**Jessica Cottis S2E1: CONSIDERING SILENCE AND COLLABORATION**

16th of August 2021

Welcome back to Declassify Season 2! I am so pleased to welcome you all back to this new season, and most importantly, to begin this following season with a host of international guests and conversations. I am so pleased, not only to have returned, but to welcome Declassify’s very first guest for season 2 and it is none other than the incredible Jessica Cottis. Jessica Cottis is one of the most prolific Australian conductors working today having been named in 2018 as the Classical Face to Watch by the Times in the UK. In this premiere episode of Season 2, host Victoria Pham and Jessica Cottis discuss the power of silence, conducting into the future and collaborative music making to forge new pathways for future classical music.

**Victoria Pham (**VP): Hello hello! Welcome back to Declassify Season 2! I am so pleased to welcome you all back to this new season, and most importantly, to begin this following season with a host of international guests and conversations. I am so pleased, not only to have returned, but to welcome Declassify’s very first guest for season 2 and it is none other than the incredible Jessica Cottis.

Jessica Cottis is one of the most prolific Australian conductors working today having been named in 2018 as the Classical Face to Watch by the Times in the UK. Jessica has worked with a whole host of international leading orchestras such as the London Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Oslo Philharmonica and Opera Orchestra national Montpellier. Her experience has also included recordings for the BBC, and Decca Classical labels and re-invitations to conduct at the Royal Opera House (Covent Garden) and the prestigious BBC Proms. She also works widely as an advocate for classical music across radio, television as a board member of several organisations and trusts. Since 2021, she is the Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Canberra Symphony Orchestra where, under her leadership, the orchestra has developed a number of important initiatives, including a significant new commissioning series. And without further ado, hello Jessica, thank you for joining me today!

**Jessica Cottis** (JC): Oh, hi there!

**Victoria Pham**: Well, I've always been curious as to what the natural path, or rather, Is there such a thing path is for a conductor. And if there is a traditional route in which a conductor followed it's to his or her career. So, I'm curious as to whether or not you followed said traditional path and how you got to where you are now?

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah, it's a good question. The traditional career for a conductor, say 50 years ago, would have been to work in an opera house, and to work one's way up from rep tutoring and coaching singers to assisting conducting and then to finally conducting yourself. There are many routes into conducting now. For me, mine was rather unorthodox, actually. I started as I started my musical career as an organist in Australia, and in London and in Paris. And after a while, I started getting an injury actually in both of my wrists, which meant that I was unable to play professionally anymore. So I, I had a kind of, yeah, a crisis really in, in my artistic life, working out whether I could exist fully without music. And I studied law for a bit but I did the end. The end of the story really is I couldn't exist without music. So I wondered what it is that I could do. And the organs are fascinating instrument because so much of it is orchestral. There's an incredible palette of sound and musical colour that we can manipulate and play Combine and experiment with a really full musical world. So it was quite a natural step really in a way to then move into conducting. Even though the physicality of playing the organ and being a conductor and using one's arms to express silently, how music could or should sound. That's, that's a big jump. But for me, that felt very natural.

**Victoria Pham**

And coming out of learning the organ, which has a degree of from what I understand if you're playing in the French tradition has a degree of improvisation involved in performance. Do you think that's helped a lot with how it's shaped your conducting career?

**Jessica Cottis**

Yes, massively. The idea of improvisation is that so much of it is thinking ahead, whilst being very much in a moment. And as a conductor, one of our roles is to, to have this over arching vision of a piece of music, and it could be an entire opera for three hours, or it could be a symphony of 15 minutes. And having an ability to know exactly where that music is going to take us what that journey is, what that story is, what that sound world is, but also be in that moment of right here right now. So that all of those decisions, feel free, even though they've all already been thought about. It's a strange paradox, really. But I feel with that, that vision and that preparation that I've gone through, or that we've gone through as conductors to understand work, that it allows that freedom of almost improvisation in the moment.

**Victoria Pham**

And did that then? Did you start conducting small ensembles when you were studying, you know, in London or Australia? Or did it kind of move you towards orchestral conducting immediately?

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah, so again, I had a slightly unorthodox route into conducting itself, I had done very, very little. And I realised, in changing careers that I needed somebody to teach me how to conduct I knew what I wanted to explore with music, I, you know, it was quite a well formed musician already through my organ playing. But I needed the technical expertise, and the philosophical understanding of what I conducted as as well. So yeah, I jumped straight into a postgraduate course at the Royal Academy of Music, here in London. And through that, I began to work with symphony orchestras and contemporary music ensembles, the opera department, small chamber ensembles. And at that time, as well, I realised what was really missing, for me was it was a practical application of this technique that I was learning in the postgraduate class, it's kind of, I guess, like conducting flying hours, you need a certain number of hours on the podium in order to be able to fly the fly the craft, you know, efficiently and smoothly and beautifully, I guess, in a way. So I yeah, I got some friends together. And we put on a number of Mozart operas, actually, whilst I was at the Academy, and that was such an incredible learning experience for me up from all aspects to work with the singers to work with the orchestra, to work with a director, and to actually kind of bring a company together to work together holistically.

**Victoria Pham**

Do you still work with many of these musicians?

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah, I mean, that was that was very much a student thing. But those people in the orchestra I come across regularly. Actually, here in the UK, occasionally in Australia, singers, definitely wherever I go. I bump into some of those singers that a lot of them are having huge international careers now. So, it was, yeah, there were fun days. And it's great, great to be reconnected with that. As we go on with our lives.

**Victoria Pham**

You know, the connection of music. It's everywhere. I'm kind of shocked somehow, sometimes how many musicians from Australia I run into?

**Jessica Cottis**

I agree. I have a similar experience.

**Victoria Pham**

Where you mentioned before, looking for guidance in terms of the philosophy of being a conductor. Has your own personal philosophy altered a lot in the last recent years or particularly in the last 18 months?

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah, I don't think it's changed dramatically, but I think it's deepened and the Biggest element I think I've found yet to have expanded, at least within my mind is this idea of silence is not an idea is that the concept of silence really. And it's something that I've thought about, always thought about a great deal, and being quite sensitive to sound as a person in the world. I'm often extremely painfully aware of small noises or loud noises, or wherever I am, there's there's a soundscape. And so this over the last 18 months, that's 18 months, it's been quite moving, actually, in a way profound, to experience an unwanted silence, a silence that none of us wanted. And none of us expected really, and to come to terms with that, and then sort of sit with it. And yes, sit with that discomfort really in a way that there was no music for so long at all. And there was no way of communicating musically or artistically in the sense that we normally would, there was none of that communal aspect of music making of coming together with audiences in concert halls, or whatever venues. And it strikes me that actually this silence, or this quietness, actually more accurately is something that I hope that we can hold on to in a positive way. As we move forward in time that we, we understand music, we understand sound very much because it's not silence, so the two define each other. And there's so much to gain I think, in, in having these moments of repose and quietness, and connecting really with nonmusical sounds. I remember the very beginning of lockdown last year, we could almost for the first time hear the bells of the local church. And so we'd always hear it, but there were there was no traffic. So, it on it in a sort of no traffic of a frequency that somehow deadened the bell sounds. And yeah, even simple things wind going through the trees or the proliferation of birds that seemed to happen in London last year, as well as a real connectedness to, to the earth around us to the landscape around us that, at least for me, I felt was missing quite a lot.

**Victoria Pham**

Do you think there are methods in which we could retain this this sense of silence in musical programming or, or musical programming in general?

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah, absolutely. And and actually not just even programming but from how we exist in how we exist in the space, from the very moment we start a rehearsal process. It's something I explore with my conducting students as well, is when we walk into a concert hall, our focus is on that first downbeat, whatever piece of music, you know, the Brahms or the Stravinsky, whatever it is. But I often do an experiment sometimes with musicians as well. And if we just sit in a space, you know, in our home, or in our concert hall, or wherever we are, and stop thinking or just relax the thinking and start listening to everything around us close to us, and suddenly realise, actually, that the world is quite a noisy place. Even a concert hall is quite noisy. There are no flicker lights, there might be some creeks in the seats. Somebody might drop something a chair might Creek.

So I think if we don't connect to these immediate human and physical, acoustical, and architectural sounds around us, then it's very hard then to jump into a piece of music. Because it's quite abstract. It's not within within a space. So that's, that's one of the things it's always philosophical, really, to examine the space we're in and to examine the the silence or the quietness there, and then go on to making music. But I think in terms of programming, yeah, I silence is very important. I mean, we could talk about I could talk about this for hours, I won't, but I could, but you know, even in one piece Playing say Wagner is just in his older Prelude that within the first four bars, there are a number of silences. And how do we how do we conduct that silence? How do we connect those two fragments or three fragments of phrases with the silences in between, and make it make it count. So that when the next iteration of a note occurs, where we're surprised by it, or we're delighted by it, or whatever aspect? Yeah. Does that answer your question?

**Victoria Pham**

Yes, in fact, It's brought up another question, because you mentioned architecture, and kind of the relationship to the acoustics that comes naturally in spaces. Does that ever affect your programming in that if you know that, you have to conduct in a certain space, you have to make creative decisions in relation to the acoustic qualities of that space?

**Jessica Cottis**

Yes, actually, sometimes you don't have a choice. So, for example, if it's a programme, and it's been played in one place, and then it goes on a tour, and it goes to two or three other concert halls, then it if those concert halls have very, very different acoustics, then it's actually the way I would do we all conductors is not just me, but how that would be performed in the space might be slightly different. But yeah, absolutely. For example. It's something I keep in mind frequently. And there's a concert series in a series of Australian music that we do in Canberra every year, and it's at the National Museum of Australia. And this year, actually, Deborah Cheatham, composer and soprano Deborah Cheatham programmed it for the orchestra. And it was so interesting, because it's it's a huge sort of atrium, open space, and yet very much. One needs to think about, you know, what is the nature of these pieces, if they're very rhythmic, and very fast, then it's, it's somewhat of a struggle to perform an insert in such an acoustic, you'd probably prefer something drier. But I would say, rather than talking about limitations, I'd speak more about possibilities. So in a venue like that, it's possible to have a small ensemble far down at one side of the atrium, and then the music kind of seeps through into the main audience space and kind of envelops us in a way that we wouldn't have in a concert hall necessarily, because it's very, in a way, it's quite one dimensional. So to use spaces in a way that we can, yeah, kind of blur where the sound could be coming from, is a quite interesting way forward.

**Victoria Pham**

Have you found that it's been easier to control or manage with contemporary music rather than historically informed performances?

**Jessica Cottis**

Yes, but only because there are no expectations. So, with canonic repertoire, I think we there has been such an incredible history of how things are done that to shift that or to reevaluate that can sometimes cause consternation. And and shifting also requires effort and time. And yet logistics as well. A 70 piece orchestra being shifted into a different place has really logistical concerns, I guess. So it would need to be something that was very well thought out. I would never rule it out. However. And because it's it's it, it's I think it's I think we should experience music and in any possible way. But with contemporary music, there's there are no rules, and no implicit rules. So, there's a lot of possibility to really engage the imagination.

**Victoria Pham**

Potentially, it's more collaborative thing as the composers are generally living.

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah. And that's one of the aspects I really love this idea of the composer as creator and then conductor as orchestra and orchestra as just status for the gestational period of bringing a piece alive with the creative, the composer there so you're right. It's so collaborative and a very fulfilling way of bringing music to life.

**Victoria Pham**

Do you think that sense of collaboration with the composer present is something we should be pushing for more Especially when it comes to broader orchestral repertoire?

**Jessica Cottis**

What do you mean pushing for more? Doing basically more contemporary music?

**Victoria Pham**

Essentially? Yes. Yeah. Traditionally more.

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah, definitely. It's always strikes me as odd were so interested in contemporary art there. You walk into central London and there are I don't know, how many 10s of hundreds, maybe probably 10s of contemporary art galleries. You can purchase it, you can go and see art, amazing stuff, and just the gamut of possibilities in terms of visual art. Yeah, it was contemporary music. It's it doesn't follow that trend. And I sometimes, uh, yeah, I'm not entirely sure why this is because there's so much fascinating. Sound. And that can really make us think it can impact how we feel physically. It can enlighten it can make us think it can delight all of the things that art should do. We find in music, new music as well. I would say that. One kind of issue is that the model for making music classical music is often either it's very orchestral II focused, it's a big institution of many players in a symphony orchestra, or it's an opera house, again, a huge institution. And, and these institutions are running on tried and true methods of success. So to bring in a great deal of new music, obviously, is very different from more recent years of programming and so on. But I would say that said, you know, all the orchestras in the UK are doing fantastic work, fantastic visionary thinking in terms of commissioning new works, and really interesting composers, and clever programming and festivals and in BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra with their tectonics festival. And yeah, there's, there's a load of really interesting stuff going on.

**Victoria Pham**

I've noticed that ever since I've moved here that all the officers do put a lot of effort into the commissioning. And if it's not commissioned, they have all these strong programmes will compose these to come in and learn how to write for orchestra. Yeah, valuable. Yeah, it really is. Because you have such a breadth of experience in terms of even now in terms of the amount of organisations that you help run your co-directs like Canberra Symphony Orchestra, London's Sinfionetta, and you will also have a board member for NonClassical, for example, how much of that variation of experience has helped you kind of guide where you believe classical music could be going?

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah, I see it’s a big question. Very frequently, we can break it down into chunks. From a personal perspective, I'm interested in really all aspects of classical music. So, the canonic repertoire, in the great romantics, going into the early 1900s, and up to the present day. And for me, it's really how we can present that how we can actually it's not present, it's how we can share that with as many people as possible. So, whether that's a symphony orchestra or a contemporary music ensemble, or an organisation who looks to promote really new like, absolutely cutting-edge new music in in every way. It's, it's really yeah, finding ways to connect with our communities. And the people who live in our communities and making really meaningful experiences with any kind of classical music and I use classical music extremely broadly.

INTERMISSION I:

VP: For our first intermission is a selected from Jessica herself. Here is an excerpt from of Sibelius’ Symphony No. 7 recorded by Philhamonia Orchestra and conducted by one of Jessica’s mentors, Vladmir Ashkenazy.

**Victoria Pham**

Do you think it's been a little bit difficult to balance the kind of suddenly new of what the sense of it being suddenly new contemporary music with this idea that we constantly have to maintain classical music as a sort of intangible cultural heritage?

**Jessica Cottis**

The thinking could, the way we think about it, I think, is important, and all classical music was new at some point. Mozart was a new composer at some point, Beethoven was a new composer, Brahms was a new composer. Stravinsky, Shostakovich, so messy on all of these composers at some point had to have a premiere for their pieces. And this lineage, I guess, this history of making music, a living art form, is the way I like to see things. So it's less about, you know, a cabinet of musical history placed in a glass cabinet that we all can look at, but we can't kind of examine and reexamine or think about in a fresh way. But that actually this is this is a replenishing, replenishing cycle where these art forms do stay within I mean, if it's in an art gallery, yeah, we have our Rubens. And we have Almaty's and Roscoe. And we also have very contemporary artists as well. So, it's it. I think it's just a really rethinking of how we see classical music and new music and what is new music?

**Victoria Pham**

And do you think that has to do with both the musicians themselves kind of asking ourselves what is new music, but also making it somehow accessible to contemporary ordinances? Who may feel a little bit ostracised from the classical music scene?

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah, I musicians are super open minded, thoughtful people. I mean, it, it comes with the training where, as you attest, you know, where we question and we practice and we study and we question we learn to think about tiny, tiny aspects of technique and music and historical knowledge from often from, you know, from the age of six or seven. So, yeah, professional musicians I, I find, without fail, really extremely open minded, and thoughtful in their processes and their applications of how music is made. I do think we, we need to position new music today in a way that is accessible. Yeah. And by accessible, I mean, kind of logical. So if we are going to have you know, a typical classical music programme, we're going to have some contemporary music in there. Why? Why are we going to choose x piece over y piece? What are the connections in the programming that make it a coherent programme, a carrot architecture actually, across three or four or even five works across the programme? And how do we know this is one of the most important things? How do we programme it so that perhaps, that new piece opens our ears in a way that we hear the classic repertoire with new ears? Or how does that classic repertoire, allow us to be in a position to then hear a new work with with no judgement with with openness and a want a wanting this for a you know, a wanting that's not a word, but I've just made it a word of wanting to hear that new work from from the sense of hearing, a Tchaikovsky Symphony Symphony or whatever it is.

**Victoria Pham**

Are there any strategies or even like long term programmes that you've worked on or developed, that have helped foster this sense of openness? Yeah,

**Jessica Cottis**

Yes. we need to, we need audiences to trust us to trust our programming so that when they come into a concert hall, or a concert venue that they feel safe and excited for the possibilities of the sonic or the oral world that's going to happen over the next hour or so. I find, for me, I like to programme with a concept in mind. So if, for example, I'm looking at, I mean, any number of things that could literally be anything it might start with say? Well, I mean, I mentioned Wagner's Tristan chord, maybe that's a piece that I want to programme. So what else would I programme is that I could go in any different. One could go in any different routes in terms of programming. Is it as weird Talking about the idea of silence. So an orchestra playing a bar, and then there's this otherworldly silence? Or is it the idea of actual composers who really changed the world in the classical music world? So no, everyone after vogner was really influenced by him, whether they liked his music or not. So who were other composers who maybe could fit into that? That kind of scheme schemata have have links and so on. So I yeah, that anything can be an idea. It's just, I guess, presenting it in a way that inspires people to come along to be interested in that idea. And then I would say more than that, it's increasingly I find, it's not just programming an interesting programme, it's actually interacting with our audiences. Pre concert talk maybe with some of the players to get insights from, from their instrumental view of things, talking from the stage, it's just opening up talking about these, these links and these connections and how they might connect to us as as people today in 2021.

**Victoria Pham**

I agree, I really enjoy the concerts I've been to where either the conductor or player or service has come and spoken straight to the audience. Yeah, kind of breaks that fourth wall, confronted as an audience member, because force of an orchestra in front of it feels separate. So that's been really, really interesting going to those concerts.

**Jessica Cottis**

It can really tune the ears as well, if there as someone just mentioning a few things to focus on this and out to then it's, I think, the experience, certainly for me when I've been in the audience, and it's been completely new work, and I've never heard it before. Or maybe it's a premiere of a new work, and somebody has mentioned a few things to listen out for. It's, it's a way in ways into that into that new world.

**Victoria Pham**

I think so too. In fact, one of my favourite memories is going to a concert in Paris and the conductor, who happened to be Daniel Barenboim, and he, for some reason, spontaneously went on 25 minute lecture about the burlesque piece that he had programmed at the beginning of the concert, but it really helped. Because had it not been for that it would have been an extremely challenging listening. I think for a lot of the audience. It was so abstract and so modern, and the orchestra was split in groups of eight across the entire Hall, who was conducting in the circles. So had you not done that talk? I think a lot of people may have been a little bit confused and confronted by a professor's writing. Perfect example. Yes. was incredibly. Yes, that stuck with me till now. Yeah. Well, you mentioned the contemporary visual arts before. And I'm kind of curious, because I've been very fortunate, in that I've recently had more conditions for visual art than I have for music. So I've had a little foot into both worlds, that I've noticed through working as an artist, I've had so much more unexpected support, from curators and various other artists, it felt like a real communal experience trying to create a new work for a new institution. Whereas it hasn't always been that way, especially when you're working with someone like an orchestra because they simply they don't have time, given the structure of an orchestra sometimes to work with you as closely as an art gallery would. So I'm curious as to what strategies you think we could steal from contemporary visual arts that might help with contemporary music.

**Jessica Cottis**

I'm actually interested to ask you the same question. From from your experiences. And there's something there's something in how we go about rehearsing new works. And what I've done a number of new operas, I use an example I've done a number of new operas at the Royal Opera House. And as part of that process, they've been extraordinary workshops, like really extraordinary, sometimes two years in advance, or three years in advance where a scene has been workshopped. And that's been maybe with piano and singers and a director and music director. Maybe it's a small ensemble of instrumental musicians as well. And these workshops are so crucial because it enables us to actually really properly hear aspects of that new work. Because otherwise it's all quite abstract so you can plug it into your computer once computer programming and Listen to it a digitised, you know, a digital version of it. But it's it's not the same as living reading musicians interacting with each other. And so I feel that this this workshop process this investment into the earliest stages of the process really yields marvellous results for the end composition. It's difficult to do this because it takes time and finances and so on. And but this is something I think, probably more akin to what you've experienced with with visual art.

**Victoria Pham**

Yes, definitely. In fact, in visual art, you're right, often I get contacted either a year or two years in advance, just to float an idea. And then from that point, you get constant support. So the curator always stays in contact with you. You get age with trying to figure out how to finance work, there's always a push for you to collaborate with as many people as possible, which is how I prefer to work anyways. So the idea that I could bring in a whole team of people, and we can make this all work together. And the idea that it isn't a solo process is something that has been really enlightening. But beyond that, the questions that the curator is asking, throughout the process of forming the artwork themselves, are almost always centred about public programming. How can we get work in? How many ways can we get young people into the doors? What are the free workshops we can offer to the local community that surrounds the gallery, so everything is very site specific and localised? And I really enjoyed working that way. In terms of my musical experience, some of them when I'm working with chamber groups has been like that man where you get sustained contact throughout, but when you're working with an orchestra, I just think there isn't necessarily the infrastructure for that to occur, because as you mentioned, financing makes it a little bit difficult. So it's not really the orchestra's fault. It's just a different way of working. And I wasn't prepared. I think the first time is a really young composer to walk in and realise that we had such little rehearsal time with the orchestra to put this new work to life.

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah. And it's really it's really valuable. observation, especially for those Yeah, as you say, those who, who are, you know, recently graduated, or who are still emerging in their careers that, yeah, that element of spending so long writing a piece of new piece of music, so many hours, and then an hour rehearsal, and then and then that's it. That's that's the performance. And it's it's been done.

**Victoria Pham**

What is process? I mean, I often wonder if in the future that will be moulded in a different way. So there's a bit more time for the musicians as well to get accustomed to this brand new sound world that they've never had to encounter before that point.

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah, very much so. And I think especially with a lot of new music being written, not with traditional notation, yes, graphic scores, or even we did something earlier in the year that was quite improvisatory. So it by the very nature of it, it required more time to find a way forward within the kind of more improvisatory, more responsibility put onto the players themselves, to pull this piece together, and that took more time. So I would envisage that in certain circumstances, that that's possible.

**Victoria Pham**

So with programmes that you run, like through I believe London's infinita has a composition programme. How has that do you think? Can you see the composers developing through their short period that you get to work with them to work on any piece?

**Jessica**

Yeah, actually, I'm not involved with the London Sinfionetta writer’s composition programme, but obviously, I've worked a lot with with the ensemble. Absolutely brilliant. But there are a number of number of composition programmes I, I have or do work with, including, for example, the Britain peers, young artists, composers, and it's, for example, a programme like that. And there are a number around the world. fantastic things where they come in having written a piece is maybe not fully finished. And then again, it's this process of workshopping with guidance from eminent composers and musicians and conductors and so on. And really seeing you I mean, it's extraordinary to the development that happens when something on paper actually becomes music. It's not just notes on a page. It's, as I said before it's being played, and then the decisions are kind of in a way so obvious, then it's not in our head. We're not thinking of it. What if a cello player was to do this? Or do I need to cut in here? Or how am I going to blend this or whatever it is? It's, it is then kind of in a way real. It's not just a construct. So yeah, super important and very profound, I think in, in, in the development of an emerging composers practice.

**Victoria Pham**

And with emerging conductors, do you think learning how to conduct brand new pieces of the specific challenge?

**Jessica Cottis**

Yes, crucial challenge. And for so many, for so many different reasons. There are so many things to negotiate in contemporary music. The interaction with the players is quite different from standard symphonic repertoire. And there is of course, the interaction with the composer and making sure I feel any way that we really do justice to their vision, that we are in a way, the person who we've been entrusted to bring everything together. So there's a lot of responsibility there. But for emerging conductors, new music is important. It also on it on a technical level, actually, because the demands placed on you as a, as a conductor of new music. They're often extremely high. So it can push you technically and push you to be as clear as possible in your musical ideas and your musical thoughts that some of the standard repertoire will never will never really require. So yeah, I mean, with all of my students, or all of the courses that I teach on the mentor, as a conductor, I always like to do contemporary music, because I feel it really, really pushes people in a good way.

**Victoria Pham**

How often do you get the composer with you when that's happening?

**Jessica Cottis**

Almost every time.

**Victoria Pham**

That's very lovely to hear.

**Jessica Cottis**

And if not, if not, then I would always have a long phone call a couple of phone calls with a composer beforehand.

**Victoria Pham**

Well, this is very helpful. The idea of it being so collaborative,

**Jessica Cottis**

it has to be a bit boring if it's not collaborative, actually, I think it's Yeah, I mean, not to be flippant, but there's, it's very, it's very interesting actually, collaborating with other artistic and intellectual minds, it, it helps us all grow. And none of us have finished products, even when we're at so as musicians. So this constant development and exploration is very special.

INTERMISSION II:

VP: For our second intermission is another selection by Jessica. This time it is a selection from pioneering composer Kaija Saariaho’s opera L’amour de loin. The following selection is from the piece Mer Indigo from Act 4. This recording is from the Deutsches Symphonie Orchester Berlin.

**Victoria Pham:**

Indeed, I have a bit of a weird question. I don't know if we should talk about this, or if you wish to talk about this. But I was actually curious system, because the conversation has shifted, particularly in the last five years into representation and diversity. I often wonder how much does that go into play? When you're programming when you're selecting people to be part of specific programmes or mentorship programmes and things like that? And whether or not that has that big of an impact on decision making?

**Jessica Cottis**

Yes, it's a good question, actually. It's very important that the arts reflect the multiplicity of our societies. And that hasn't always happened. And there's no reason why it shouldn't. And if we don't, if we don't act, and we don't programme in, in a way that reflects this, and we don't provide support, in ways to be able to reflect this, then we can't say that music is universal. We can't say that art is universal. So it's so so important to me, and to many, many of us. And I think they'll get a point where maybe it doesn't need to be so we don't need to think about it so much, because hopefully it will have become a place where it just is, but we're certainly not there yet. So yeah, look 100% every programme I'm thinking of I'm questioning myself and questioning the orchestra, trying to work out who we're playing to why we're playing to these people and how we can programme in a way that that is meaningful and reflects. reflects us now. And and who we are in the world.

**Victoria Pham**

Often when I, when I talk to various people in the art world and also outside they bring up the idea that being very aware of diversity or representative representation, representing different voices means that it has to be tokenistic. I don't necessarily believe it's that way. So have you found ways that that have worked without it necessarily being about box ticking in the way that a grant application asks you to tick boxes if you've done certain things?

**Jessica Cottis**

I don't. Yeah, of course, I look, there's there's no point doing things. If they're tokenistic. in my estimation, there's just no point it doesn't achieve anything. It doesn't make anyone feel good. It doesn't help. And it doesn't connect, doesn't collaborate, doesn't connect, it doesn't communicate. So if we are creating programmes that have a particular theme focus, then we have to ask ourselves, well, why does it have to be just from this point of view? What are the other points of view? What are the other voices who could illuminate a particular idea? Who could kind of almost have a conversation within within a programme? And it's? Sure, maybe on paper, it might come out similarly, but what is the reason for approaching programming in this way? I, yeah, I didn't, I just it makes me angry. Actually, I just, there's, there's so much for me, there's so much amazing music out there. There's so many interesting voices, and so many fascinating philosophies and ways into creating sound and ways into describe our emotions and the landscape we live in, and different histories and different voices and languages and so on. And we're just it's just, I don't know why we don't programme them all. Because it's so fascinating.

**Victoria Pham**

No, I agree. Sometimes I also get angry when I have conversations with very conservative programmers, that, you know, they talk about it not being economically viable to play new music or to play unexpected voices. Because it doesn't bring in audiences, but they do connect with contemporary audiences.

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah, I don't buy that argument at all.

**Victoria Pham**

Nor do I know it's just a shift in culture or reflects our contemporary culture, people will be invested in listening to them.

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah, definitely. The more that we embrace the multitude of voices, the more that I think, our audiences I don't even when I did this, I don't even know where I'm going with this. I just, it's like, a conversation that I can't see. Just it's so obvious to me that we need to be broad and open with our programming to really everyone from all aspects of life. And it's just it. Yeah, I you can hear I always have no words, I'd say.

**Victoria Pham**

No, I agree. I don't know what to say now when people bring it up, because it happens to them regularly. And I don't know how to combat that. Because it also seems very blatant to me that it is fine. To listen. Yeah.

**Jessica Cottis**

It's always that I don't really, I don't the polemic in a way. I feel this is unnecessary. There's, if we really truly desire classical music to be for everyone. And for it to be universal. Then the voices who are being performed also need to be part of that universal University anti individualism as well.

**Victoria Pham**

Yeah, otherwise, we'd only have the canon. So, we would, it would turn classical music into purely heritage performance, which wildly upsetting.

**Jessica Cottis**

Yeah, deeply actually.

**Victoria Pham**

And as a final query, do you have any advice for up and coming and young musician?

**Jessica Cottis**

I would give one piece of advice. And that is, music is a lifelong pursuit. It's a lifelong way of living. And the world is very fast. And I think we need to allow all the time and the space to develop to understand more about music and art and history, and sociology and our place in the world nature, all those things that feed into our artistic life, to take the air to take all the time, and not not be pushed and not be worried about things not happening immediately.

**Victoria Pham**

That's really beautiful. I'm going to take that all on board. That was actually my last question. So thank you so much for answering all of my multitude of all the questions. You.

**Jessica Cottis:** Pleasure, it's really, really good to talk to you.

**Victoria Pham:** Anytime. Thank you once more to Jessica Cottis for joining me for the premiere episode of Season 2 of Declassify. I know I now have plenty of thoughts to mull over. For resources and information about Jessica, her work and upcoming performances, I have placed them in the podcast description as well as within the transcript of this episode. I look forward to hearing many of your thoughts as Season 2 progresses – catch you all next time!

**RESOURCES**

Jessica Cottis website: <https://www.jessicacottis.com/>

Non Classical trustee: <https://www.nonclassical.co.uk/engage-1/2020/4/28/spotlight-jessica-cottis>

Royal Opera House: <http://www.roh.org.uk/people/jessica-cottis>

Limelight Interview with Jessica about the Canberra Symphony Orchestra: <https://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/features/jessica-cottis/>

The Music Show: ‘Conducting through Silence’ – Jessica Cottis and Andrew Ford <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/musicshow/jessica-cottis-conductor-symphony-grammys-global-music-rick-howe/13260070>