

Key Change Episode 8: Opera & Activism — Part II

SPEAKERS

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser, Julie Mclsaac, 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. Welcome, everybody, to our episode eight.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:23

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

Julie Mclsaac 00:26

...and Julie Mclsaac. Before we get started, we wanted to say thank you to everyone who sent in messages for our special episode on March 30th, which we'll devote to questions from you, our listeners.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:37

It's not too late to get your questions in, so feel free to send us an email or voice message to audiences@coc.ca

Julie Mclsaac 00:46

You can find some instructions for how to send us a voice message at coc.ca/KeyChange. And we really can't wait to hear from you, we're really excited to hear all your questions.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:57

Now, on to the episode.

Julie Mclsaac 00:59

Last time we spoke with musicologist Rena Roussin about opera's role in activism. For this episode we're speaking with Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser about the many areas of his work as both a conductor and a disruptor.

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:12

Daniel is currently Artist-in-Residence and Community Ambassador at Symphony Nova Scotia, and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's Principal Education Conductor & Community Ambassador.

Julie Mclsaac 01:24

You might have seen the documentary "Disruptor Conductor", which highlights his efforts to extend the boundaries of orchestral music through concerts for neurodiverse, prison, and other marginalized populations.

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:35

He's passionate about community engagement and we had a really interesting chat. We found many connections between his work and what we explored with Rena in terms of opera as a force for change.

Julie Mclsaac 01:45

Yeah, I've been thinking a lot about what Rena shared with us that originally she was studying political science, and then she happened across music history and musicology and that became her passion and her way of exerting influence in the world and creating social change. And I'm really excited Daniel, as a working artist - as a conductor out there in communities - I'm really excited to hear how he uses that as his avenue. So we'll get into all of that as well. Here we go! Daniel, such a treat to have you here with us today. Welcome to the podcast. Daniel, starting off, if you could share with us your journey to becoming a conductor: how did you find your way into this life you lead now?

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 02:32

My journey to conducting started at Marion Carson Elementary School in grade two with Leonor Pauls, my grade two music teacher, who taught us conducting patterns. She just taught us two patterns, taught us the four patterns. Okay, okay. Let that simmer, two years [later]. grade four Mrs. Kostenuk – shoutouts! – Mrs. Kostenuk and I just remember her saying, you know – I can't do her accent but I can, you know, remember this story of her saying, "you know, after a hard day's work. I just like to go home and listen to some Chopin." And I didn't go home and listen to Chopin but that planted a seed that, "Oh, this is something you can do." I learned to Chopin [piece] this morning. That planted the seed, you know. Then when I was in grade six, I had to decide which school I was going to go to for grade seven. A band came from the junior high school and they played for us, and I think it was probably the first time I encountered live music in that way, and I just remember the feeling of watching – they played Superman with John Williams. Thank you, John. Thank you, John Williams, for encouraging, you know, inspiring me. It's crazy a group of probably grade nine kids played Superman for this kid who had never heard anything like that before and I was hooked. But that was how... Really, it wasn't a conducting journey; it was a musical journey, a journey in music that started with education. Why do I say that, why do I harp on that? It's because it was about access; I wouldn't be here if I didn't have the access. I wouldn't be here if, when I wanted to play tuba in high school, there wasn't a tuba there waiting for me. Coming from, at that point a single-parent family. really affordable rate, I had access, I was allowed to take my tuba on the bus to practice at school. had a really great school music program. So if this sounds, like, you know, "Oh, he's just advertising music education!" it's because he is!

Julie Mclsaac 05:02

Absolutely, yeah!

Robyn Grant-Moran 05:04

That's how I got started, too: if it weren't accessible, I never would have gotten into music either.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 05:11

Absolutely. So I'm cognitively aware and I constantly like to do very bold... not even bold... overt advertisements for the power of music education and the difference it made in my life. You know, not every kid can, you know, play first clarinet or be, you know, principal second violin and, for them, there's football and baseball; there's other things for those people. But music is very important. So it's about access. Now to being a conductor specifically, right: I knew that I wanted to be a conductor probably at age 13. I remember doing a presentation for my French teacher, Madame Wilson – who was small but fiery, I remember her well – and I did a project on Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* – *idée fixe*! And then at the end of that little [project], I did some conducting for the class, you know. People rolled their eyes and who's rolling their eyes now?! Just maybe the orchestra occasionally. But, um, you know, I did music education. I taught for 10 years, I taught for 10 years but I always had this struggle inside of me of "Do I do professional music or do I do educational music?" Because I was, like, you know, I wanted to have an "impact", you know, showing young people the power of music the way that I had experienced it, yet, I also wanted to work at a "high level" with professional musicians. So, while I was teaching, I was almost always doing some sort of professional group 20 per cent of the time and then, at a certain point, I had a conversation with my friend Rod Squance, who's now the Head of Music Department at University of Calgary. He said, "You know, Dan, you're getting to the age where you kind of have to decide." And I started doing auditions and I did for a number of university professorships – or PhD programs, say – but I got the job with Thunder Bay Symphony Orchestra and a little bit of a story with that. You know, teaching is really, really intense and it's, you know... you don't have time to think during the day at all, and that can go on for months and months. And I remember the band concert was scheduled for a Wednesday night and my audition was a Thursday morning in Thunder Bay. and I realized that if I didn't change the date of the band concert – which is a huge thing to do – I would never be able to get out. So, I had to, kind of, rock that boat, move the band concert forward a day, got to the airport at 6:00 for my 8 p.m. flight to Toronto, but it was snowing! Oh, no!

Robyn Grant-Moran 08:07

Of course it was!

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 08:08

Of course it was snowing! But it was three hours delayed, missed my flight into Thunder Bay, ended up sleeping on the ground at Pearson, got two hours of sleep, got into Thunder Bay about 90 minutes before the audition started, rolled into the actual audition 10 minutes late because of flights and stuff like that, and won the audition with some very, very stiff competition – and I say that because they know who they are and they're now also in conducting posted candidates. So Adam Johnson was there and now he's in Montreal – go Adam! – he's doing wonderful things out there. But it was a great thing that happened because, on two hours of sleep, I was able to successfully complete an audition and that gave me so much confidence for everything that came before. And then after that it was Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony, working with ultimate Shylock, Artistic Administrator, and Edwin Outwater, who's my mentor, one of my very, very close friends and then Halifax Symphony, Nova Scotia, working there, and now Toronto and guest conducting, and I was with Washington National Opera this past season, which is wonderful, and San Francisco Symphony for the past six seasons now. And then, you know, I had canceled engagements with Baltimore [Symphony Orchestra] canceled

engaging with Detroit [Symphony Orchestra] because of corona[virus]. But those are all coming back next year and Carnegie [Hall] debut next spring. Something like that, yeah.

Julie Mclsaac 09:31

Very exciting! Can we loop back momentarily to Washington National Opera because we'd love to know about your experience with opera both personally – like, as an audience member, as a music lover – and then professionally, in terms of "Blue", the project you've worked on in Washington.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 09:48

Right. So, musically, I grew up going to a lot [of], you know, the standard musicals, right, and Broadway musicals grew up and that was probably the entryway. And then I remember not seeing as much opera growing up, and even in my music career. Just, like, specific moments, one of which was this Puccini's Tosca, which I vividly recall just being blown away by when I saw it as a youth in Calgary. And then in my training, right, a lot of it has been... you do a lot of opera excerpts as a, you know, orchestral conductor – you're constantly doing overtures; all the big Rossini overtures...

Julie Mclsaac 11:22

Right.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 11:23

...the big Italian opera overtures all the time, and some French as well, too. And the Washington National Opera is, to date, my biggest involvement with opera. You know, rombro we're always doing opera scene scene. Here in Kitchener we did [Die] Fledermaus, which was wonderful, being the cover conductor... Assistant Conductor for that. The Washington National Opera experience, that's been sort of the whole point. That's been the real highlight, one of my career highlights, being chosen to be the cover conductor for that. So, that opera – the opera Blue by Jeanine Tesori and libretto by Tazewell Thompson – then knowing that I was going to be a black member of an all black cast in an opera that was about a black police officer whose son is shot by another police officer. So, directly addressing race issues – musically, in Washington, DC, the year before a presidential election – I knew was going to be a very, very intense time, I knew was going to be a time of deep thoughtful reflection, and I was not disappointed: we get into a rehearsal and we finish a scene, for example, where, you know, not even the scene where the mom is coming to grips with the death of The Son, but just a scene where, for example, The Son is talking to The Father at the end of Act One, and he's talking to The Father about all the injustices that black people have had to suffer – and not even just black people, just in terms of class – and you get through that scene and, musically, because of what Tesori has done, it's so compelling and it's so powerful that you need a break emotionally and physically. And I don't know what happened but I must have gotten through the end of one of them, and one of the cast members came to me and he just said, "Dan, just spend some time with it and let it sink in and let it do its thing to you. Don't fight it." That's what he said, "Don't fight it." So this was an opera and it was at once more than an opera. You know, Kenneth Kellogg, he sings the role of a father in that opera and he's the bass. It's impossible for Kenneth to sing that role and have his son die – Aaron Crouch, his stage son die – without thinking about his actual son, right? And we know that gun violence is still very real – I mean, we know this is still happening, right? So it was an opera and it was also a personal journey: thinking about my roots, my forebearers, Tazewell Thompson's libretto, it's beautiful, it's stunning, and it

really, really gets you. To be honest, it ended so abruptly because of COVID that we didn't have a chance. The only other person I really talked about this was some members of the cast and John DeMain, who I talk with, you know, every couple of weeks is still. But, you know, but this is the first time I've been able to really talk about my experience with that opera.

Julie Mclsaac 12:42

We're so honoured because we in Canada have not experienced this work yet. So, it was done at Glimmerglass and then headed to Washington National Opera and, sort of, cut short of its life because of COVID. And we just feel so honoured that you're sharing with us about your experiences and about that work because we have yet to receive it. So, it's so beautiful to receive this insight.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 14:58

You know, I so excited about, um... you know, and you have to frame things that people will look at me and look at my career and go, "Oh, conductor!" and then project everything they think of, you know, conductors, mood tears of and dock it onto me and all these things. Great, that's fine! But I'm a prairie boy and I started with 10 years of junior high school teaching, teaching kids, at 7am, to put together clarinets, right? That was the first 10 years. So then you take that person and say, you're going to Washington National Opera next year. That was tremendous, for me – it was huge! And it was opera on a scale that I'd never really, you know... the Kennedy Center, this was, "Oh, I'm so excited!" So I went to Glimmerglass for the premiere, for the very first performance because I wanted the musicians that I was going to be working with at Washington National Opera to know that I was there and that I was committed to the performance, and I was there for the very, very first one – so, I was there for the first one. So, we worked on this incredible, incredible opera in an incredible setting, being able to walk around Washington, DC, taking in everything – just, like, drinking in Washington as much as I could because I knew this would be a special time, walking around the Capitol, walking the Lincoln Monument, walking on the grounds. A couple of days before I left, the blossoms came out – the cherry blossoms – so got to see all of that and just soaked in Washington. So now I see what's happened on the Capitol Building, it impacts you very, very, very deeply. For my colleagues at Washington National Opera, my colleagues at the Kennedy Center, my friend in Washington, the beauty of that place being desecrated in that way, it's very, very painful. You know, there's a couple things that happened: first of all, I haven't spoken much about the music, the music is compelling, the music is tremendous and the way that Tesori is able to match – um, I just it goes down, so smooth – but the way that she's able to match the emotion and pace emotion with text – just the pacing of the whole thing – is incredibly impactful. And it's music that really, really lives... it lives inside of you in a very different way. It's almost a series of tableaux, right, different scenes, starting with The Father who encounters this police squad, and he goes from wearing, I guess you could say just, like, casual street attire to putting on the police uniform. And then you see The Mum come in, she's talking to all of her girlfriends and they're having fun and they're making food. And she's talking about her business and all this. And then she says, "Oh, I'm having a boy child." "You're having a what? You're having a who? No, no, no, no, no, no, you can't have a boy because we know what happens to black boys. We know what happens." And then that's where it starts, is already the child hasn't even been born yet and there's a sense of danger, and Tesori takes us through all that. One of the most impactful scenes is when The Mum, you know, is finally coming to grips with the fact that the child is dead, and the interval that she sings is a minor ninth, and you have to hear it. It's just the setting, you know. It's amazing what we do with music, you know:

intervals, it's just notes but in the right setting, it's just so much more, it's so much more. So, the point is that all of this... you know, we're getting ready for this and we're feeling emotions and we're aware of what's happening socially, we're aware of what's happening politically, we're putting this together and we're feeling in our real lives, and we're feeling it on stage, and we go through all the processes, and then we get to COVID. Things were happening faster in Canada, all my friends were like, "Danny, are you gonna come back, are you gonna come back?" "No, I'm not coming back. I'm with the Washington National Opera and I'm gonna stay for as long as I possibly can!" I have a friend who's a data scientist in Manhattan and he said, "Oh, yeah, you know..." He's like, "Yeah, it's just exponential, Dan. We're going to be at 4,000 cases by this date."

Julie Mclsaac 19:14

Wow.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 19:15

So, I'm sitting with John DeMain at the Old Ebbitt Grill, and we're two days before opening night and the dress rehearsal is the next day, and we're sitting there in the afternoon – we had a rehearsal that morning, and we're just sitting there refreshing – refreshing our email, refreshing Gmail, refreshing Gmail, thanks for the salad, refresh Gmail, order another drink, refresh – and he said, "It's a laugh a minute." We're just watching across the industry meetings are being had, we're just waiting for it. And then it went home that afternoon and then I got the text from Johnny's, like, "We're canceled." So that felt... you know, we've gone through it and I'd conducted a lot of it in the majority of rehearsals, John was doing the dress rehearsals and then this entire process just halted. And it's the halting of an opera but it's also the halting of a message that needs to be stated. You know, because we're talking, at that point in March, about police violence on Black people, we still have not reached May 25th, Best New Opera by the Music Critics Association [of North America] addressing police violence on people of colour. Then we go into lockdown and then we know what happens after that.

Julie Mclsaac 20:30

Yeah, yeah. Do you happen to know, Daniel, in terms of – I know it's so hard to predict what's going to happen but I'm going to throw things over to Robyn in just a moment but – is there anything on the horizon in terms of when this piece might return to the stage and when we might hope to encounter it? Because, like you said, the urgency and the importance of that message has not...

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 20:48

Right. So, online we did a virtual offering of one of the scenes – a bunch of people got together as a cast and put into that - but in terms of mounting the entire production again, I believe there's a holding production this summer but I don't know if it's going ahead yet. But that's just me – you can check that and maybe you can put information for people online.

Julie Mclsaac 21:06

Yeah, we'll make sure we link it in the show notes so they can dig into the production, yeah.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 21:11

But it will it will have a life because...

Julie Mclsaac 21:13

Absolutely.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 21:19

Tazewell Thompson spoke about it saying that it started off as a Black family having a son who was shot by a police officer but then, as they went through refinement and as they went through the process of coming up with a libretto, he decided that actually it should be a police officer who loses his son to police violence against Black people. And that just adds another layer of tension...

Julie Mclsaac 21:48

Yeah.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 21:50

...within the production, and that adds another layer of tension within Kenneth Kellogg, who has to sing it, and also me: I have two cousins who are NYPD, I have two cousins who are NYPD. You know, one of my very close friends in Calgary is a police officer, I have two friends in Kitchener-Waterloo who are police officers, as well, too. They could come to this production and that's one of things I loved about it. I wish that my cousins were able to see it because I know that what *The Father in Blue* feels is what they feel as well, too, even though the police officers, their sons are not immune to that sort of violence, right?

Julie Mclsaac 22:30

Right.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 22:31

And what I think is the achievement is that presciently Tesori and Thompson have created something that both expressed the moment and, unfortunately, foreshadowed...

Julie Mclsaac 22:49

Yeah.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 22:50

...exorbitantly what we were to experience in the next month. As such, it is and will remain a stunning artifact of our time, and I'm glad that that artifact is preserved in as multifaceted a medium as opera.

Julie Mclsaac 23:13

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 23:14

And I'm wondering if it might be even more profound [if it is] performed after George Floyd and all the horrors that did take place? Because a lot of operagoers are not people of colour and so they likely might not have had any emotional connection to the realities of living in North America as a person of

colour, as a man of colour and the risks that are faced and, all of a sudden, the whole world was exposed to things, that they were much more conceptual.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 24:01

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 24:02

And if that might, like, now might be able to really understand the urgency of it in a way that they couldn't before.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 24:11

Right. And what is very special about this opera: at the premiere, there's a woman sitting beside me who is not a woman of colour, and she turned to me and she said, "What I love about this is that it's not just about race; it's about just family and love and people." On the one hand, I was mad; on the other hand, it's also true, right? So, let's talk about the "mad preference": but part of me was, like, "How can you sit through this and have the first thing that you say be that this is accessible to everybody because we all have this experience?", right? But she's also right. You know, it was the moment after everybody's applauding, she was she's excited, we're all excited, so, that's totally fine. But what I think she latched onto was the fact that any mother watching this is going to come away with an appreciation and a love for their child and that you can relate to that – you can relate to The Father, you can relate to The Son who's full of something and vinegar – he's played by Aaron Crouch so wonderfully and is an activist but then ends up getting into deep trouble – and then I think everybody will be able to relate to The Mom. For example, I don't want to give too much away, but there's one scene where The Father and The Son have had a fight, and The Mom – played by Briana Hunter, so beautifully by Briana Hunter – is... she brings peace to the family table. And the way that she does it is just... all moms will recognize it, right? So, here's the thing: it's a story about a family, right? And then another layer: it's a story about a Black family that's involved in law enforcement and police violence. But it's also this beautiful, beautiful opera that I just listened to – I just listened to it because I just love it. I just love it. And maybe, you know, as a final thing about it: that one of the things that was most difficult about the entire thing is that when you are a performer, Alexander Mickelthwate, who was, for a long time, the Music Director of Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, said that "All through the process of preparing and getting ready for a concert, you are sick and then, by the concert, you are healed," right? You have this music living inside of you, you know every moment, [how] everything is going to happen, how you want every phrase... And then the concert, you get to express that. And in the same way that, you know, we take a left step, we take a right step: you breathe in, you breathe out. This process with WNO was a big inhalation and then hold your breath,

Julie Mclsaac 27:07

Right.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 27:07

And it still kind of feels like that.like

Julie Mclsaac 27:11

Right! It's living in you because you haven't had the chance of that exhalation and expression. Wow.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 27:16

I listen to it with the score and I still enjoy it, so, I have been able to exhale, you know, in the weeks of quarantine and lockdown. So, yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 27:27

Well, that actually is a really nice tie-in to the thing I'm really curious about: talking about opera and pertinent stories and personal stories, how do you physically prepare for something like that? Being a conductor is physically demanding: you're standing up in front of people for hours, keeping everything going, moving your body in such a highly coordinated fashion. And there's a difference between performing the canon and performing something that is really deeply personal to you. Was there any ways that you approached it that was different? Or did you approach it in the same way?

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 28:14

So, in terms of the physical approach, conducting has to be from the inside out. So it'd be really easy for a conductor to get up and do a [Wilhelm] Furtwängler impression, right? But the reason that, you know, Furtwängler or Carlos Kleiber, there's always a reason for the way a person moves, the way that they move. And if you don't have that reason underneath, then it's just very empty and orchestras will pick up on that because there's no intent. So, the first thing to do is to have a really good idea of what it should sound like, and that's based on the score. So, that's the same, I think, or roughly the same across opera and concert. You know, for example, for Blue: what should it sound like? Well, when Jeanine Tesori is sitting beside you, Tazewell Thompson's standing right there, and both of the creators [are] in the room – you're working with them – you get a really good idea of, "Oh, when she puts bells there, this is what she wants. Oh, it's not just a scratch; she wants, like, a sheen of sound!" that gives you insight into not just that work, but a lot of the composer's work. Okay, fine. So now you have an idea of what it should sound like; what I am learning – because I'm still a young conductor, in terms of how long I've been doing it, and also hopefully just plain old young – you want to have an imagination of what it could sound like, right? So, I know, like, what could this sound like, and that's the difference between "no one recording, it's good." And the next one is like, "Oh, that is sharp and crisp and I'm really feeling something." And then the next recording where you listen to or performance you listen to it and it's just, like, you're transported. Okay, so what it should sound like, what it could sound like. Then the question to answer your question specifically, "physically", I need to think of, like, "If I know what it should sound like and I have some cool ideas that I think, you know, the orchestra will buy and singers will buy about what it could sound like: what do I need to do physically to encourage that?" So that's where the mental process of "what do I need to move..." Like, "Do I just need to be really clear and small here and let the orchestra and the singers organize themselves around me? Or do I need to be more forceful and really act this out to inspire them?" And that is always a balance, that's always a negotiated dance between leading and saying, "Go here and do this, and more fire, and more of this," and just guiding what they are doing. Because you're always having a conversation with another group of professionals that have a very concise idea about what the music should go like, and sometimes you want to guide that in a certain direction, sometimes you encourage with them, as a group – both the singers and the orchestra themselves – are already doing. Physically, you're doing some stretches, right? I will conduct silently for myself, so, you know, I'll have the score out in front of me – and

sometimes I'll play piano and stuff as well, too – but I will be conducting silently. And I feel when there's a disconnect between my internal intention in my hands. That's a moment where the music is weak inside of me; I go back, study it, sing it, play it, think about it; walking down the street, going down to Rabba's or whatever, grab some, you know, salad, milk, what have you; going over in my head, go for another walk somewhere else, think about how I want this. And I'm not trying to sound, like The Nutty Professor or anything like that but I will be walking down the street and probably there are times where my hands are moving a little bit – I'm thinking, right? Not being training. This is a really interesting thing: I studied a little bit – well, a lot actually – with with Kenneth Kiesler, who's a professor at the University of Michigan, and is a well-renowned conducting teacher at Medomak conducting retreat. And what we would do is, I would be sitting... actually say me and another friend would be sitting on a bed in one of the cabins with our scores out, our other friend would get up and conduct in front of us, right? Silently, right? And what's amazing about this is you can hear the other person's interpretation based on what they're basically doing and, also, if they make a mistake – like, you have to imagine three people in a room, one is conducting, two are looking at the book, looking up at that person, and then suddenly, all three just start laughing, because they realize, "Oh, right, yeah, I missed the second violin" So it's a lot of internal work, it's a lot of thinking and careful physicalization, thinking about what is the relationship of my motion to the sound? What do the musicians need to see from me in order to feel secure and safe to do their best to not be distracted? It's a lot like being an airline pilot: you just want everybody to get home safe, right?

Julie Mclsaac 33:02

Yeah.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 33:02

And when you have a huge production, you've had, you know, two dress rehearsals, the orchestra's seen the music for three days beforehand, the singers [too], you are making sure that everybody is getting the information that they need to do their best job – that's your job.

Robyn Grant-Moran 33:16

That's beautiful. And I imagine, like you described, you're internalizing these muscle memories, these motor patterns so deeply that once you get there, it doesn't matter what you're confronted with you; you just keep going.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 33:36

And has to matter. Yeah, it has to not matter you confronted with because... I'll tell you a little bit about being a cover conductor. So, I was being the cover for John DeMain and, you know, he's probably the world's foremost Porgy and Bess conductor – his recordings with the Houston Grand Opera are of great renown. So, I was there to be the cover conductor but also just to really learn from John, and I had all of his markings, all of his beat patterns in, so, that if anything, you know, God forbid that happened or he had to leave suddenly for whatever reason, I would look to the orchestra as much like John DeMain as possible in terms of beat patterns, right? So, it'd be a seamless transition and they can still do their job. So, if he were unable, for some reason, not to be able to do the job, I can step in and it's seamless. So, that's a big part of the job there.

Robyn Grant-Moran 34:32

So, it sounds like basically, when your cover conducting, that you're not only dealing with your own physicality, but then you're learning the conductor's physicality, so you're ready to slip right in there.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 34:47

Yes.

Robyn Grant-Moran 34:48

And so how do you negotiate that fight?

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 34:50

Right.

Robyn Grant-Moran 34:51

How do you go about it?

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 34:53

How you go about it is thinking about why you're doing that job, and the reason you're doing that job is to make sure that, in case have emergency, the orchestra and the cast are able to perform musically and well to the best of their ability. So, what do they need to see from me? If they have had, you know, 17 rehearsals, right, where these four bars were in a 4/4 [time signature] pattern, and now you come in Mr. Cover conductor and you're "You know what: I've always felt that this should be in 2/4," and suddenly you get in 2/4, that one moment of indecision can be enough to throw somebody off. And when you have a singer who's trying to scoot across stage, right, to keep the door from slamming – because if the door slams that means the other person is going to be locked out or whatever – they don't need that; what they need is consistency, reliability, and "solidity". (Am I making up tons of words for this podcast? I don't know. Okay, good!) They just need reliability from you and they need to see that. So, it's about developing trust as a cover conductor in the rehearsals, that when it was my turn to conduct them – you know, if John would leave and now I'm conducting – that I'm not throwing curveballs. You don't want to throw curveballs, right? Because everybody's mental attention needs to be devoted to the art, right? And you don't want to have them, like, having reserved mental capacity or thinking, "What's the conductor gonna do," right? But the thing is once you are in that framework of safety, now you can create.

Julie Mclsaac 36:30

Yeah!

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 36:30

Now you can express things. Now you can say, "Okay, now let's go... Okay, more, you know, I'd like a little more for now you can insert a little bit of individuality, but only once you've done the actual job first, right? I don't know if that makes sense. The thing is it's not "either/or"; it's a balance, right? And, of course, if I were to conduct it, it would be slightly different, you know. Especially, you know, my position there is to make sure that people are able to perform and able to enjoy a performance, audience loves it, in case of emergency.

Julie Mclsaac 37:01

Mm hmm. Daniel, we're such admirers of your commitment to community engagement and we'd love to have you speak a little bit about that, and the way you're helping to break down those barriers that have existed between classical music and marginalized communities, people who haven't felt included. So, could you tell us about how that first manifested in you and how it's taking shape in your work presently?

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 37:23

I think the way that first manifested is probably due to the fact that, growing up, I would listen to all different sorts of music and in different contexts. So, you know, visiting my family in Brooklyn, and I'd be hearing Handel's Messiah, you know, and then walk down Flatbush, and then come back home, and I'll see, you know, all the rivers on right. So, the mixing of those contexts me, I'm not doing anything that's different from anything in my regular life, right? So, bringing... you know, taking our music to... I don't say "bringing" because the difference in "bringing" and "taking" is very different, right? Bringing is like, "We are offering you the Beethoven. Isn't this wonderful what we're giving you?" "Wow, no, no, unless with the hand that's offering the other hand, you know, you're gonna take that hand back and receive the Mighty Sparrow from Trinidad, right? Or, you know... Anyways. So, taking music to different communities, I think a lot of it is about access: there are people who would love to hear our music but just are unable to. You know, parents who have kids who are on the spectrum, for example, they have so much to think about just getting their kids to a concert, how much work that takes – it's the least that we can do, not because we're offering them anything special but because of what they're doing that's actually special. Let's give them some Beethoven, let's give them some Puccini – it's really great music and it can help them as they're doing their important work, you know. Orchestral music all over the place, so, it's more about just recognizing that fact, recognizing there are other musics that have a wonderful tradition. I think Beethoven is really, really special and really, really important, and I think his story and his music and what he did with harmony, what he did with rhythm... not rhythm – what he did with, like, motivic development, I think it's really important and brought, too. It's my poverty that I cannot speak to the same sorts of figures in Korean music, or Indian music, or the music of Brazil – that's my loss.

Julie Mclsaac 39:26

Yeah.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 39:27

So, when people are talking about orchestral music... and I think what's frustrating people is that we haven't made space necessarily or haven't recognized the beauty and the value in other musics as much. So, about recognizing that: you know, I was raised on Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms and it will always be that way for me. That I love. I love that. I love that music. I love that music. I love Mozart, I love Haydn, I love... I love Tesori, and I love [Phillip] Glass, and I love [Luciano] Berio, and I love the Second Viennese School, right? And I also love Calypso, and I also love reggae, and I also have Sufjan Stevens, and I love orchestra and I love teaching, you know, grade sevens [students] as well, too, and I love high school students, and working with them and seeing lights come on, you know? So, for me,

maybe it's just a stubborn refusal to do one thing, but really it is doing one thing: it's trying to do music to the absolute best of my ability and breaking down any barriers to anybody who wants to enjoy it.

Julie Mclsaac 40:42

In the documentary, "Disruptor Conductor", which people can stream on CBC Gem. It's available now, it's great – do check it out! But there's something that you said that's really stayed with me, it's that: "anyone who feels other needs to be included."

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 40:56

Yeah.

Julie Mclsaac 40:57

And also the moment of inviting those female inmates at the prison to conduct and giving them the opportunity to have that agency and that sense of control – so beautiful, really, really beautiful! Thank you for that work.

Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser 41:11

Okay, thank you! That was the whole point, that was the entire point of that concert, was the concert at Grand Valley women's institution [Institution for Women], in Kitchener, and the whole point of that concert was to allow these women, who are the inmates of that institution, to feel like they were in charge of the experience and they had the power. So, we come in as, "We're gonna play Beethoven!" And, by the end, they were rehearsing the quartet, they were conducting the quartet, there was even a moment in it that they didn't show where, in order for them to effectively rehearse, the orchestra has to not know the piece. So, I got the quartet's permission, put a very, relatively easy Haydn minuet – that quartet had never seen before – into manila envelopes, handed it out, got the quartet to sight read it, and then I had them play it, and I had the women actually say, "No, do it faster. No, we want more viola." And it was all about subverting the power and letting them have that moment – that was the whole point of that. And just another quick thing on the documentary: there's the Thorgy Thor concert, and Thorgy Thor is a star from RuPaul's Drag Race, and one thing that I remember when we did that concert with Nova Scotia – which is a pioneer orchestra in terms of taking risks on this sort of stuff – when Thorgy Thor came out on stage, it is the loudest I've ever heard an orchestral audience cheer and yell, such that in all of that, I think, six or seven subsequent performances, I've had to warn orchestras, "For the first piece, you have your earplugs in!" Why do they scream so loud? Because, for the first time, you have people – usually most of the audience is under the age of 35 – that are seeing a space that has traditionally been fairly conservative, where now they are allowed to be who they are in that space, right? That's inclusion: bring yourself to work, bring yourself to that space, and that's the power of that concert. Yes, it's great music and, yes, it's Thorgy Thor, who is an incredible star – drag queens work like nothing else – but what it's about is having an audience of people who felt they were on the outside of an institution be able to say, "Hey, I can be here as well, too," while they're going, "Oh, you know, I actually kind of like this music as well, too." That's what it's about and that's why the screams and the cheers were so loud – it's a cathartic moment. And that's what we can do at that moment and that's what happens with, for example, Blue, you know? There's a reason why I can look at that opera and say, "Wow, this is an opera about a Black police officer whose son is killed by another Black police officer, and I wish my cousins, who are NYPD, would be able to come and see this because they would

love it, because they would recognize themselves in the blackness of the characters on stage, and any Black person who goes to see that opera will recognize themselves on stage; there are things that they will know from our culture from the inside out, they will recognize on stage." And that is a beautiful thing. That's not only diversity, having the Black faces on the stage; it's also inclusion in terms of the way the opera is done, the way that it portrays us in authentic and real way from inside out.

Julie Mclsaac 44:22

Well, I'm so honored that Daniel spent that time with us – so inspiring! He's so passionate both, like, in his work and talking about his work. So, really grateful that he spent that time with us.

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:32

Yeah, it was so exciting to talk to him. He's an effervescent human being.

Julie Mclsaac 44:37

Absolutely. What were some of the standouts for you in terms of what he shared with us about his experiences – which are so vast, he's done all sorts of different work in different communities?

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:46

Um, let's start with Blue. I feel like we, kind of, need to go through them step-by-step because there is so much to talk about. When he was talking about speaking with an audience member who wasn't a person of colour. who had just heard Blue and she had said that she "totally understands" – I'm paraphrasing inaccurately but I think that kind of gets it across that she she understood – the experience and he was very, like, "No, no, you don't get it, and just the timing of Blue, for her to be able to get that when people of colour have known about police brutality and violence within the police for decades. But it's something that people who aren't of colour don't engage with necessarily, so it's easily not seen.

Julie Mclsaac 45:42

What Rena shared about The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed is that these texts and stories are now being interwoven into these musical forms of storytelling, where those stories haven't necessarily been present. So, there's this interesting coming-together of communities who have known for a very long time that this is happening; this has been such a deep part of their reality, and it's encountering this other group of people, these other communities, who have a very different lived experience, who've had a much more privileged lived experience in many ways.

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:13

Yeah, and that opera can be used to share these stories in a way that is a lot safer, because you are somewhat detached, where you're watching what's happening on a stage rather than arguing at a town hall, or clanking away on your computer. Like, there is that level of detachment to allow for conversation and understanding in a very different way.

Julie Mclsaac 46:44

I'm so excited to know what the future life of Blue is going to be, beyond the times that we're living through, given that it was so short of its opening night and then thinking maybe, when it returns, not

only will it returned to that original production that was meant to happen, hopefully, but that it will be seen in many cities and many communities across North America, and potentially internationally as well. It's really exciting!

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:08

Yeah, like, people getting to see stories that they're unfamiliar with, and people getting to see stories that they're all too familiar with, represented together on stage – it's a thrilling idea of, like, that sharing! I love that, Robyn. It's, like, what happens when a story is told simultaneously to a group of people who are... half of them are familiar and the other half are completely unfamiliar and have never encountered it before. What's that magic that happens in that moment or the power of that encounter? Hmm. Very cool. Hopefully we'll have more of that once this pandemic has calmed down. And I feel that that leads really nicely into his work with Disruptor Conductor, the documentary.

Julie Mclsaac 47:58

Yeah, everything that's documented there is so cool. (Just a big shout out to the makers of the documentary and encouragement to our listeners to check it out.) Because they showcase Daniel working in these different communities and it's really lovely to see the breadth of his practice there. And what really struck me was his work in the prison system, with these inmates – I found that very powerful.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:20

Me, too. Yeah, because, like, a lot of prisoners are victims themselves and don't have agency by virtue of the fact that they're in prison – that takes away agency – but the circumstance that led them to have no agency was beginning with a lack of agency in having been victimized. So, to have this platform where conducting is giving a form of agency, it's saying, "Let's work together and you can react to my voice or hands."

Julie Mclsaac 49:00

Yeah, because I'm thinking about that young person who never had an opportunity to offer something, whether it's through words or through a physical action and to have that responded to positively; they've never had the experience of being able to change their circumstances, be able to impact their surroundings. And, so, then they become an adult who's never had that experience and, so, to imagine what that feels [like] to be handed that baton and say, "You're gonna stand in front of this group of people and they're going to follow your every gesture, whatever your vision is, for this moment, they are going to help you realize it, they're going to make it a reality." Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:36

Yeah. You know, I'm going to cite sort of what's popular in the culture right now around, you know, "just fake it till you make it" and, you know, "Oh, it's all within you. You have to believe it in yourself." But if you can't imagine what that is, how can you "fake it till you make it"? How can you believe it in yourself if you don't know what it is?

Julie Mclsaac 50:04

Right.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:04

So, have a safe avenue to be given some agency to learn that "Oh, people can be on my side, I can be on other people's side, there is some level of safety" is incredibly profound.

Julie Mclsaac 50:20

Yeah. And the physical nature of it as well. So, when we think about conducting, I know there's these scientific studies that have been done, where there's a feedback loop between like our emotions and how we feel and, like, the physical positioning of our bodies, with the hypothesis being – or, I think it's been proven – that if I stand in, like, a power pose for two minutes, something's going to happen hormonally and chemically in my body that makes me feel good – and, likewise, if someone wins a race, victory! You know, they do that! I get curious about, like, the biochemistry of this person having the opportunity to conduct and like move their arms and take that space, and perhaps that's a physical positioning they never had the experience of previously.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:58

Yeah, well, and that's, like, how we move really does reflect how we are. And I'm not saying this to plug myself because I am gradually stepping out of massage therapy, but that has been my day job for many years. When people are depressed, they physically they shrink in. When they might be fine but something's causing them to physically shrink in they will become depressed. Anxiety has a totally different texture and sometimes just moving your body differently is a way to break those... We talked about muscle memory but it's not a memory so much as it's a motor pattern.

Julie Mclsaac 51:46

Yeah. And now I'm thinking about how Daniel had that experience as a young man – so early in his young music education, someone said, "Hey, I think you might like conducting, here's a baton, come stand in front of the class, come stand in front of the group," and how that set him off on a whole journey. So especially when people are young or vulnerable for any reason, to give them that experience of having that agency, having that control and that joyful power over a circumstance and artistic expression.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:13

Could you imagine being, like, 13 years old and your music teacher saying, "Give it a try?"

Julie Mclsaac 52:22

Oh, amazing! Also, I think about conducting – like, I've never conducted – but you kind of have to forget yourself in a way because your job is to empower and inspire this whole group that's in front of you to do their best work together and succeed together.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:37

It's a weird balancing act because you have to fully be in control of yourself and fully surrender to being part of this entity that is an orchestra.

Julie Mclsaac 52:52

Yeah. So, here's the question, Robyn: if you could get up there with that baton in your hand – let's say we could snap our fingers and have all that skill and training that it would take for us to conduct a combined full orchestra – what would you want to conduct? What would you want to exert that agency over?

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:06

So many things. So many things. But I think I'd start – it's ambitious – with Der Rosenkavalier.

Julie Mclsaac 53:15

Aim high – I love it!

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:18

How about you?

Julie Mclsaac 53:19

For me, it would be Salome. I think that it's really muscular and powerful music and, you know, that female character – Teiya Kasahara mentioned this in Episode Three – but that female character and the journey that she goes on, it's wild, and it's powerful, and it's carnal, and it's exciting. So, I think wielding the baton, that crazy timpani at the end – I think it'd be really fun, really, really fun. Robyn, I'm reminded of what you encouraged us to think about when we spoke to Rena about the celebratory aspects of activism and the social commentary because we do get caught up with the tragedies and the victimhood, and it's important to mark the tragedies and be aware of the great suffering that's going on in the world. But you reminded us to be celebratory, too, and to point to the joy.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:05

Right? I mean, these cultures – we say, like, they're different from ours – but we're all humans and we all celebrate, and we need to be celebrating the really wonderful things because it's so easy to get caught up in like, "Oh, why do people really want to honour their Indigenous heritage or their Black heritage when it's all just suffering?" But it's not. And there's so much pride in our cultures and an antidote to a lot of the horrible things out there is that pride and is that celebration,

Julie Mclsaac 54:50

Mm hmm. And humour, too – like, humour, and love, and joy, and that it's all part of it. And again, like, that's what Daniel brought into our experience chatting with him, I think – that energy!

Robyn Grant-Moran 55:00

Oh, yeah. And talking about Thorgy Thor and the "Thorchestra" – like, that is disruption, you know?

Julie Mclsaac 55:07

Yeah. Well, and nothing's as disarming as joy when you least expect it.

Robyn Grant-Moran 55:11

Exactly. And I just I would have loved to have been there to see... And I believe that it happened in Nova Scotia, which just tickles me completely because I remember growing up in Halifax when, you

know... I had a friend who came to school one day with black eyes because he was gay. So, to have that moment of that joy and that pride and Thorgy coming out in her fabulous outfit and with her violin is... it just makes me feel so warm inside. We're curious about your experiences with opera as activism. What do you want to see more of? What's exciting? Let us know on social media or send us an email.

Julie Mclsaac 56:13

And, remember, we'd love it if you'd send us your questions for a special episode on March 30th, where we answer all your burning questions about opera. So, send those our way by March 5th to be included. And, if you'd like some more details, you can visit coc.ca/KeyChange.

Robyn Grant-Moran 56:28

If you're a COC subscriber or member, you have access to exclusive bonus content and extended interviews.

Julie Mclsaac 56:35

Daniel has some really great desert island disc recommendations for you, so, you'll want to watch for that link in your supporter newsletter.

Robyn Grant-Moran 56:42

Next time, we'll be speaking with acclaimed actor, choreographer and director, Michael Greyeyes about his career and connection to opera. You won't want to miss it.

Julie Mclsaac 56:52

Thanks so much for joining us.

Robyn Grant-Moran 56:54

See you next time.