

(October 2015): Alina Noir (<http://www.alinanoir.com>), visual and multimedia artist based in Lyon, France, has created an interview feature with composer, Elizabeth Knudson (as part of a series of multimedia artist interviews), for her online blog. This interview was also published by Cuckoo Magazine (November 2015).



I discovered Elizabeth Knudson's music some months ago, and I have been in complete admiration ever since - this is the kind of music a theater photographer loves to listen to while looking for inspiration, as it is both highly technical and intimately visual, encouraging you to think in movement and dialogue between bodies and space.

Alina Noir: Hello! Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Elizabeth Knudson: I'm Elizabeth Knudson, a 34 year old freelance composer and cellist, living in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. I got my Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts (Music) from Simon Fraser University, and my Master's degree in Music Composition from the University of British Columbia. In 2008, I was accepted as an Associate Composer of the Canadian Music Centre.

AN: How and why did you start music?

EK: I've been composing music since before I can remember. My mother tells me that I used to sit on her lap while she was playing the piano—I would pick out a melody on the keys, and then tell her to "write this down!" It wasn't long before my parents enrolled me in

music lessons, so that I could learn to write down my own music!

As for why I write music—it's always been a natural form of expression. I see music as a lens through which to experience the world, as well as being an incredibly powerful means of transcending physical barriers and connecting people. The act of creating music allows me to explore so many things, since music can relate to, and encompass so much.

AN: How has your musical practice change over time?

EK: I love challenges, and putting myself in a position to learn something new with each new project. I don't know that my actual working process has changed too much over time, but certainly the scope of my technical interests and abilities have evolved. For example, having been part of an orchestra tour to Albania and Macedonia (as a cellist) in 2012, and learning about traditional Balkan rhythms and folk music has left a noticeable impression on a couple of my recent works.

At the moment, I'm working on a concerto for jazz trio and orchestra—so again, I'm putting myself in a position to learn as much as possible about the language of jazz, and working on the challenge of incorporating those ideas, including improvisation, into a piece for full orchestra.

AN: What are your favorite composers and what music do you most identify with?

EK: My favourite genres would be classical, jazz, and world music. Favourite composers would have to include Maurice Ravel—his music had an exquisite balance of elegance and precision. He was a master of orchestration; fine-tuning the “colours” of the orchestra.

Dmitri Shostakovich was also a great orchestrator, as well as being incredibly resourceful with his materials. Architecturally, nothing seems out of place, and yet there is a real individuality and character to the music that is quite distinct.

Beethoven would have to be on the list for his passionate writing—I think I'm more attracted to his work as a cellist than as a composer, since performing a Beethoven symphony, for example, provides such an intense experience: a complete physical, mental, and emotional release. I think much of this has to do with a masterful control of the elements of timing: expectation and surprise.

I think Sibelius should be on the list, too: I love the way his music provides a sense of

three-dimensional space. It breathes—there is freedom beyond the sense of a strict formal structure. There are layers of music that may not sound like much on their own, but when combined (as part of a symphony) they suddenly fuse and come to life as one organic whole. I think this type of concept comes close to emulating the real, physical world. In this vein, soundscape recording is something else I find very interesting; exploring the sonic dimensions of a physical environment.

AN: What inspires you?

EK: Visual art, architecture, dance and movement, nature, travel, language, exposure to other cultures—and simply discovering unexpected points of intersection between two seemingly-unrelated ideas.

AN: What research do you do? How do you know when a work is finished?

EK: The research I do depends on the piece I'm working on—but I do tend to do quite a bit of research on a topic of interest before I begin actually sketching musical ideas.

I think there always a risk of adding too much to a work—but I know a work is complete when nothing more can be subtracted. I think there is such an understated beauty in creating something elegant yet simple.

AN: What do you like about your work? Is a musician's life lonely?

EK: I love the variety and challenge of my work. Besides composing, I am also a cello teacher and freelance cellist. The composing work, by necessity, requires a lot of time alone to think and create. However, I really enjoy the collaborative aspects of working with a specific performer or ensemble, or collaborating on a project with an artist in another discipline (i.e. film, dance). The interchange of ideas and creative energy, plus the notion of creating something larger than the sum of its parts—something designed to engage and draw people together—those are all elements I find really inspiring and enjoyable.

AN: Name some things you dislike.

EK: I'll name just one: feeling stuck. I don't think there is anything more frustrating for a creative individual than to feel that something is "off"—and therefore preventing ideas from

flowing and moving forward. I think probably everyone working in a creative profession has experienced some form of this, but I think it is really a test of persistence, and ultimately creative resourcefulness that will finally provide that needed push forward. Sometimes too, the solution will come from a totally unexpected source—and things will somehow just “click” into place.

AN: What’s the best piece of advice you’ve been given?

EK: To paraphrase some advice from a couple of my composition teachers at university:

-Imposing parameters on a project actually creates freedom. If you’ve set certain limitations, then it’s a true test of creative thinking and resourcefulness to be able to create something good with that particular limited set of materials.

-Be sure to enjoy the \*process\* of creating—in other words, don’t anticipate all of the pleasure/reward to come from the finished result. If you are able to enjoy and learn from the process of creation, then your time and work spent will feel worthwhile.

AN: Professionally, what’s your goal? Where do you see yourself in ten years?

EK: I think my dream job would be a composer-in-residence position with a professional orchestra.

AN: What is your favorite quote?

EK: "The real composer thinks about his work the whole time; he is not always conscious of this, but he is aware of it later when he suddenly knows what he will do." -Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

"The old idea of a composer suddenly having a terrific idea and sitting up all night to write, it is nonsense. Nighttime is for sleeping." -Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

AN: Where can we find you on the internet?

EK: Personal website: [www.elizabethknudson.ca](http://www.elizabethknudson.ca)

Facebook artist page: [Elizabeth Knudson, Composer](#)

Soundcloud: [www.soundcloud.com/ejknudson](http://www.soundcloud.com/ejknudson)

Canadian Music Centre: [www.musiccentre.ca/node/37862](http://www.musiccentre.ca/node/37862)