists, and I'm excited for them that they get that opportunity to work with you.

Krisztina Szabó 44:31

Thank you.

Julie Mclsaac 44:37

So, Robyn, have you received any, sort of, weird communication in the past, like, from your music teachers about how to change something or implement something?

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:48

Oh my gosh, so many, so many. And they're not weird, per se; they've been fascinating. I've experienced, you know, singing from the "hoo ha."

Julie Mclsaac 45:00

Okay.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:00

And I'm not quite sure, like, "Am I sucking air up? Am I engaging my pelvic floor?" I don't really know what that command actually means physically – like, what's being sought after. I've, you know, been told to walk "tits up," which I always think is a funny one, I enjoyed that. Because there's no question about what is being looked for in that moment; it's so crass, it's memorable, and it's goofy, and it's fun. They're looking at my core as more of a balance ball, or my core is a corset. There's been a lot of them. How about you?

Julie Mclsaac 45:41

Well, I found myself thinking more about how when I'm working with singers or actors in a rehearsal, when something happens that feels successful – that feels like it's really close to that result that we're going, for that moment that we're trying to build together – as soon as possible. I try to connect with the person and go, "Okay, how did that feel? What did you do to get there? What was the process? What did you do?" because I'm aware of the fact that we're building things in rehearsal but we want to then be able to do that on multiple evenings of performance, right? We want to create something that's repeatable. So, to try to get them to feel what that felt like, and then to articulate what was that process that they did to create that result? Because I think we can't really repeat result but we can repeat the process that got us there.

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:22

Right. Well, yeah, you're building muscle memory...

Julie Mclsaac 46:25

Right, yeah!

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:26

...and if you're building muscle memory, it's much easier to build it by saying, "How did you feel in that moment? What did you do to make it happen?" and doing it in a timely way, immediately after, rather than just letting it go and being, like, "Oh, yeah! Like what you did 10 minutes ago – what did you do there? That really worked." And it really speaks to what Krisztina was saying about her, like, having that moment of stage fright when she was in the straitjacket.

Julie Mclsaac 46:56

Right! And then they were kicking in?

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:59

Yeah. And, like, your body just has to go...

Julie Mclsaac 47:02

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:03

...and not let that burst of adrenaline take over and compromise the physicality of your singing.

Julie Mclsaac 47:10

Mm hmm. Yeah. The other thing that I'm really thinking about that was shared with us was how training can be as much about "undoing" as it is about "doing," and that, particularly when people are shifting between trainers and teachers or if they're working with different stage directors or different conductors, and what's asked of them that sometimes they're having to stop doing something that they've been trained to do or are used to doing.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:35

Yeah, that's been a lot of my training; it has been a lot of, like, "Let's undo the things... This was a good start but this particular technique might not be right for your voice type."

Julie Mclsaac 47:47

Right.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:48

"Let's unlearn that technique and work in something that is better for your..." – or my – "...physicality,"

Julie Mclsaac 47:57

What were your thoughts, Robyn, on the idea of instead of thinking of it as "breath support," moving to this idea of "breath energy," something that's more fluid?

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:05

That was so great because it took the power of the breath... it changed the power of the breath – I was going to say, "Took it away," but it doesn't; the breath as being this static thing that fuels... It's more than a fuel; it is everything. And when you're looking at more of a dynamic breath, it's part of a whole package...

Julie Mclsaac 48:29

A whole thing.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:30

Yeah. And that takes a lot of the pressure off.

Julie Mclsaac 48:36

Yeah! I feel like I'm in the state of wonder because I was aware of the fact to which my larger muscle groups are able to do things because they're what gets me up and down the stairs, and you know, those other things that I do on a daily basis, or if I'm at the gym, for example. But to bring our attention to all the presence of those smaller muscles and bones that have this great capacity to affect change, and to help us create sound – I'm just living in the wonder of all that and it feels really empowering in terms of bringing our attention to what our bodies are capable of doing, rather than how our bodies look, for example,

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:11

You know, we've got our muscles that allow us to walk, and then we've got our muscles that allow us to breathe, and our muscles that allow us to digest, and our hearts to beat, and they don't all work on the exact same system, which is a really good thing.

Julie Mclsaac 49:25

Yeah, yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:27

But it can also be difficult because those big muscles want to do all the work.

Julie Mclsaac 49:33

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:34

And when you put all the focus on them, it can obscure what feedback you do get from those little tiny, really important synergistic and supporting muscles.

Julie Mclsaac 49:47

Yeah. And what are your thoughts, Robyn, on the... We started to talk about autonomy, too, in terms of our bodies and the connection between the training that people receive and the sense of autonomy that they feel over their own bodies and instruments or not.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:00

I was really struck when Jen was speaking. I started singing when I was 25, as a means of claiming my body, of reclaiming my body; I always thought I had a hideous voice, turns out it was just enormous. Definitely can use some tweaking, needs more training. But it wasn't that my voice was bad, but I had said, "Okay, I'm going to do this: I'm going to learn how to sing because I'm going to claim my voice," and, on some level, isn't that what we're all doing? We're all claiming our voices in our ways. How we use our bodies is really reflective of how we take up space.

Julie Mclsaac 50:46

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:47

How we move through the world – whether we're moving through all hunched up and, like, crushed by the weight of the world or tits up, chest open, like, very confident shoulders down and back – I was really wanting to take a session with Jen by the end of our conversation. But I've done the Alexander Technique and I expect it's a very similar sensation.

Julie Mclsaac 51:13

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:13

Not necessarily the approach but the end result, where you feel like you've got a whole new body.

Julie Mclsaac 51:21

Yeah,

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:22

I used to walk out of my lessons where I just had my teacher moving my head a little bit, she would just hold my head and move it, or take my arm and move it. And then "Let's stand up and sit down from a chair repeatedly." And it sounds so absurd but I'd walk out of there, and I'd feel like I was six feet tall, and I'm just, like, ready to take on the world.

Julie Mclsaac 51:47

Well, and Krisztina was sharing with us how she's still training, like, how she's taking up and learning more about that. And Jen also alluded to the fact that she's learned through having this opportunity to work with the artists and her collaborators at the Ensemble Studio and I'm really struck by "Here we were chatting with two teachers who talked about being learners."

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:05

That teachers can openly and freely admit that they're learning, too; that it's not... you don't reach a place where you are the expert fully. They clearly have more expertise than your average bear, of course, but they don't know everything yet.

Julie McIsaac 52:24

And the question of "Will we ever know it?" So, things have changed over the past 20 years in terms of approaches to singing, and approaches to training, and there might always be more to know, and there might always be a little bit of a mystery to it in terms of how those singers do what they do, and have that impact on us when they perform.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:41

Well, yeah. And we're all evolving together – like, concert halls and opera houses, they're evolving, and how we use our bodies within them is evolving, and vocal pedagogy is evolving. It's never ending and that's really thrilling. Thanks for joining us for Episode 13.

Julie McIsaac 53:10

We love hearing your comments and feedback, and we look forward to hearing your thoughts on what we talked about today. You can tag us on social at @CanadianOpera, or drop us a note at audiences@coc.ca.

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:22

We appreciate all the feedback we've received so far, including your reviews on Apple Podcasts.

Julie McIsaac 53:27

Next time on Key Change: we're exploring connections between opera and space – not outer space but how different opera creators explore levels of scale and immersion in their work.

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:37

We'll be speaking with two special guests: American opera and theatre director Yuval Sharon, and Canadian mezzo-soprano and multidisciplinary artists Debi Wong. Yuval and Debi are both known for their experimental takes on opera production. We'll be talking to them about pushing the boundaries of opera's physical spaces, and exploring the possibilities of virtual reality and site-specific opera.

Julie McIsaac 54:00

Both of these guests have so many unique creative projects to their name. I can't wait.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:05

Me, too! Take care everyone. 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 McIsaac 54:26

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 54:40

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

Julie Mclsaac 54:47

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

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:54

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