

Key Change Episode 12: Opera & Contemporary Art

SPEAKERS

Ragnar Kjartansson, Julie Mclsaac, Adelina Vlas, 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 00:20

... and Julie Mclsaac.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:23

And welcome to Episode 12 of Key Change – our first podcast of the spring! Today we're looking at Opera and Contemporary Art, and some of the projects where the two collide and intersect.

Julie Mclsaac 00:35

Toronto, as a city, is a phenomenal cultural hub. It's home to so many creators and artistic organizations, and something that's been so great to see – especially during the pandemic – has been the shared sense of solidarity and partnership as all of us, in the arts and culture sector, work to stay connected to our art forms and to our shared communities. And by collaborating with one another, I think we're all learning that we're more alike than we are different.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:59

This episode is, kind of, a perfect example of that. When we were thinking about the idea of opera and contemporary art, the Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson, immediately came to mind. Someone had mentioned this wild-sounding installation that he'd done called "Bliss." It's basically a two-minute excerpt from the finale of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, looped over and over for 12 hours straight!

Julie Mclsaac 01:24

So, for anyone who thinks that opera's are long – leading to a potentially very frustrating or potentially exquisite transformative experience, depending on your perspective – Ragnar's work takes things to a whole new level.

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:36

In doing our research, we realized that Ragnar actually has one of his works currently on display at the Art Gallery of Ontario [AGO]. And this got us thinking, "Here's the chance for us to learn more about the

world of contemporary art, but also for art gallery fans to learn more about opera." So, in addition to speaking with Ragnar, we also connected with Adelina Vlas, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art.

Julie Mclsaac 01:58

We'll hear from Ragnar later in this episode – and you definitely don't want to miss it; It's so fun and fascinating – but first up: Adelina is Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Before that, she held curatorial positions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Canada. She was involved in bringing the massively popular "Infinity Mirrors" by Yayoi Kusama to Toronto in 2018. And her area of specialty is postwar contemporary art with a focus on conceptual and time-based media practices. Adelina, we're thrilled to have you here with us today and we're really excited to talk to you about your curatorial work. But, just before we jump into that, we'd love to know: how has opera been present or how did it first come into your life?

Adelina Vlas 02:51

Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be talking to you today and opera is something that's been in my life from a very young age. I grew up in communist Romania in the 80s, which was one of the harshest decades, under that particular regime. And somehow the censorship bureau thought that opera was not subversive, so we were allowed to experience it. So, it was one of the forms of music that I listened to growing up and learned in school about. So, someone like Giuseppe Verdi was, you know, a household name in Romania and we would talk about his opera's as if they were, you know, our own cultural background. So, yeah, it's something I grew up with and I've experienced almost my entire life.

Julie Mclsaac 03:40

And I'm very curious: with Verdi, was there anything in particular that stood out to you?

Adelina Vlas 03:45

Well, the the large, kind of, ensemble, you know, choir pieces were the most dramatic ones. And I think that, of course, if you think historically at the time, when he was composing that music and the political message, of course, opera was nothing but... worse, right? So, in a way, I like to think about it as cheating the system a little bit, right, as art always has a message and the message might be perceived differently in time, but, yeah, it's always there.

Robyn Grant-Moran 04:40

So, Adelina, can you tell us more about the role of a curator? What does an average day look like for you?

Adelina Vlas 04:46

So, I am a curator of contemporary art and I want to make that distinction because contemporary art means dealing with living artists, or working with living artists and it's very different than working with the ones who have passed on. And something that attracted me to this particular area of work is because I love working with living art, and being part of the moment I live in and being part of the conversations around how the work is made, how the work is displayed. So, a typical day in a large museum, like the Art Gallery of Ontario, might involve a number of things: communications with artists

is one of them; on any given day, I might be talking with an artist in Montreal, or Vancouver, or Paris, or, you know, Buenos Aires depending on what our projects are; and communications with colleagues, and galleries, and constant exchange – it's a really active fields and, internally, we meet to discuss how we realize our projects, how we make acquisitions, how we remain relevant to current conversations and to our community. So, I might be doing, you know, visits to galleries when that's allowed; I might be on the phone; I might be in a meeting; I might be in a gallery; I might be having coffee with a supporter – it's all happening!

Robyn Grant-Moran 06:13

I'm wondering: with COVID has that changed what a day and curation looks like?

Adelina Vlas 06:20

It has and I'll use the example of an exhibition that is currently installed in the galleries. It opened in October, it was originally scheduled for April of 2020. So, when we went in the first lockdown, crates were arriving with works from all over the world, the artist is Haegue Yang, the exhibition is called Emergence. She's Korean but based in Berlin and Seoul. The exhibition, first of all, the works have to stay in crates for months until we were allowed to get back into [the] building and open them and install the exhibition at a slower pace, accounting for the new health protocols, and the artist was never able to come or any of her assistants, and that's highly unusual in contemporary art.

Julie Mclsaac 07:08

I was really drawn to what you were saying, Adelina, about how you work with living artists and how that's an important distinction where some of your colleagues might be working with artworks that have been created by people have come before us, and people who have passed, and what the corollaries are in opera practice because a lot of our grand works are created by composers who are no longer with us, but we have contemporary creation happening as well. Now your specialty at the AGO, as we understand it, is postwar contemporary art, especially conceptual and time-based media practices. Now, the idea of a piece being "time-locked" certainly sets it apart from a lot of other work in galleries. What do you think that dimension adds for the viewer?

Adelina Vlas 07:46

Duration is part of any artistic experience: you can take a second, two seconds, a minute to look at a painting, or you can take an hour to look at a painting. So, you define how long you want to spend with a work of art. I think performative arts, like opera, have a different kind of temporality and duration, and require a different kind of time investment. But, as it applies to contemporary art, we define time-based media by the medium itself. So, if it's a file that's on a carrier, it needs playback device, and they need a display device, right? So, it could be a USB, you need to plug it into a computer and a drive, and then you need a projector. So, those are the technical terms that define time-based media. It's really interesting because when artists turn to technology – it happened in the 60s, right, when technology became more easily available, and portable, and easy to use – and since, artists have struggled themselves with "How much can they ask of the viewer, especially in the museum context" right? And we're very much aware of that demand on the viewer to spend time with the work, that it's a predetermined time, right? We usually put on our labels the duration [of the piece], so visitors know like, "Okay, this – if you want to experience it from beginning to the end – is 30 minutes or is 15 minutes."

And I think that artists, at some point, figure out that the ideal length is like 8-10 minutes. So, we started seeing a lot of work under 10 minutes. It's dependent on the content, too, right. And I think with... we'll be talking about Ragnar and, in his case, he's someone who has been interested in duration in a very particular way, right? And I think that what he's built into his work from the beginning is this repetition. So, repetition is already part of the structure he's working with. So, he repeats usually have a 1-2-3 minute musical segment again and again, again, and sometimes, for as long as an hour or more. But the idea is that you can walk in, you can be there for a few minutes, and you, kind of, understand. And if you really get pulled into the work you can spend as long as you want. But that repetition is almost like the looping device; it connects to the medium itself, when we project something, it's always looping.

Robyn Grant-Moran 10:18

How does the role of narrative change between a more traditional piece of art or even opera, and some of the conceptual or time-based works that you specialize in?

Adelina Vlas 10:29

Someone like Michael Snow, right, who is, you know... the subject of his films are film in film itself, and it's extremely conceptual, and there is no narrative, right? It's completely broken down and taken away from the medium. So, yeah, it has to be in the context of each individual practice. But narrative, again, if you think of a historic painting or, you know, large-scale painting usually involves some kind of narrative, and it's static, right? You have to use your imagination to activate that image, and that scene, and create the narrative or think of the narrative that it belongs to. And I think that time-based media or artists who work with film and video use, of course, a temporality as a way of telling a story, and there are artists who work in more of a documentary style. But others still choose to just play with the conventions of the medium – and temporality being one of them – to create a different sense of narrative, or different sense of experience altogether.

Julie McIsaac 11:40

Are there particular movements or trends in terms of narrative or doing away with narrative that you're particularly drawn to

Adelina Vlas 11:48

Someone like Hito Steyerl, who's a German artist who actually had an exhibition at the AGO in 2019 called "This Is the Future," is someone who's trained as a filmmaker and she's a writer, and she's thinking about the medium but she's also very much interested on how we, as subjects of 21st century, are bombarded with information, with imagery, with all kinds of visuals that we're not even able to tell what's real, what's not real, and what is being done to us when that information is presented to us. So, her work is very much about creating almost documentary-style videos, but they incorporate elements of almost, like, surrealism, and performances, and music and humour. But they all tie together in a very interesting way, and you're left questioning your own agency in the world, and your own perception of reality. So, I find the practice like that extremely interesting. I've known Ragnar's work for almost 15 years: we're the same generation, so, as I was becoming a curator, he was becoming an artist. And I kept running into his work in different places around the world. So, I've seen it develop and get to the point where he's that now and *Death Is Elsewhere* was made in 2019. It was always such a strong experience that it made me think that we should buy it for the AGO, and it's now in our collection. And

one of the elements that's very fascinating is how he created an all-surrounding environment; it's a panoramic, you're surrounded by this landscape. It makes you think of painting, it makes you think of sculpture, it makes you think of very traditional forms of art but they are expressed in this very contemporary format of moving image.

Julie Mclsaac 12:56

Knowing that Ragnar currently has an exhibit on display at the AGO called "Death Is Elsewhere," what do you find most striking about Ragnar's work? And what do you find particularly impactful about the way that he plays and incorporates music?

Adelina Vlas 14:04

He knows how to select exactly the type of music, or the style of music, that has the maximum impact for what he is trying to say. And I like to call that, kind of, "the emotional temperature" of the style, right? So, he might use opera in one instance, or he might use, you know, a very mournful song in another, or a love ballad like he's using "Death is Elsewhere." And his relationship with music extends also to his collaborations with his musician friends, and Death Is Elsewhere also has that aspect very present as we have those two sets of musician twins paired together, and they compose the song together with Ragnar. So, music is at the core of how he develops a project or a work of art.

Robyn Grant-Moran 14:58

I'd like to just connect your work to opera for a moment, and both the AGO and the COC share roots in a predominantly European classical and romantic art form, with ties to particular socio-economic classes, but we're seeing both companies working to make sure they do better to represent Toronto and make space welcoming for as many people as possible. So, how do you think that we can strive to do better?

Adelina Vlas 15:28

This is a very good question and I agree with you that our institutions are very much rooted in Eurocentric traditions. At the AGO, I think we're working on multiple fronts to address this question, and one of the initiatives that came out in 2019 was a major [accessibility] initiative, introducing low-cost membership of \$35 a year – it's called an Annual Pass – and also allowing people under the age of 25 to come and access the museum for free. And what this program has allowed us to learn about our audiences is really amazing because we learned that people between 18 and 25 really took advantage of this offer and came in to experience what the AGO had to offer. And we also learned that they were much more diverse than our traditional audience is. And it got us thinking that, you know, "We we need to do better to reflect that, and we need to change the way we program, the way we collect, and the way we represent the communities we're serving."

Robyn Grant-Moran 16:41

And thinking back to the [Yayoi] Kusama exhibition, that the only thing that was really restrictive about it was actually getting a ticket because there was so much interest. Like, it was an incredibly diverse group of people there and, like, nothing like I've ever seen at the AGO. I'm wondering if that was expected?

Adelina Vlas 17:06

Oh, yes and no. I worked on that exhibition, I was the in-house curator for the Yayoi Kusama Infinity Mirrors, so, I'm very close to how we thought about it in advance and really what the reality taught us. And we knew from the venues who organized the show, and who displayed it before it got to Toronto, that we didn't have to worry about an audience, that people will come, that already Kusama had such a reputation. And it's interesting how her way of creating those reflecting environments in a way predating social media, but very much, you know, talking about this narcissistic instinct that has been exacerbated by social media – you know, this kind of constant infinite reflection of ourselves – so, we weren't surprised, we knew that it will have a large audience appeal, and that, yeah, our problem will be how to get more people than we could physically accommodate to see it, and that was the challenge. And if I may add something that I think ties us back to Ragnar, in a way: I always thought about those Infinity Mirrors... I mean, they are so, you know, photogenic – if I may call them that – and so social media-friendly, and everyone wanted their picture in that reflection. But when I was giving tours and when I was talking about those rooms – particularly the dark ones, the ones that were dark with the light reflections – they're all very much about, kind of, death and energy... you know, how she thinks about us being just dots of energy and the dots... that's why it's such an important motif for her. So, to think about that in connection with Ragnar's piece that clearly states in its title, "Death," and brings that up to our minds, I find that kind of an interesting contrast.

Julie McIsaac 19:01

What I find myself thinking about is opera as a reflective surface, in the sense that we have these works that have been with us for centuries, and every time we mount them or explore them a new, it's a surface on which we can see ourselves reflected, or it tells us something about our contemporary experience. In terms of that lived experience that we're going through right now, we know that our city is still in this "on again, off again" state of lockdown, so, we thought we'd ask: what and where is your favorite piece of public art in Toronto right now?

Adelina Vlas 19:30

Well, Toronto is so rich with public arts. I think we're really lucky and, you know, it's one of the options we have to still encounter art and interact with art. And there are a few works of art that come to mind, and mostly because they are part of my everyday – or at least they were when I was commuting and I was out in the world – but they still are because they're in my neighborhood, or at least close to where I live. And one of them is called "Three Points Where Two Lines Meet" and it's this, kind of, playful, colourful metal structure built by two artists that work as a collective, Daniel Young and Christian Giroux, and it's at the intersection of Bathurst [Street] and Vaughan Road, just south of St. Clair [Avenue] West. And the reason why I love it so much is because most of the time I pass it – either on my bike, or in a car, or on a bus – and when I'm with my son, who's five years old, I look at how it activates his imagination, and we can talk for, like, a long time about what he sees in it, what he thinks it's about, and I think that that's the sign of a successful public art project: is when it gets your imagination going and you can think of what you see in it versus what the artist intended. So, I like those open-ended projects. And another project like this that I love – and it used to be close to where I lived before in Parkdale – it's a work by Luis Jacob, and it's called "Spirits of the Grotto," and it's in the Dufferin Railway Underpass at Queen [Street] and Dufferin [Street], and there are those sets of faces and eyes that are, kind of, presented on both sides of the Underpass as you go under and they, kind of,

follow you and move with you, and it's, again, like, artists finding ways to respond to a site so successfully; it's a gift to the city, right? Because they become landmarks and they are there as part of your everyday.

Robyn Grant-Moran 21:49

I was really happy that Adelina talked about the art of the Dufferin Underpass because geography and environment is so important. I love the idea of her son. Like, I know I stop and every time I see it, I've never gotten bored of it. I always stop and think about it. And I love the idea of her son reflecting on what it means, too.

Julie Mclsaac 22:12

Well, I'm so grateful that you asked her the question about "What makes successful public art?" So, to ruminate on that for a little bit because I think art is subjective, but for us to give some energy to "What is it that is successful? What is it that makes it a meaningful contribution to the landscape of the city?" And, like you said, does it make people stop and, like, ignite their imaginations and their interpretations of it? Or, does it open up new ways of seeing or for them to connect with their reality? Also really intrigued when Adelina shared with us that growing up in communist Romania, opera was allowed because it wasn't seen as something that was subversive; it was very safe for...

Robyn Grant-Moran 22:47

Right? Isn't that wild?

Julie Mclsaac 22:50

Well, yeah, especially thinking back to Episode Seven with Rena [Roussin], who pointed out to us throughout opera's history all these ways in which it has been subversive and has upset the status quo. And, of course, someone that Adelina has worked with quite a lot is Ragnar Kjartansson, a performance and video artist living and working in Reykjavik. His work has been featured at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Barbican Centre in London, and the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, among other places. And you could see his work is all-encompassing: his videos, performances, drawings, and paintings rely heavily on references to film, music, visual culture, and literature. He's even produced some opera including a war-themed piece called "Krieg."

Robyn Grant-Moran 23:31

Ragnar's current exhibition at the AGO is called Death Is Elsewhere. It consists of seven video screens that surround the viewer. On the screens, two sets of twins stand across from each other, in the vast Icelandic landscape. They're repeating a song in unison over and over without beginning or end.

Julie Mclsaac 23:49

We thought we'd start by asking Ragnar how music first came into his life.

Ragnar Kjartansson 24:01

Music came into my life very much in the form of... I mean, there was this idea of music in our basement, which was a singer called Engel Lund. She was a she was a folk singer, born [in] the year 1900, but she sang, like, kind of, [a] lieder folk singer – she sang lieder and then, like, songs from all

over the world. And she was Danish, her parents were Danish (Iceland was a colony of Denmark and her parents were at the pharmacy in Reykjavik and we're, sort of, Danish aristocrats), and she had moved from Iceland when she was 11 and studied singing, and became, sort of, a bar in Germany and in between the two wars. And her repertoire was totally amazing: she sang folk songs from all over the world but mostly Icelandic folk songs and Jewish folk songs. And she would tell all these stories, when the Nazis started, you know, getting power in Germany, she was just like, "Well, I just started my repertoire with the Icelandic songs because they all thought that was, sort of, 'Aryan music,' and then I would just do the Jewish folk songs when the public was warm. So, then, like, some guys in SS uniforms would just forget." You know, because she said the politics were so shallow, which is the brutality of politics, you know. So, for me, like, I realized early on, like, sort of, the political power of music and, like, you know, what it's from, what it means. But then the big, I think, breakthrough in music came when "Amadeus" the movie came out, and I got to see it seven times in the cinema. Like, because it's easy, like, you know, "Can I go to the cinema again to see Amadeus?" It's like, "Yes, it's so cultural. You can."

Julie Mclsaac 26:19

Do you remember what impact the music had on you?

Ragnar Kjartansson 26:22

I think the emotional impact. What I really remember the first time I really discovered music – and the power of music – was, I think, when I heard Chris de Burgh's "Lady in Red" on the radio. I was just, like, "This is so beautiful." Still, when I put it on, I just, kind of, start crying.

Robyn Grant-Moran 26:57

Your exhibition at the AGO, as well as your "Bliss" project, and so many others regularly use repetitive performance elements that can last hours, days, or even weeks. What's the purpose of repetition for you?

Ragnar Kjartansson 27:12

It's a form I started to use very early on. It was almost, like, a form of like drawing – like, "Okay, this is an art form that exists. I will just use this form." I don't ever remember that John Cage line perfectly but John Cage said something like, you know, "Repeat something once, it's interesting; repeat something twice, it's not that interesting." You know, he said, like, "But if you start repeating it more than 10 times, it starts being interesting." You know, I wish I remember[ed] that quote now, but it's just the feeling of that idea. That repetition: there's something weirdly interesting about it – also, like, spiritual about it. It's just, like, sort of, repetition is the basics of all religion; we touch higher ground with just repeating stuff.

Robyn Grant-Moran 27:58

I was watching a video of Bliss yesterday and it had a very chant-like quality to it, even though it was the very opulent music of Mozart.

Ragnar Kjartansson 28:11

Yeah, yeah! It's also interesting with Bliss: like, this really gorgeous music that's a part of a narrative structure – an opera. Like, when you just repeat the process, again, again, it starts being, like, white

noise; it starts to sound, kind of, Buddhist or Gregorian, or, you know. It's just like, the music slowly just goes out of it.

Julie Mclsaac 28:51

What is it that you hope the listeners or the viewers of your work might take away through that encounter with the repetition?

Ragnar Kjartansson 28:59

I think it's almost rude to, like, wish something from the people that come and see my works. So, I have I really have no expectations, and no... It's just you put the work out there and hope that, you know, it's not gonna destroy people's day, because I think every interpretation is totally right: you can just see it and this is like, "Oh, this is annoying," and you just, like, leave, and that makes perfect sense – I mean, it's just, like, it's annoying to see something repeated, and I think that's an interesting interpretation of it. For me also, like, repetition is so much about, like... it gives things a painterly quality: you know, that they're just repeating this, I'm not missing anything, you know. It's just, like, you see a painting in a museum and it's like, "Yep, there's the painting and it shows this and I can look at it for an hour and something happens, or I can just glance at it and I get it also." The hour or the class: they both have the same impact.

Julie Mclsaac 30:10

Right. No, I've never thought of it in that way before but whereas, like you say, with a painting, I could stay there for a moment or I could stay there for hours. By virtue of having the the artwork – or the music on repetition – we have that same opportunity to encounter it for a moment or longer.

Ragnar Kjartansson 30:23

I think that has, sort of, been the grand idea in these works: to, like, turn something that is not active into something painterly or sculptural.

Julie Mclsaac 30:33

People level that at opera as well in terms of the repetition, with a da capo aria or something that's very long and durational, that some people might find it annoying but other people find increasing meaning as they encounter the work over time.

Ragnar Kjartansson 30:46

Yeah, absolutely. And talking about repetition in opera, and that's also really interesting that, like, you know, most operatic theatres in the world are just, like, always doing the same operas again and again.

Robyn Grant-Moran 31:02

There's just more space between them!

Ragnar Kjartansson 31:04

Yeah, there's more space between them! And you think about, you know, if there wasn't COVID, you would think like, "How many performances are there of The Marriage of Figaro tonight, you know, in the

world?" These, kind of, "entertaining song and dance plays" that were made back in the day, that they have become this, like, classical ritual of Western culture is sort of interesting.

Robyn Grant-Moran 31:28

And you developed an opera for yourself, "Krieg." Fun fact, for the listeners who are also big alt, indie rock fans: the opera was composed by Kjartan Sveinsson, the former keyboardist for the band Sigur Rós. I understand your frequent collaborators. So, why did you guys choose opera as the medium?

Ragnar Kjartansson 31:50

We actually have made two operas: Krieg, and another one called The Explosive Sonics of Divinity. We choose opera because I just like the word "opera;" it just means "a piece." You know, I realized, like, how open the word opera was when I was in Italy, you know, as a tourist. And, so, like, you know, some guy's fixing a road, it says, like, "Opera." You know, it's just, like, "This opera will be on 'til Wednesday." So, like everything, you just doing stuff, that means "opera." And I found that, so, like, it opened up the idea of opera so much because, like, we look at it as this very fixed things. Like Krieg is an opera where there is just, like, dramatic music and the soldier dying, like, for an hour; it's just, like, a guy dying. It's just super dramatic music and just an actor just doing [imitates screaming]. It's just an actor acting is heart out and, like, super dramatic music. And that's also why I really love to collaborate with Kjartan because he... I mean, those who know his work with Sigur Rós, it's very, like, very emotional music he makes. And, you know, like, although you get, like, this stupid idea, like, you know, like, "Can you make really ridiculously dramatic music when somebody is just dying on the stage for an hour?" He goes, like, "Yes, I will do it," and he actually does it with heart and, like, all the way. It is really heartbreaking music; it's not like, you know, he just sort of... He has a very good sense of humour, but he knows, like, you know, you just have to take the humour out of it so it works. So, it becomes weird and interesting.

Julie McIsaac 34:01

The next question we were interested in asking you, Ragnar, was about pieces that don't have narrative at their centre but yet have this emotional capacity to create this reaction in us, and it feels like that's exactly what you're talking about: is that despite the fact that story-wise there isn't an evolution, it's just this one moment. Could you talk to us a little bit more about that?

Ragnar Kjartansson 34:24

I really like this idea of high points, you know. Like, I mean, because, for example, I had myself seen many versions of The Marriage of Figaro just to wait for that, you know, final moment. You go through the whole opera, fall asleep two times. (And, I mean, I always fall asleep but opera and I think that's a healthy thing. I mean, I think it's the art Goddess is whispering to you while you're sleeping up an opera.) When you just take the high points and just, like, turn them into white noise, you take the emotion out of the most emotional, but it is always emotional; there's some weird thing that happens that I find interesting. You know, looking at rehearsals in the theatre, like, when actors were rehearsing the same scene over and over again, and was always so curious [about] what was happening before it, and what was happening after it. And then you saw the actual production, then it was, like, narrative and this thing was happening before it, this thing after it. I remember it was always such a disappointment, you know: I hadn't imagined anything, it was just this idea that something was before and something after, and I had no idea what it was. It was mysterious. And then, like, when the

narrative structure of the play came, I was like, "Oh, yeah, this is it." And narrative structures are always, sort of, the same. So, you know, talking about all the kinds of repetition: it's, like, we always tell the same stories and, I mean, it's unlimited. It's depressing when you ask a human being, like, "Do anything you can within imagination." You just go, like, "Dragons, space..."

Julie Mclsaac 36:07

Beginning, middle, end.

Robyn Grant-Moran 36:09

Hero's journey.

Ragnar Kjartansson 36:11

Yeah, totally!

Julie Mclsaac 36:12

Yeah.

Ragnar Kjartansson 36:14

Yeah.

Julie Mclsaac 36:14

I'm even thinking about how our lives are repetition, in the sense of "Go to sleep. Wake up. Eat some food. Brush your teeth. See some people."

Ragnar Kjartansson 36:22

Yeah. We look so much for security in repetition. And, you know, like, that's also the nice thing about, like, these COVID times: like, I've started to, like, live a repetitive life because, like, my life was just, like, always traveling, like, constant, like, mayhem. But now it's, like, I feel like my soul is settling; it's like the dust settling. Like, now I live a repetitive life, and I, sort of, know what's gonna happen tomorrow. It's just like, ahhh!

Julie Mclsaac 36:52

I, too, have witnessed that in the rehearsal hall, where the actors will do the scene over and over and over again, and there is a magic that emerges or it creates its own meaningful experience. And sometimes I then, too, miss what happens in rehearsal when we actually get to a production where everything goes one to the next to the next to the next.

Ragnar Kjartansson 37:11

I think that was the ground idea of, like, why I started doing this stuff, like...

Robyn Grant-Moran 37:16

Music from a whole range of genres factor so heavily into your art. And I'm thinking about some of your other works here, like "God" and "A Lot of Sorrow." In the first your singing with an orchestra, and in the

second you have the band The National singing their song "Sorrow" over and over for six hours! Why is music so successful at eliciting the experience you're after?

Ragnar Kjartansson 37:40

There is something ridiculously great about music and it's, like... It goes back to the "Lady in Red," you know, like, it's just, you know, like, time stops and, like, you know, everything else just disappears. That's what great music does, you know, be it Beethoven or Megan Thee Stallion, or, you know, like... It's just something takes you and, you know, kicks you in the guts. It's totally not based on genre. I was just listening to "The Winner Takes It All" [by] ABBA yesterday for the 9,000,000th time, and it's just, like, "This song is so ridiculously good." It's so brutal and it's so multi-layered. It's just a, you know, it's mega-heroic ballad about the one who is defeated. And, you know, in the background story that, like, he wrote it for her when they were divorcing, it's just, ahhh! It's just so hurtful. It just, like, kills my heart every time when I hear it. And also just, like, makes me so happy because it's a gorgeous art piece. Just put on this ABBA song when you're doing the dishes, and it just takes you and you start crying while you're doing the dishes. I mean, it's in the background but it's more powerful than coffee.

Robyn Grant-Moran 39:24

As a musician yourself, do you see any difference between the way you engage with music in a gallery setting versus how you experienced it on-stage or in a concert hall?

Ragnar Kjartansson 39:35

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think that that's why I started working with music and the visual art form: was that you have, somehow, this free space; you can suddenly do anything you want with music. I mean, I remember it, like, when being in a band there was, like... I mean, the music world, it's a very limited world, in a way. I mean, it's just, like, you write something, you rehearse it, and you perform it, record it, and you tour it, maybe make a video. It's, like, everything is, like, the form is very precise. I mean, you know it, like, from even opera, it's very precise. "No, no, no, this is not an opera. This is not this. This is not the company song. This is, like..." All this really, like, boring stuff around this beautiful thing that music is. And I just realized, because I think I went into art school because, like, I realized that visual art is the sort of ultimate freedom. I think Marcel Duchamp, with his urinal [Fountain], gave everybody that came after him this total freedom – like, you can do whatever you want and say it's an art piece. And, you know, there is no way no one can say anything. I mean, people can just say it's "good" or "bad," but, you know, of course... There's freedom of the art space. Or even the art idea – that I really like! So, that's why I really like working with music in a, kind of, art space function rather than, you know, the classical concert function. But I mean, like, playing with a band in a concert, or, like... it's just fantastic. But I mean, it's a very different thing.

Julie Mclsaac 41:25

What have you encountered from the performers who've been involved in that repetitive performance? What [are] some of the discoveries or reactions that they've had in being the ones to perform that repetition?

Ragnar Kjartansson 41:36

For most of the time, I've heard, you know, very positive reactions. And, you know, understandably some people are just, like, "I can't." You know, that's also why I always say, like, you know, if you feel this is ridiculous and you just can't do it, I really understand that; you should just, like, say, "I can't do it," and leave. But those who have done it usually have a very positive experience from it. That's also why I started, you know, asking other people to do these kinds of performances, because I did them myself first – started doing, like, these kind of long, durational performances alone – and I just realized it was so nice. It's just like, "Ah!" It's just, sort of, [a] get away from reality. You're just in some performance for 12 hours and there's nothing that can touch you. Because our lives are a narrative structure, like, "I'm doing this now," then "I'm doing that now" and it's "What should I do in between?" But when you're just, like, in something for hours and hours, there's, like, you know... it's sort of freedom for the mind.

Julie Mclsaac 42:43

What are some of your standout memories from having performed this kind of work yourself?

Ragnar Kjartansson 42:49

When we filmed Bliss in L.A., like, almost two years ago now. I just remember, like, we had been for 11 hours, and I was just, like, "Oh, no, it's about to end," you know. It's just, like, a weird feeling: you're just, like, "I love to be drenched in this music." But then you're, at the same time, like, "Oh, wow, it's gonna be fun to end and, like, have a drink. Oh!" Well, I think one of my most memorable experiences was, like, I was doing a performance in Norway, where I was lying in a basement. Yeah, there was a trapdoor that was open, you saw me performing underneath that trapdoor, and I was just, like, lying there for a week, you know, like "ahh!" singing something like that for a week. A group of teenagers came to see it and they were, like, looking at me, you know, through the trapdoor, like, down on me – like, I saw these faces of teenagers – and then there was this beautiful moment when they just started [imitates horking and spitting].

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:01

I was going to ask if that positioning brought out some of the worst in people!

Ragnar Kjartansson 44:08

And I just remember, like, "You fucking assholes," but, like [I also thought], "Who is the asshole? I totally understand, you know: this is so pretentious, me lying here, doing, like, 'ahh!' some sound." Like, I felt I deserved it and I was, like... It was a really interesting feeling.

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:27

It's just hitting me as we discussed, like, how paradoxical your work really is. And I don't know that I felt that before coming into this interview; I was just fascinated by it but didn't have a sense of that. Like, you're creating permanence out of something impermanent, but then that's giving you impermanence. Is that something you're trying to express? Like, sort of the paradox of existence, really.

Ragnar Kjartansson 44:59

Yeah, I think so. Yes, I think so, Robyn.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:01

Yes, yes.

Julie Mclsaac 45:08

Well, that was super fun! Like, he's such a playful energy. Like, I really loved his humour and his appreciation of beauty in whatever form it comes.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:19

Right? There's no sense of guilty pleasure when he's talking about music. Like he embraces ABBA, and Chris de Burgh as openly as he embraces more classic works.

Julie Mclsaac 45:33

And there was no sense of hierarchical preference or positioning of these different styles of music.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:38

Right. Like, I have this stereotype about contemporary artists – I don't know if you do, too – but I find because contemporary artist is so cerebral, that I expect the artist to maybe be snobby or to have a very structured hierarchy. And it was just such a joy to have that stereotype for me completely dismantled by Ragnar.

Julie Mclsaac 46:07

Well, and I'm always just afraid that I'm not going to get it; that I'm not going to have the education or the wisdom to understand what they're putting forward. And yet, with Ragnar, it felt like he's so open and inclusive of whatever response the audience might bring to their experience. His idea of equanimity and being okay with whatever they offer: like, "If you find it annoying, that's fine! If you love it, that's great, too!"

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:30

Which is an incredibly healthy attitude to have towards your own art creation. I wish I could have that!

Julie Mclsaac 46:38

I get the sense that what he does is deeply considered, it's thought through, it's intentional, it's specific, and yet there doesn't seem to be this sense of attachment to the result.

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:47

Right. It's more just... it's the process. I got the sense that a positive response is a bonus; that really the joy is creating. Should we all be so blessed to have that kind of attitude towards creation.

Julie Mclsaac 47:03

Yeah! To, like, work really hard at what we do and yet have this freedom in the sense of non-attachment – not grasping at this one solitary response. When I think about, like, the myriad of audience reactions that could come to his work. I'm thinking about John Cage, who he mentioned, with the idea that John Cage created these containers, these experiments, wherein whatever sound was created – by the audience, by a bird flying overhead – became part of the performance. And, so, now when I reflect on

Ragnar's work, I also think about all the ways that the audience might react, and how that becomes part of the performance or part of the overall entity,

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:37

Thinking of "Bliss," where it is a snippet of Mozart's work being played over and over again for 12 hours: he stayed the whole time but I'm sure many of the audience members came and went, and that that would become the sounds of people going and sitting down, and getting up and leaving, and wrestling through papers, putting their bags down – all the sounds that accompany getting comfortable watching something, then becomes part of Bliss itself.

Julie Mclsaac 48:11

How the singers in the orchestra and the conductor are dealing with the fact that they're performing this over and over again, that to me would become part of the experience, too, that I would find really interesting, in terms of fatigue, in terms of thirst in terms of physical exhaustion.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:25

To bring it back to the "zen" idea: it's almost like it becomes a cone that gets repeated over and over again...

Julie Mclsaac 48:33

Yeah, yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:34

...where the artists then find different meaning and different interpretations. When you repeat something and the freedom that that brings up, the freedom of repetition, like you, Julie, you were saying, in the rehearsal hall.

Julie Mclsaac 48:48

Yeah. And I was just thinking about that, actually, in the sense that sometimes I give it as the exercise to the performers. Say, "There's this little snippet that we're working on, maybe it's a two-minute scene, maybe it's a bit longer, we're going to do it four times in a row, we're not going to talk about it in between. You're going to perform it or practice it, rehearse it, and then once you get to the end of it, just go back to the beginning and do it again." So, they loop it three or four times, just to allow them that time to live in it, and to explore different choices, because sometimes we get bogged down when we stop and talk and talk about things all the time. It somehow, like... it puts the brakes on a creative process on the, sort of, flow that can be really useful. So, I'll encourage them to use that repetition in rehearsal to see what it yields, to see what it reveals.

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:28

When I've had to do that as an artist, it creates so much freedom because you get so married to your ideas, and then with repetition, you divorce yourself from them, almost unwittingly – like, it's just a thing that happens...

Julie Mclsaac 49:49

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:50

...that that all gets stripped away.

Julie Mclsaac 49:52

Well, Robyn, I'm curious about, like, your own experiences with repetition and duration, like, as an audience member or as a performer.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:00

We talked about the Kusama exhibit and that you had two minutes per room, and I am kicking myself now for not asking Adelina this when we had the chance: was the two minutes purely for time consideration to make sure they got the masses through, or was that the intention of the exhibit...

Julie Mclsaac 50:25

Oh, interesting!

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:26

...on a non-practical level?

Julie Mclsaac 50:29

Right. Had the artist determined two minutes that they feel the audience should spend, or was it logistical?

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:35

Exactly. And there were some of those rooms that I just wanted to stay in forever. By limiting to two minutes, it completely forced me to absorb them and perceive them in a way that I don't think I would have if I didn't have that constraint put on me, and I was just trying to ignore everybody taking selfies because I wanted to just absorb it. And I probably sound like I'm trying to virtue signal but it was just how I chose to want to experience that moment. The duration, I think, played heavily into that choice, where if I had three minutes, four minutes, even, maybe I would have taken selfies. How about you?

Julie Mclsaac 51:23

Well, I certainly found myself envying when Ragnar was talking about the liberation that comes – in the fact that he can just, like, release into it and not have to think about anything else other than that repeated performance that he's participating in – I found myself thinking back to the discovery I made, sort of, having trained in school and, as a young artist, everything felt so precious; you felt, like, you had this one chance to get it right or you desperately wanted to get it right. Whereas, as I got older and I had more chances to do things repeatedly – like, to do 100 performances of the same show – there you get a lot less precious, and the repetition can be something that's really healthy, and you explore something a little different each time but you don't grasp as tightly to each one because you know that it's part of this repeated process, and that you can discover different nuance and subtlety every time.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:12

Basically, with repetition, there's that freedom but he was also trying to make something that's ephemeral permanent. In doing so, in creating a sort of permanence for the audience members, it creates an impermanence and a freedom for the performers. And I love that paradox there.

Julie Mclsaac 52:34

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:35

I thought that was so fascinating.

Julie Mclsaac 52:37

Well, and speaking of "impermanent permanence," if we take a step back and consider opera as a whole... like, let's think about opera as durational art: like, the idea that for centuries now, we've been all participating in this long-standing durational performance in the sense that we repeatedly staged the same works over and over again, and we return to them and hear them performed.

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:01

And each production is, sort of, that freedom to explore a little bit differently that the repetition provides.

Julie Mclsaac 53:11

I find myself thinking about what if an opera company decided, "We're going to stage the same work – so, for our six mainstage shows, if we're thinking of the COC model – we're only going to do 'The Elixir of Love'" – completely random choice – "but each production is going to be different; it's gonna be the same singer, same orchestra, same conductor, but it's gonna be six different productions of the same work. Like, six different concepts, six different sets of costumes and sets. But that same group of artists is going to do it over the course of an entire season." Like, it's completely weird and I don't suggest it as a business model.

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:44

No, yeah. No, I can't imagine many audience members really getting behind that – I totally would! Maybe a different production but maybe not, because there's a whole bunch of fun things you can do with [The] Elixir of Love. But, yeah, turning the opera company into really overt performance art...

Julie Mclsaac 54:09

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:10

...contemporary performance are rather than opera.

Julie Mclsaac 54:14

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:15

That's a really cool, fun idea – conceptually, anyway!

Julie Mclsaac 54:20

And then even in opera in its traditional usage, or its traditional experience, it is durational performance art, too – like, Wagner: people who go to attend The Ring [Cycle]...

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:30

Right?

Julie Mclsaac 54:30

...and they're there for a weekend, or they're there for a week, or a longer period of time and they're, like, those devotees to be there in that ritual way to participate.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:39

Like, I remember the Four Seasons Centre when it opened that was... I didn't go on vacation, I didn't go visit my family; my vacation was going to the COC and watching The Ring Cycle. The Ring Cycle in and of itself is a, kind of, durational piece, and then the reproductions of The Ring Cycle is a, kind of, durational piece that's been happening for over 100 years – for almost 200. Like, it's mind boggling!

Julie Mclsaac 55:11

And when I attend a Wagner opera – whether I'm seeing it in a video format or live in an opera house – I think I go through all stages in the sense of there's moments where I get annoyed, there's moments where I go, like, "Oh, this plot isn't moving quickly enough," but then I'm completely overcome by the music, and you feel this sense of, like, proud completion, and it's also musically really satisfying in terms of, you know, those melodies and those harmonies being drawn out for that resolution. But I go through all these different relationships to the work throughout those hours and hours.

Robyn Grant-Moran 55:41

I have to confess: like Ragnar, I go through a period of "I've just fallen asleep for a few minutes," and that that's all part of the experience: "I'm gonna fall asleep; I'm going to get frustrated; my butt's gonna get sore; I'm going to transcend and experience God, creator, other some greater power."

Julie Mclsaac 56:09

One of my big takeaways from chatting with Ragnar and Adelina is the fact that both of them have opera as part of their creative lives, or it's something they've attended, it's something they've experienced, and yet, their work goes far beyond that: they have this, like, really thriving artistic curatorial practice that touches on opera, but has a lot more to it. And I love that: I love how opera can be something you're super passionate about, but it can also be something that you have this passing acquaintance with, in that sense of, like, "Oh, yeah, I know her. We hang out sometimes."

Robyn Grant-Moran 56:35

Yeah, it's no more or less valid: your relationship is your relationship, and it's so equally valid.

Julie Mclsaac 56:45

I agree.

Robyn Grant-Moran 56:46

And so to take a really high emotional point out of an opera and loop it, you get to write your own before and after to set it in, which I think is just fascinating.

Julie Mclsaac 57:04

Yeah, no, this whole chat has been so great and it reminds me that, as different arts organizations here in the city [the AGO and COC], I wouldn't want to think of us as vying for audiences or for this one scarce place in the city. We're all working together, and we're all pouring water into that well, collaborating together and, you know, supporting one another because ultimately, I think we all want the same thing, which is to have this vibrant urban life where everyone feels connected to art, and are empowered to dream, and to imagine that before and that after that you mentioned, Robyn.

Robyn Grant-Moran 57:43

Thanks for joining us for Episode 12.

Julie Mclsaac 57:46

We'd love to hear your questions or feedback or even ideas for future episodes. Either tag us on social @CanadianOpera, or email us at audiences@coc.ca. You can also send us a voice memo and there's instructions for how to do that at coc.ca/KeyChange.

Robyn Grant-Moran 58:04

We appreciate all the feedback we've received so far and the reviews you've left on Apple Podcasts.

Julie Mclsaac 58:10

Coming up next episode: we're exploring the connection between opera and the body.

Robyn Grant-Moran 58:15

Joining us as guests will be Canadian mezzo-soprano Krisztina Szabó and COC Performance Kinetics Consultant, Jennifer Swan.

Julie Mclsaac 58:24

With both of them, we're really excited to explore how performers engage their breath and bodies during performance, as well as looking at some new holistic ways that artists are being trained for opera performance.

Robyn Grant-Moran 58:36

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

Julie Mclsaac 58:58

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 59:12

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

Julie Mclsaac 59:19

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

Robyn Grant-Moran 59:25

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