

DECLASSIFY

Episode 6: Thinking Critically - the Performance of Story-Telling

Guest: Lolita Emmanuel

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SUMMARY

This week Declassify welcomes pianist, vocalist, music educator and feminist ethnomusicologist, Lolita Emmanuel. Lolita is an Assyrian and Armenian musician, born on Cabrogal land and navigating many worlds. Lolita's experience as a performer spans across venues such as AGNSW and Sydney Opera House, to The Metro Theatre and North Byron Parklands for Splendour in the Grass festival. Her work is actively inspired by her experience as a young woman in stateless diaspora. Guided by the tutelage of Dr. Natalia Andreeva and masterclasses with Armenian pianist Anahit Nercessian, Lolita is particularly drawn to expressions of cultural identity and is strong advocate for the continued preservation and reconstruction of Assyrian, and more broadly, at-risk culture through music. This week's conversation goes through everything from social justice in music, unpacking the notion of performative action and the progressive orchestra and the power of critical thinking.

TRANSCRIPT

Victoria Pham (VP): Hello hello! And we're back for another week of Declassify and this week we have someone that I actually went to music school – the Sydney Conservatorium of Music with - and it's none other than pianist and feminist ethnomusicologist Lolita Emmanuel. Unreservedly, Lolita's one of the coolest people I know so I'm sure this conversation is going to be a wonderfully long one today – she works across genres from being a classically trained pianist all through to working in the realms of Hip Hop, RnB and Soul. Navigating the worlds of ethnomusicology and feminism through her acute critical thinking in the world of Western Classical Music, she is actively inspired by her experiences as a young woman of colour and of stateless diaspora. And here we are to talk about all of this experience and of how to think about change. Thanks for joining me Lolita!

Lolita Emmanuel (LE): Thanks for having me. And cheers for calling me cool, you're cool as well!

VP: Now, I've done this thing with everyone before you, and it's just occurred to me that you're our first under-30 voice of the podcast– yay – so how should I best go about describing your incredibly rich practice? We've had a conversation about this before and I think of you as a performer, which of course is a fraction of your entire practice which encompasses so much...

LE: Well, that's a really good question and actually I do have kind of a thing I say when people ask me this. Yes, I do a lot of things but most of my formal studies have been in performing and more recently in ethnomusicology, and I think I am interested in a lot of things. I'm a singer, I play piano although I don't always want to call myself a classical pianist but I think I just enjoy music.

VP: I mean it's so interesting, because I know you work across several genres and classical music just happens to be one of them. You even did the hip-hop works, I think I was even still in Australia when that happened.

LE: That's right yeah, and I'll mention this. I usually say I'm a pianist, I'm a singer and as a performer I like to do a whole range of things including classical musical, hip-hop, soul, I'm inspired by a lot of those things including Armenian and Assyrian folk music. I've recently started teaching myself the frame drum so I guess that's making me a percussionist now [laughs].

VP: How is it going with the frame drum?

LE: You now, I'm not going to lie, I'm pretty good. Because I think there are a couple of reasons; One, I've always enjoyed drumming – doing hand percussion and Middle Eastern beats and stuff but I think I have a lot of finger independence as a pianist so that makes sense. So, it took me some time to adjust to the positions but a lot of the movements that are required for drumming on a frame drum are already natural to me because I use those kinds of movements on the piano.

VP: That definitely makes sense to me and there are definitely transferrable skills both performance and technical between all these expressions. Given all of your experience and the many, many things you are now pursuing and importantly pursuing together, I have to ask how did you uncover these intersecting points through your studies and a performing musician?

LE: I do a lot of things [laughs] I do a lot of different things, so I grew up learning classical piano and for a long time mainly played classical pieces on the piano. I also am a singer and I love soul and RnB and I am influenced by those musical forms. I was also a backing vocalist for a rapper, so I have experiences within the hip-hop space, and I love the folk music and [generally] the music from my cultural background and I've basically been performing that music from a very young age. And for a long time, I didn't know how to bring all those things together, but I learnt a lot through black feminist theory about how to bring it altogether. In fact, a lot of what I do now is based off what I learnt from black feminist theory, I owe a lot to that. Because what black feminists like bell hooks spoke about or Kimberley Crenshaw – who actually coined the term intersectionality – spoke about was the distinct experience of black womanhood which is: you are not a black man, you are not a white woman, which was often the binary which was produced a lot in society, and so it's that experience of not fitting into one neat pocket that really resonated with me. It was learning about and learning from powerful black women like Nina Simone, for example, and Erykah Badu, it was learning from them that really helped me bring all these things together. I owe a lot to them.

For example, Nina Simone, she doesn't fit into a neat idea of a black woman. She had a classical upbringing in piano although she was rejected from that space. She didn't fit into neat ideas of her appearance, to neat ideas of what a black woman should look like. But what she did which was so powerful was to use the stage as a transformative space, so she was so unique in her musical expression where she drew in lots of musical styles, so, classical music, jazz, gospel, soul, she brought that altogether in her music on stage and that was amazing first of all, musically it was beautiful. But she also used that platform as a way to inject really revolutionary ideas about civil rights, black feminism, and actually second-wave feminist ideas that hadn't even been articulated yet in second-wave feminist movements. So, she was doing all this revolutionary stuff before these popular [second-wave] movements were even aware of them. And so, the way she used the stage as a person who has been pushed to the margins was very transformative and that was a very powerful lesson for me. Again, of course, my experience is very different to hers. I am an Assyrian woman living not in America and she is a black woman who is living in America and was a Civil Rights activist – very different experiences but there are significant lessons that I could learn from her.

VP: She's an amazing figure. A lot of people don't know about her in this way, we see the records, and the jazz and her voice in modern film soundtracks, but a lot of people don't know that she was essentially forced out the classical space – she aspired to be a classical concert pianist and was pushed away from it.

LE: Yeah, that's totally right! There is a story about her when she was young and she was a performer and where she was about to play her recital and her parents walked into the hall and were asked to move to the back of the hall because the white audience members were prioritised to the front, and she refused to play until they had a seat at the front. And as a young [girl], I think she was 12, that was so revolutionary, this needs to be acknowledged. And the things is that she left this incredible legacy behind that was adopted by artists like Lauryn Hill, Erykah Badu, Beyoncé, and they recognise that in their music and actually refer to her as well, but a lot of people don't recognise the incredible work that she did, the revolutionary work that she did.

VP: And amongst many there has been a recently released documentary out about her life and work now called 'What happened, Miss Simone?'" so to anyone interested, please do check that

out. So, coming from this background of the two of us having or now continually exploring our cultural heritage in performance, my questions around your performing where basically, how do you personally program the music you then perform on stage? Or has that changed in the last few years.

LE: That's a really good question. So, I think broadly or generally as a performer I think about these things, and maybe I've grown to think about these things which might be common to a lot of people, to balance a few things. So, I think you need to be able to connect with your repertoire, you need to have a connection with it because that's going to determine your dedication to it in the practice room, that's going to determine the impact of your performance, I think, and also the reaction or the impact that it's going to have on your audience. I also think that it should reflect the world as it is today because importantly, like I'm a strong believer that as performers we are musical communicators. You know? We are storytellers, and so, on the stage we are sending messages to our audiences and we are sending messages to ourselves as well. And so, I think it should reflect the world today, but I didn't realise this for a long time. I didn't understand the significance of this and how this reflects the way I play as a classical performer. And so, now for a bunch of reasons, I've realised that I need to represent a range of musical experiences or musical experiences that are important to me. And so, right now for me, I am really drawn to programming, or listening to, or playing music that tells powerful stories. That tends to be stories about marginalised identities, so at the moment as a pianist it's Assyrian and Armenian music because that's my cultural background.

VP: What's interesting about hearing you talk about this uncovering in a way is that, I also didn't think that I could approach music that way for a really long time. So, I don't know how old you were when you started piano, I was 4. And because that was so young you feel like there is no agency, because of course there isn't. You are taught in a very rigorous sense, you are given repertoire, you are told this *is* classical music and then you play it, even to the point where by the time I was 8, I asked if I could play Beethoven and my piano teacher went "No you aren't old or mature enough, let's wait until you're 20."

LE: [laughs] I've had those too! Totally totally. I think, yeah. I'm sure a lot of people can connect to this and as a pianist, and I'm sure you felt this way as a student learning piano as well, there is this intense focus on the classical music canon when you're learning piano. You know, there are the greats. You've got the Bach, the Beethovens, the Brahms. You know, there is this obsession or an attachment to the classical music canon that is taught to us and normalised, and we don't ask questions like "why are we playing this?" and so it is internalised. So, I think one of the ramifications or the consequences of that is that we start to centre that as "good" or "the only good music" that can exist. Especially in classical music there are a whole range of things that contribute to class issues, or to things that make that music [seem] superior. But I feel like there is another message being sent when we prioritise or emphasise this classical music canon, which is usually represents European musicians or European composers who happen to be dead, white men. And the message that I'm talking about is that the music written by these people written in this tradition is the only music that is worthy of our study, and I think that's very harmful. It's harmful on our growth as musicians, as people connecting to others through music. I think it's really interesting when you're a person of colour and you're playing classical music and you start to internalise that and it affects the way you view music from your own culture. I don't know if that happened to you, but I was definitely affect by it.

adjective I... no, you know what I'm going to be straight. I thought that arts practices in Asian cultures were lesser than because we didn't have a similar structure, we don't write music down

like the idea of notation is a very Western practice, and they're in some ways fixated on the act of notation as some sort of symbol of superiority in the same manner that there is a fixation on writing as a symbol of civilization, but I felt that as well. It felt like because I was trained rigorously in a certain way, that my own culture's musical traditions lacked some kind of complexity which is totally untrue, and a different kind of complexity arising from a different kind of rich tradition with different kinds of harmony, which for example Brahms would be incapable of producing on a keyboard et cetera

LE: Yeah, this is something I've been thinking about a lot recently in my research, especially when I've been researching Orientalism and that binary of the West and the East, and how the West looks upon the East in a condescending way. And this is not only an issue in music, it's an issue all around the world. And maybe we need to catch up a little bit within the musical world in understanding this, but going back to what I was saying about the messages we're sending as musicians, I think this is one of those messages, and we need to be conscious of that and think of ways that we can fight that or diversify that.

VP: And if the two of us are going to go back and think and talk about education, I don't know how you felt when you started at the Con, but I remember when I went there and I was lucky enough to be allowed to do the double degree and I had my other degree which then allowed me to take art history and archaeology alongside my classical music studies. The astounding thing that there was an immediate revelation to me, that there was a lack of critical thinking being taught to us at the Con... as in it being a skill. There were some things, but they weren't critical thinking in the sense that they would be teaching us about how our profession or our artform related to the rest of the contemporary world. It was thinking in a narrow sense that it was centred on things like harmony, and very specific things within music history like Bach's four periods and what it was like during his Leipzig era et cetera et cetera...

LE: Yes, and you know how I feel about this, I feel very strongly about this issue. I like to say that as musicians in institutions and this might be a big issue in institutions and music academies, we are quite inconsistent with our critical thinking. Right? As artists and as musicians, we are meant to be really good at this. And I think we are because we spend hours in a practice room critiquing tone, we spend hours refining sections, we spend hours thinking about the different ways to represent a three-second passage of sound. But for some reason, we cannot transfer that critical thinking to the world around us and other issues that intersect with music. And I think this is linked to a broader issue in that music has been depoliticised in music academies, we disconnect music and art from politics, and I think that we shouldn't do that because I think that's impossible. Everything is political in my view. And that's totally right. There is a lack of critical thought in that aspect and I think that there is perhaps a strategy behind that. I think there is a reason why that doesn't happen and it also contributes to the maintenance of power and hierarchy that exists in institutions. We could talk about this for years, I don't know if you're thinking about the story I told you about the lecture on orientalism?

VP: Yeah.

LE: Yeah, so that was a big one for me. In first year, I remember sitting down in one of my very first lectures and it was one of the slides was on *Orientalism*. And, you know, at that point in my life, I was very aware of Orientalism and that whole kind of concept, and as a woman of colour I was very aware of how women from the east, whether that's South-west Asia or South-east Asia are depicted. So I saw that word and I thought "Yes! Oh my god, we're going to talk

about this! Something's going to be said!" But actually, I was very disappointed. The slide was on musical Orientalism but it wasn't critiqued in the way that, for example, Edward Said talks about Orientalism, or at least it didn't go into the depth that I felt it needed to be examined. And I had a problem with that because there are actual consequences to the representations of the East that are made in Classical Music. There is a history of composers profiting from and exploiting from the East, and in some cases it has been consumed into classical music and assumed that it's a part of classical music. And there's a history, and there are affects to that.

A big part of what I'm looking at in my research within Orientalism is the depiction of music from the Middle East in Classical Music and the way that the new Russian school – so like the Mighty Handful – like Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakov – what they believed was their goal with the Russian School, which was to develop a Russian National sound right? And one of those steps to achieve that goal was musical Orientalism, by drawing on music from the Caucasus, from Persia to the Arab Nations and integrating into their music and basically naming it as Russian. But, you know, there are distinctions to those geographical lands. And so, you know, there's a great part of ethnomusicology and musicology in general which talks about how that was consumed and repeated so much that the rest of the world thought that music that was actually Armenian or North African or Indonesian, well this is mainly in the case of Russian music, but music that is from those regions that I mentioned before – the West started to believe that that was actually Russian Music, but it's not! And so, Orientalism as a practice conflates and erases culture in a way that is very harmful. And these composers' profit from that. So that's why I was very disappointed.

VP: Gosh, was it just a single slide that essentially says – because this is almost always the example we're given – Debussy loves Gamelan.

LE: It was a while ago so I can't remember, but I do remember being disappointed. So the tutorial that came with that lecture that week, we kind of just brushed over that, there was no discussion of that either – so it was brief and consolidated into one slide. But you cannot, you cannot, you need to problematise it.

VP: And because we don't talk about it critically, it continues as a practice. And all we have to do is look at contemporary Australian music from the last ten years and look at how many works and compositions have taken words from Indigenous cultures or transcribed from Indigenous cultures and mixed them, and then put it onto the stage.

LE: It's very harmful, and I really think that those spaces are quite dangerous because they brand themselves and market themselves as progressive or against the status quo but actually they reinforce Orientalism, it's quite sneaky. And I don't think it's critiqued as much as it is in older waves of classical music, so it can be quite dangerous.

VP: I also think that what you mentioned before about music, well classical music specifically, branding itself as apolitical and using that as a mask is partly why we don't have much critical inquiry or analytics when we study music history and musical practices, and think about "actually it's quite important what we choose to represent on stage, because not only are we an artform but we perform, and it's on a stage that's part of our practice."

LE: That's right. And you do tend to find people of colour, you know black musicians, Indigenous musicians who have experience of being pushed to the margin. We tend to be more aware of these things and it's very difficult to communicate that to the people in power who

tend to be white men, or white women. It's very difficult for us to have those conversations because institutional racism and sexism and institutionalised oppression is so deeply rooted that it's very hard to identify sometimes. Because of neutrality, and you're right, it's used as a mask, and we use kind of neutral terms of talk about our music, you know, like music theory, music skills, Bachelor of Music. We use that as a mask to appear to be inclusive or diverse, but actually, if you look a little closer there's an implicit message that's being sent out. It's Bachelor of Music but actually it's Bachelor of *Western Art Music*. It's music theory but actually it's *Western Art, Tonal Music Theory*, as in tonal music theory – it's used as a mask. So it can make it very difficult to have these conversations, and we need to understand... Actually, this is also why I have a big problem on diversity and inclusion and over-emphasis on this. Because by over-emphasising this, we neglect the larger issues, larger structures in institutionalised racism, we neglect that. And over time diversity and inclusion attempts become limited or limiting. You know, because it's like diverse to whom? You know, inclusive to what extent?

And you know, there is this concept that is spoken about by an incredible music theorist called Philip Ewell, and he talks about this thing called the 'White Racial Frame' and how it is very pervasive in music theory but in music institutions in general. The white racial frame is basically referring to the whiteness of institutions, or maybe broadly the lens through which music is looked at – a white lens. It's something that is also related to white supremacy and how it is very deeply rooted in those music institutions. So, what he's talking about is, it doesn't matter if you inject more money into supporting more people of colour and including composers of colour in your programs or your course curriculums, that does not matter either if you do not interrogate the white racial frame. And another symptom of the white racial frame or white supremacy is neutrality, which is what we were talking about before.

So should I mention the Schenker thing?

VP: Yes, that would be really useful because it doesn't matter where you study, it's one of the things we are all forced to learn – it's Shenker's analysis.

LE: Yeah, Schenkerian analysis. And that kind of forms a big part of music theory and music skills education. I think in the Australian music institutions, it's drawn from Shenkerian theory or Shenkerian-Lite version. So basically, it's a really big part of Phillip Ewell's research. And what he does is he critiques Shenker, Heinrich Shenker, obviously a very prominent music theorist. He critiques the way he is taught in music theory courses and how institutions and academics have kind of sterilised Heinrich Shenker's attitudes about race and sterilised his music theory from his writing about biological racism. He was very, very racist in what he spoke about. So basically, it's this idea about removing or disconnecting every racist thing that racist thing Shenker said and every anti-Semitic thing Shenker said from his music theory. And a lot of academics and scholars defended him by saying "well, they're not relevant actually, it's immaterial and we don't need that to teach his music." But, in fact, and this is a really good point that Phillip Ewell makes, if there is anyone to advocate for the coupling of your attitudes about race or attitudes about the world as an artist or musical theorist or academic, it's Shenker himself. Shenker actually believed in embracing all of those things in his theories. And Phillip Ewell actually presents some really interesting points that Shenker's music reveals about the kind of 'Equality of Tones' and how there are parallels between that [with] the equality of races, and that's link to biological racism and it's really wild. It was an excellent presentation and I will share that with you because I think a lot of people should watch it. He presented his research in a symposium last year, I think we should all have a look at it, but basically what

he's saying is that by sterilising it, by sterilising what Schenker was doing, music institutions are making Schenker look quite innocent and they are stripping the racist legacy of Western art classical music. And what he proposes instead, and he proposes a range of things, is that if we are going to continue to teach Schenker, we must also present his views on race, his racist views and attitudes alongside his musical theories because that's what Schenker would have wanted, and we should allow our students and make assessments for themselves about what they want to do with that information.

INTERMISSION I

VP: For our first intermission, it's also occurred to me that Lolita is our first performer to be on the podcast so it's a delight to say that this is a recording of one of her live performances. Here is an excerpt of Lolita performing *Elegy* by Arno Babadjanian.

Follows a 4-minute excerpt of *Elegy* by Arno Babadjanian

VP: And point about students making their own assessment when presented with information like Schenker is really important. And yet again, is a continuation over an aspect of students having a lack of agency. We don't have these conversations about these quite important musical figures, we don't talk about context beyond general music history, because again we're pushing this idea of classical music being this absolutely truthful representation of human emotion or art, so that the separation between the man and his personal or political views which – it sounds like he made them very public – away from his musical work, which is made out to be unimportant. Whereas, as a general comparative, if we look at other artforms, literature or going to an art gallery, there is always information made readily available in public spaces like galleries that present a whole person, even historical person – the good and the bad. Whereas if we go to a classical music concert and you open a program, what you get is a musicological analysis of the piece being the theme comes here, comes there, but you don't get to know or insight of the mind of the person behind other than this mirage and myth of a tortured artist or a singular genius.

LE: Yeah, but there are other forms of musical expressions that *do* do that. Like hip-hop, and the stories that are told in hip-hop are, it's connected to real-life experiences and it's not just hip-hop. It's a lot of musical expressions around the world but I really think that classical music is a form of musical expression that has sterilised itself so much and I don't think that we should do that. Why would you want to do that?

VP: It needs to be a more of living platform where we can have conversations, start to move on or move from it and work with different people and listen to different kinds of stories. Just as a very simple example, say you go to see a concert. There's such a procedure of getting there, and doing the right things when you're in the hall, sitting the right way, making sure that you clap at the right time, coughing in between movements if you really need to, and it's so rigorous and like a set of protocols in order to feel like you're socially accepted in that environment to even enjoy the music let alone the presentation of the music itself being critically programmed or curated.

LE: Yeah, definitely it's tied to cultural or classist codes. It's tied to controlling the way people act, it's power and it's actually tied to power. Classical music, its foundation is elitist and this is a manifestation of that – like concert etiquette. Just breath, come on just breathe! We're human beings, you know. I'm a big fan of obnoxious dancing at a classical music concert [VP: Me too]. Enjoy and express yourself to the music in the way that you want to express yourself.

VP: Or clap when the soloist does well, the way you would in a jazz concert, but it doesn't really happen in a classical music concert.

LE: Yeah, you know I was watching an Arab orchestra, The National Arab Orchestra, which was based in the US and I was watching a concert and in that orchestra there was a combination of folk instruments like Arab instruments or instruments from South-West Asia, and also Western instruments as well – it was combination of that. And in the performances and there were many solos, and you heard the audience react with sounds, gasps or with joy – and that's... it was so beautiful... that's the space I want to be in. I want to let out a sound when I hear something that I love, and that encourages the musician that's performing and injects life into what you're playing.

VP: And actually, getting to see an emotional response from the audience. Actually, there's another similar performance that I always go back to and I should send it to you if you haven't already seen it, I think it's from 10 years ago, but it's Gustave Dudamel conducting the youth orchestra in South America, the Simon Bolivar Youth Orcehstra and they're playing Mambo from Bernstein's West Side Story, and the entire audience is up and dancing throughout the whole thing and it's the coolest thing ever to see that kind of energy and celebration.

And now a really awkward segway from Bernstein's musical portraying the Peurto Rican community to some questions about ethnomusicology as you are also an ethnomusicologist. Do you think starting to have these conversations, if we use Orientalism as an example that we'll be able to move away from the formula or perpetuating acceptance the way it has been for so long? For example, with Orientalism being acknowledged in the industry or institutions like Conservatoriums and in music history as more of a term with little critique, will institutions being to understand the colume of diversity within people of colour themselves – for example, we get slotted in certains ways or get very specific narratives allotted to us like when I meet a certain patron and they ask about me writing music to reflect upon boat people. Do you think it will begin to progress?

LE: Until we do not interrogate the white racial frame and we do not address white supremacy, I don't think we can get to that point. Because Orientalism and a big part of white supremacy is that it centres the West against everyone else. It doesn't matter where you're from, you're just an *other*. And even as we try to diversify our understanding and learn more about the world outside of the West. I can get it wrong myself, about things about my own culture. And we must unlearn that, and we can unlearn that by understanding how the white racial frame actually permeates everywhere. It can be internalised by people of colour as well, and as an example is that one way we can come to that understanding is by supporting Indigenous people, Indigenous researchers, musicians, composers, performers, everyone. Black musicians, musicians of colour, if we give people with that experience that platform, we can listen to their interpretations.

And also, another thing is that within Indigenous research and this is something I've been learning a lot about and been really excited about because it answers a lot of questions I have,

as an Assyrian person. You know, Assyrians are indigenous to Mesopotamia which is now present-day Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, and you know, we are also displaced and we are transnational as a people, and it's kind of like constant displacement. And what indigenous research can help us understand is how diverse this world is. As an example, even in ethnomusicology which is all about understanding the heterogeneity of music and that "ethnic" music is not one homogenous thing and it's incredibly diverse and we need to understand the nuances of that. Even ethnomusicology can get it wrong, for example, Bela Bartok. He was a massive advocate for folk music and well-known for his "folk-art" fusions and combinations, and he travelled to the Middle East, to North Africa, he explored music from Hungary and the music from Roma people – the people, there is a big demographic and community of Roma people in Hungary. He was also not immune to the white racial frame. He had a very Western idea of culture that was very tied to nationalism and to nations, and the problem with that kind of thinking is that nations often oppress Indigenous people, and that's something I know very well as an Assyrian person. As an Assyrian person from Mesopotamia originally from there, we have constantly been oppressed not only by the West but by Arab nations. And people don't recognise that, people might see oppression as white against non-white but it can also be, there's also oppression within the East of course. So, I think indigenous research can really widen our understanding of oppression as well, so that it's not simply white against the rest of the world.

VP: It also emphasises that what you're talking about is not a historical experience, because that is sometimes used as an excuse to move on, or it's in the past so get over it in order to not talk about these issues, but in reality it happens every day right now, and will continue to.

LE: Yeah, definitely, there is a lot of incredible Indigenous work... actually, people all around the world. Indigenous communities all around the world, there's a lot of amazing work coming out of there, so that's actually what I'm really drawn to at the moment in my research as an ethnomusicologist.

VP: It's also potentially this double frame, in that you and I are both classically trained which is obviously a very Western structure, and we're both studying academia which is also an extremely Western structure. Firstly, I would like to dispel the idea that academic study is in any way a rigorous form of objective analysis because it cannot be objective. For example, you mention that Bartok would not have been necessarily aware that he was viewing culture and other cultures in a certain way, or even ranking them in some manner without being cogniscent. Because that is what academics does like for you first start studying, which for you is ethnomusicology and for me studying archaeology, both disciplines then including an aspect of anthropology which is at its core a study of other cultures – past and present. You are inadvertently taught to think about them in a certain way, or to categorise them in a certain way because that is what that field has been doing for decades and centuries, often under the guise of "scientific methodology." And occasionally you will rank certain societies in a certain way or assign certain attributes that lead to them being categorised as more or less "civilised" and you do so without realising how this affects your outcome and analysis, it will inadvertently your analysis will then come out that certain cultures and certain practices are not, and again in quotation marks, civilised. And this is because you are taught to think of them in that way, and this extends to everything to how cultures are run, back to what we mentioned before about the fixation upon notation and writing as a marker of being in some sense civilised, all though to artistic practices and traditions, which is a problem in ethnomusicology. For example, back when I was at the Con we had that single course.

LE: *Yeah, that's not enough and there is so much to learn, and we will constantly be learning as well. I think that's one, I guess, trap that we need to be careful not to fall into, in academia and even in our work if we are activists, we will constantly be learning and constantly need to unlearn as well. And if we are musicians within the classical music world who want to make it socially just, that's one key thing we need to understand, that the social justice movement is an ongoing movement and we must constantly be checking ourselves and interrogating what we think we know, and trying to learning more and more. We're never going to stop learning!*

VP: And we're never going to stop listening!

LE: And listening and having conversations, but not listening so you can let that person say their thing and so you can let them know what your view is because you've already decided on it. But listening and taking time to think critically about it, and to digest it and to reflect on how you might contribute to oppression as well.

INTERMISSION II

VP: For our second musical intermission is another excerpt from one of Lolita's live performances. Here she performs the first movement of *Sonata* by Aram Khachaturian.

Follows a 4-minute excerpt of *Sonata* by Aram Khachaturian

VP: So now I have to ask about some other activist work you've been doing within the institution in order to shift the culture and at least creating a space in which to talk about it, which is the Social Justice Group at the Sydney Con, that I believe you founded?

LE: Yeah, so when it comes to cultural shifts or structural shifts in the classical music industry, I can speak for my experiences with what I've seen in the Conservatorium, I tutor there, I tutor in musicology there. I am also part of a new Social Justice study group in musicology and it's developed for the conservatorium community, it was put together by Jeremy Tartar who is a music theorist and Dr Christopher Coady who is a senior lecturer in musicology and he's also the Deputy Director of higher degree research, and it's also facilitated by myself as well. So, we put this thing together and the idea is to interrogate white supremacy within musicology, and importantly to understand how it manifests itself within our own institution, the Sydney Conservatorium. And we have academics, professional staff, students, alumni, all from the Conservatorium community, we have them come together and meet every month. Every month we have sessions that are broadly structured around the components that make up undergraduate study at the Conservatorium, and we have set readings that importantly equip us with anti-racist tools to make the Conservatorium community a safer place, essentially.

So first, we want to understand how white supremacy exists in the broader structures of the Conservatorium and music academies in general. But I think the kind of significant thing is to come together and start discussing what we can do to kind of undo white supremacy or interrogate white supremacy. And that could be things like looking at our course structures, courses and the syllabi that are put together for the courses, and thinking about ways about how

we can move beyond diversity and inclusion, because I've already spoken about my feelings towards the limitations of diversity and inclusion [attempts]. But looking at the ways in which we can create structural changes that can make the Conservatorium a more socially just place.

VP: And since the study groups' inception have you seen any change or shifts in terms of culture and attitudes?

LE: Already though, there have been changes in the Conservatorium that can contribute to this kind of change. We have courses that are part of the core units of study that encourage critical thought and the use of academic skills to interrogate these issues that are deeply rooted in conservatorium culture. One of those things is 'This is Music' which is a relatively new course which was developed by Dr Chris Coady and I actually tutor it myself as well, and it's a first-year mandatory course. So, we have first year students taking this course, this is their first experience in musicology, their first kind of history course or analysis course that they take at the Conservatorium. And we basically put students from a range of musical experiences in one room together, so we have contemporary, jazz, classical composers, musicologists and people who just love music together in general in one room to pose and answer philosophical questions about music to answer provocations – that's what we call it. Provocative questions about the ways in which we form ideas about music, it pushes us to think critically about how we have come to form values about music, what we believe to be good music, what makes good music or who has dominated our conception of what is good or bad music and what does that mean? What are the implications of this conception? So, these are the kinds of questions that pushes students to ask critical questions about music, and ask critical questions about their place and their education in music, so I think that's really important. And in the couple of years I have been teaching it, it has firstly been an incredible experience for me. I wish I had taken a course like that when I first started at the Con, I think my life and connection with musicology would have been very different or at least I would have been more engaged with musicology earlier on. But I think that's really positive. We do have these changes happening in music education. We have Dr James Humberstone who is an awesome, awesome person who has done a lot of work to kind of bridge together the social justice world with music education, and he's done a lot of projects that bridge those two worlds together.

VP: So aside from the wonderful beginnings of structural changes in the Conservatorium which I also wish were available when I was a student, what are the goals of both the study group and this newer course in terms of active investigation and challenging, or as you say provocative, questions?

LE: Now that's a good question. *So, I think one of the steps is to skill up with research, because there is a lot of research that we haven't been made aware of, or is not commonly known in the Con community so skilling up in that way. And then, trying to see how we can in our own departments or areas make changes, whether that's through short-term goals or long-term goals. That could potentially be changes to the repertoire that we are advocating for, or changes to the course, and importantly, and I think this is important goal in general in social justice within music, I think we should know why or ask ourselves why we want to be doing this, because again that will prevent us from doing that whole box-ticking thing of doing something for the sake of diversity and inclusion. So, significantly I think it's about developing critical thought.*

VP: Yes, which I personally believe is incredibly useful if not more powerful when it comes to unpacking and trying to understand the diverse world around us. And because, like you say, when it comes to quote-based systems and tokenistic gestures which are very becoming increasingly common and I would say particularly in the case of larger institutions whether they are educational or ensembles like orchestras, they don't actually have any procedures in place that encourage it or support it with depth and meaning.

LE: For sure, and going back to what we were talking about when it comes to contemporary classical spaces, I think the same thing applies to younger generations of orchestras or progressive orchestras that might market themselves as progressive, there are a few that I can think of and what I want to say is that I think that we should be careful not to... or maybe that we should be careful to maintain critical thought when we look at these or support these orchestras. First of all, I think there are young people like yourself who are doing incredible things to transform our industry and I think that's really important and I think we should continue supporting young people who are doing this, but I think we should maintain critical thought even in those spaces as well because it's important to notice how power structures can be manifested or maintained in those spaces as well.

A big part of my own research, as well, in intersectional feminist research is with intersectionality which is the understanding that power and people's experiences with power intersect with race, sex, sexuality, gender, age, able-bodiedness, class... all of those things and how power can shift along the scale of those things as well. So even in younger generations who might want to be progressive, if you're not interrogating all of those things and without critical thought, then you might be maintaining those classist or elitist structures as well. So, I think we need to be careful.

VP: Well, I mean I know exactly what you're talking about in terms of the progressive orchestra. There was one here in London that started I think just over a year ago, and I was actually very hopeful for, and they actually used the word revolutionary in their goal, which now I realise was a marketing buzzword term. I don't think they've programmed anything beyond Shubert or Ives so it's not revolutionary or progressive at all, they just happen to be new.

LE: You see, that's actually a really a good point. It's a marketing tactic by using terms like diversity, inclusion, revolutionary – it's marketing and it's branding or it can be used that way, and I think there's been this trend all around the world – not just in music - a trend to commodify diversity and commodify or consume progressive politics or thinking in a really interesting way. I think it can be dangerous, because also in the classical music space we need to acknowledge that the classical stage is charged with classist implications, elitist implications – there is no escaping that – so to what extent can we be revolutionary you know, if we are not addressing that aspect, to what extent can we be revolutionary?

Also, that's right. Because if you look at programming choices of these progressive orchestras and if you're still seeing music written by white, male composers – even if they are young – you are not revolutionary.

VP: And the weird thing I find about this particular orchestra, or any so-called progressive orchestra and we've seen this happen in Sydney too, is that the media *loves* them. I don't know if the media fully buys into the idea that they are revolutionary because they obviously are *not*,

but they are being touted as the new face of classical music but they are nothing but an exact replication of what already exists in our industry.

LE: Yeah, because it's consumable and it's progressive enough. It's very digestible for those in power, it's like "ok, you can have your progressive fun but only if it's done in this way." So, I even am cautious and conscious of the way I describe the work that I do, I don't think it's possible to just say "I am completely progressive or I am completely anti-racist or whatever." I think a big part of this journey or this movement is that we all actually hold bigoted attitudes in some way and that we all need to unlearn. So, and that's right, it's very trendy at the moment and the danger of the unfortunate thing is that those groups or those spaces will get funding, and that funding could be going to people on the margins, people who are oppressed, people who actually deserve a platform, and people who actually have a story to tell.

VP: Exactly. And sometimes when having conversations with potentially more conservative voices and you ask, "what about all these other voices that we don't tend to hear and see on these stages?" It's a bit of a cop-out to presume that they are either less valuable or that the quality will drop if we include them, which is often one of the argument points, which is obviously false.

LE: And racist or just bigoted or just offensive.

VP: Well, yes exactly. Well moving from this and towards applying this critical thinking to programming, I should ask how have you been going about your practice as performing and programming or commissioning music?

LE: So, I think the direction generally that I've been going down is telling powerful stories, like I said before, in my music about marginalised voices. As a pianist for some time now, I have focused a lot on Armenian music, and that was a conscious choice I made a couple of years ago when I was doing Honours. My whole Honours project was a conscious choice I made to advocate for my culture, and explore my culture. It was also just a learning experience of me as well. So for my Honours project I had a practical component which was to perform two recitals, one 50-minute which was solo and one concerto recital. That was purely based on the works of two Armenian composers, Aram Khachaturian and Arno Babadjanian. And that was really important to me for a range of reasons because one, I connected to that music, it was something that I recognised, they incorporated music that I recognised from growing up. My grandmother, who was Armenian, I'm very close to her, she's a singer and a poet-songwriter in the Ashough tradition which is a South-West Asian troubadour tradition, and so I was actually playing pieces that incorporated songs she actually had sung. So, it was a really personal experience. Another thing is that I chose to do that because of how that kind of repertoire can actually re-circulate folk music and recirculate music from marginalised identities.

As an Armenian, as an Assyrian, I am very familiar with concepts of erasure, with displacement, and of genocide, it's something that Armenians and Assyrians have gone through. Specifically, as an Assyrian – our culture has been destroyed, for a very long time artefacts and for Assyrians in the homeland, they are prevented from practicing language and practicing their traditions as well. But with music that's something you cannot take away from people, with song, but unfortunately, folk songs can disappear after generations pass away and if generations don't pass that down, and in the music that I was playing that was a way to recirculate those folk songs and keep it going in our memories, and reconstruct it in different

ways too. Admittedly, though, those compositions were written by Armenian men so that's an important distinction too, so against here's so much that I can do as well as a performer. I'm a signer as well and I'm very drawn to music written by women and people who are gender non-conforming and people of all genders in general, through folk music as I sing a lot of that as well.

You mention commissioning which I think is a good point because as a commissioner, and it's an area that I'm starting to explore, I haven't done it yet but I'm exploring that. As a commissioner you can actually use your power or your money, as you usually have funding or obtain money for this, you can use that platform to advocate for stories that you need to be told and so, for me I am currently exploring an idea (just working on it) to represent Assyrian music through solo piano works, so that's another way to advocate for music that you care about for important stories. Even as a performer, even if you're not commissioning something, you back the music you spend hours practicing. You advocate for the music you present on stage, that you talk about, that you research, so that's a way and a form of advocacy in a way. That's why I think it's really important to ask ourselves questions as performers: what stories am I telling on stage? What message am I sending across when I'm playing the works by these composers? And in the institutional space, commonly that has been music from the European Western Art tradition, and so that's a question I think we need to ask ourselves: "what message am I sending across if I am *only* advocating for this music".

INTERMISSION III

VP: For our third musical intermission is another excerpt from one of Lolita's live performances, actually taken from one of her Honours recital. Here she performs another excerpt, this time from the second movement, of *Sonata* by Aram Khachaturian.

Follows a 4-minute excerpt from *Sonata* by Aram Khachaturian, Second Movement

VP: And was it an issue when you were doing your Honours and these were the composers you had chosen to highlight, particularly for the panel considering their expectations and the traditions they had come from themselves?

LE: You know, I did well and it was embraced, I got some really good comments and I was really happy because I never thought that that was possible. I never thought that I could sit down for 50 minutes, also I presented the recital and I spoke in Armenian as well, I didn't think that was possible so I was really happy. But during the process, I did notice a few micro-aggressions, as in the process in preparing for the recital and working towards the recital, from a range of people whether it's the people listening to or critiquing my music, or staff members, there were some microaggressions and implications of "well, I don't know if this is representative of a classical technique or the classical tradition," or "be careful with how you choose to play this phrase because it doesn't sound very classical to me." But I noticed it more and micro-aggressions more with the way that I perform and with my cultural background when I was playing music that wasn't by Armenian composers and that was really shocking to me.

When I entered the Conservatorium, I was aware already of these micro-aggressions as a person of colour in that musical space, like growing up I always heard this stereotype or kind of warning that East Asian musicians don't have musicality, do not play musically, they play like robots. That is so racist, you know, I heard those things. I always had connections made between my cultural identity with the way that I played, and the beautiful part about theory and academia when it's written by people of colour is that this issue has been articulated. So, this is the racialisation of bodies, the way that bodies are racialised in the classical music space is very racist and very dangerous. I once had a very eye-opening experience as an undergrad performing in a performance workshop, and I was playing a piece by a Russian composer, and I had recently come out of a set of masterclasses with a Russian teacher who specialised in this Russian composer. And in this workshop, the lecturer critiquing my performance asked me what my nationality was. That was the first question they asked me – and it's also a very loaded question by the way, because, what does that even mean? Anyway, when I said that I was Armenian and Assyrian, the lecturer chuckled, you know they laughed, and said to me – “Oh, Armenians, you folk are crazy” – and I was really shocked, I was so dumbfounded, I just didn't know what to say - and the students sitting in the lecture hall laughed with the lecturer too.

Anyways, basically, I got a few points from the lecturer about the way I played and they were making a comment about my rhythmic control and my use of rubato which was excessive and too out of control, and they made a link between my cultural background – the fact that Armenians are crazy – and my use of rubato. And I was very embarrassed. As a second-year student, I didn't have the confidence or a way to articulate this issue, I wish I had said something but also, it's not my responsibility. I think that that shouldn't have happened in the first place.

But this is part of a legacy, part of a tradition, it's a very common thing that happens, it's actually documented a lot in academia especially in the context of a lot of African American jazz musicians. A lot of white critics would write highly racist reviews about the bodies of African-American Musicians and this is spoken about a lot in theory. But of course, at the time I didn't know about this. And I remember talking about it with my peers at the time and some staff members, and it was kind of acknowledged but kind of dismissed and nothing happened from it. And it was kind of disappointing to me because it was like, well get over it. And I cannot imagine how many times this has happened to other students which makes me very scared, and it's very upsetting.

Anyways, basically, I got a few points from the lecturer about the way I played and they were making a comment about my rhythmic control and my use of rubato which was excessive and too out of control, and they made a link between my cultural background – the fact that Armenians are crazy – and my use of rubato. And I was very embarrassed. As a second-year student, I didn't have the confidence or a way to articulate this issue, I wish I had said something but also, it's not my responsibility. I think that that shouldn't have happened in the first place.

VP: Yes, you're also in an unforgiving position when something like this happens, perhaps sometimes not to the same degree as what you experienced but, when anytime when you're confronted with racist and sexist comments that are directed at you in front of a class full of people, you are entirely alone and there will be no one there to defend you because we're in a space where this has been made acceptable, and instead everyone just laughs. You have the

choice to stay silent and feel guilty afterwards, or act in anyway and no matter how mild you are in your defence your action will be taken as inappropriate and in every way wrong. And when you go to the point of reporting someone, which I also did in my second-year at the Con, which was a lecturer who played a piece of music to our class with no context or warning about what we were supposed to be learning. It was in a musicology setting and we were supposed to be learning about modern music and instead we were played an opera with full frontal nudity, gang raping as a theme or potential rape and bestiality, but the problem is we weren't told any information about the opera at all. We watched it with a lecturer fast asleep, and then when it ended we left. So, when we reported it because to this day I have no idea what all of us learnt from that lesson, you get told "Oh, he's been there for a long time, don't worry about it, we'll try and make sure this doesn't happen again, but he's been teaching here for a long time." That's, that's not a reason.

LE: And it isn't. And unfortunately, that's what protects people like that, it's so harmful. And I wonder how much of that is connected to the fact that music is an artform and there are these stereotypes or generalisations of creatives being unhinged and its part of the creative process for being radical some way. I know that that conversation about vices and jazz musicians happens a lot, I've heard that a lot in the Conservatorium space and that's been used as a way to dismiss complaints about inappropriate behaviour. But I think that is very dangerous.

VP: And it is definitely playing into a stereotype and it's unacceptable. And I think, and maybe the public has this vision of what a classical music teacher is like – perhaps on par with the brutality of what we think a ballet instructor would be – and that they can get away with being inappropriate and offensive with their students because they're supposed to be teaching you about the harshness about working in this artistic world.

LE: Yeah, there is definitely a script or this stereotypical image that protects people from that. It's not ok, it's not ok.

VP: I'm sorry that happened to you.

LE: I'm sorry that you experience similar things as well. You know, I think what we're doing right now we're talking to each other about this and I said this before when we first started talking. I wish we had had these conversations in our first or second years, we didn't know that we were going through the same thing, as women of colour we were going through very similar things. Imagine if we had been aware of that and were conversing with each other. That would've been so powerful. We would have known that, first of all, we are in this together, we are not alone and that we can do something about it because power comes in numbers. And I think that we should all start having conversations because we will probably start revealing things that have been hidden for a while.

VP: Exactly. And that's why I'm so glad that now after all this time we're having this conversation right now. I can't thank you enough for taking the time to chat with me. It's been an absolute pleasure and I know we're going to keep having these conversations. Thank you so much, Lolita, for your insight, your research, your advocacy and all of your work. Always a pleasure to talk with you.

LE: Thank you, thank you so much for having me and for putting this whole podcast series together. I'm really glad that we get to have these conversations more and more. And thank you to that person who has gotten through this super long conversation [laughs]

VP: You too! So I know we covered an awful lot in this week's episode, I think it happens everytime I get the pleasure of talking with you. So, as always, all the information about Lolita's myriad talents and multi-faceted career will be provided below as well as all the resources we talked about including Phillip Ewell's talk, Edward Said's famous essay Orientalism if you haven't already checked it out, info about Nina Simone and her legacy all through to any students out there – Australia or not – links to the Sydney Conservatorium's Social Justice study group. Once more another cheers to Lolita, and to everyone who listened, catch you all next time!

DECLASSIFY is a podcast available for listening and subscription on Spotify and Apple Podcasts. It is hosted and produced by Victoria Pham.

RESOURCES

Lolita Emmanuel

<https://lolitaemmanuel.com/>

Interviews with Lolita:

<https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2016/06/20/a-hip-hop-remake-of-an-ancient-greek-epic-spreads-a-tale-of-huma.html>

Lolita's Selected Performances:

Episode 5 of the Assyrian Arts Institute, a performance of Arno Babadjanian's 'Impromptu.'
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFykKEcLwfM>

Prelude Arno Babdjanian: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkRfW6ZmjFY>

Elegy by Arno Babadjanian: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORTTvfaovHw>

Sonata by Aram Khachaturian: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYp41ErbPIA>

Phillip Ewell's talk and work on Schenker and the White Racial Frame:

<https://musictheoryswhiteracialframe.wordpress.com/2020/05/08/music-theorys-future/>

National Arab Orchestra performance of Bayati Medley (Arranged by Michael Ibrahim)

<https://youtu.be/9uD6x-Q983g>

Gustav Dudamel and Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra performance of Bernstein's West Side Story 'Mambo': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYvEvP2cmdk>

Edward Said, *Orientalism*. Downloadable at this link:
http://pages.pomona.edu/~vis04747/h124/readings/Said_Orientalism.pdf

Documentary - What happened Miss Simone? <https://www.netflix.com/gb/title/70308063>