

“If we put anything out there, it had to be excellent”:

A conversation with Allegra Chamber Orchestra

Erin James, Louise Lee and Janna Sailor

By Keith Stratton

The **Allegra Chamber Orchestra** is one of the only all-female professional orchestras in the world. Founded in 2016 by conductor and violinist Janna Sailor, the musicians of Allegra are brought together not only as professional musicians, but as women united in service and support of other women. Each innovative concert, event and recording project presented by the ACO has a social impact focus and a practical method of financial and visible support for the partnering charitable organization. The orchestra regularly commissions and premieres works by Canadian, female and minority composers, and has co-founded and continues to support a music therapy program for women living on the streets of Vancouver’s downtown eastside.

In addition to working with the Allegra Chamber Orchestra, violinist **Erin James** is currently based in Edmonton where she performs with the Edmonton Symphony, the Chamber Orchestra of Edmonton, the Alberta Symphony Orchestra, Early Music Alberta and the Alberta Baroque Ensemble. Erin has begun her Doctorate in Violin Performance at the University of Alberta and is a recent recipient of Queen Elizabeth II and Doctoral Recruitment Scholarships.

Violinist **Louise Lee** is a graduate of Imperial College London and holds a BSc in Physics. She's earned the prestigious credential Professional Certified Coach (PCC) through the International Coach Federation (ICF). She's a graduate of The Art & Science of Coaching Program from Erickson Coaching International, she's a Certified Psychological Safety Coach, and is also a Certified Maslow Leadership Coach through the Maslow Centre for Executive Leadership.

Conductor and violinist **Janna Sailor** is firmly established as a musical innovator currently residing in Vancouver. In addition to leading the Allegra Chamber Orchestra and guest conducting the major orchestras in Canada, Janna pursues a diverse career as a violinist, delving into contemporary, world and early music, jazz and improvisation, chamber music, and interdisciplinary projects with dancers, visual artists, and electronics.

When I heard about the Allegra Chamber Orchestra, I was curious about their social mandate, and how that informs the kind of music that they make. Their programming and mentorship program boast an amazing list of female composers, both established and emerging, and the recordings of their recent

festival, FestivELLE, frankly blew me away. I was fortunate to sit down over Zoom on July 29, 2022 with conductor and founder Janna Sailor and performers Erin James and Louise Lee.

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“Leaving the class system behind”
Canada and the United Kingdom

Keith Stratton: *We have a huge country, geographically, and also culturally, there’s just so much diversity. In your experience, is there anything in particular that you notice about Western Canada, about the Prairies? Janna, you’re from Saskatchewan originally. You’re in Vancouver now, so you’ve lived in a few different provinces and worked with different communities. Do you find there’s anything particularly unique about the classical music scene in British Columbia or the Prairies?*

Janna Sailor: I kind of came of age, I guess you could say, as a musician in Vancouver, and largely in part thanks to the musical community. Particularly the experimental and new music communities in Vancouver, which I was really fortunate to be immersed in right out of school. So there’s a great hub of fearless creatives and composers in Vancouver that are always experimenting and drawing upon the unique culture of the West Coast.

I feel like Vancouver is a leader in a lot of ways, as far as the beginning stages of reconciliation and environmental awareness and sustainability, and that very much impacts a lot of the artistic output and creativity that is unique to Vancouver. A lot of awareness of the land, you know, as we’re surrounded by ocean and forest and mountains. A lot of that, whether we’re aware of it or not, influences our creative output and we have these amazing opportunities to step outside the city into just an incredible landscape. I feel like I was really fortunate to jump in with some of these experimental, new music and world music influences early on. Everyone in my circle was creating something unique to them and to their community and that was really outside the box. It really encouraged me to create my own projects and to know that I would be supported, that there would be a community around me that would jump on board, both to participate and to co-create with me. So that resulted in a number of projects, first, my harp and violin duo, and ultimately, Allegra Chamber Orchestra, which evolved out of some experiments with my own concert series and my own duos, and other ensembles.

KS: *It sounds like you've found a lot of community and overlapping art and music. Erin, I know you've had experience performing and studying in Europe. I was wondering if you have any thoughts on classical music traditions, education, or performance with your experiences in Canada, versus in the United Kingdom and Europe?*

Erin James: Great question, it made me think. I think I would actually probably build on what Janna has said about the setting of Vancouver, and how that enables more of a creative and diverse approach. I have to say, it was 2011 when I graduated from college in London, so you know, it's been a while since I've been there. But I do think that Canada, and Louise you may disagree with me here, 'cause you're from Britain originally, but I do feel that Canada is sort of a bit further ahead in terms of really talking about and valuing diversity, as well as some of the themes of, even leaving the class system behind. I found that my education in the UK was still a bit entrenched in that, which was really interesting coming in as a Canadian. You know, we still have our issues in Canada, but I think there's a lot more thought and focus in looking at those things, and finding value in the different voices. So Louise, I hope I didn't step on your toes too much as a Brit. (laughs) That was sort of my sense.

Louise Lee: Erin, I completely agree with what you're saying there. So I did the shift the other way, Keith. Originally I was born in London, England, and I grew up there, for the majority of my life still. I'm still on that side of the tipping point. And I completely agree with what Erin's saying. When I moved here to Vancouver, the running joke was that I found the music community before I found any form of other income or employment type situation. I just really wanted to immerse myself in that community, see what it was like! Especially compared to London.

One of the things that I really noticed, connected to what Erin was saying about the class system, is that over here, people seem to be a lot more open, shall we say, to the fluidity of what we can achieve, and who we are achieving that with, and our backgrounds. So for example, I technically do not - this is where I kind of out myself - I technically do not have a music degree. But, nobody seems to care over here. In London, there's a certain amount of status that you need to have, or you're expected to have, but over here, it wasn't a problem. People wanted to play with me, they wanted me to join their community orchestras, they invited me to join their professional orchestras, ensembles all over the place. I find that to this day, that I get invited to play with all sorts of people at all sorts of levels, and it just seems so open, both in mind and in heart, which I think allows for a really great collaboration here, and a very, very enjoyable experience.

"It was apparent that this was a thing that needed to continue"

Origins and community connections

KS: *I'd love to get into the Allegra Chamber Orchestra now. Maybe we can talk about some of the origins, maybe some of the inspirations. Were there existing organizations that you based this off of?*

JS: Sure thing. First off, I had no intention of starting an orchestra, it kind of happened by accident, oddly enough. I was at a point in my career where I was transitioning into conducting full-time and coming up against a lot of those issues that apparently you encounter as a female conductor in the orchestral world. I was coming up against some of those traditions and mindsets, and some of the issues around gender and race that you encounter if you are any kind of a minority coming into a position of leadership and authority. To be honest, it was pretty heartbreaking, it was pretty demoralizing, and it wasn't enough for me at that point. After a few years of doing the circuit, I didn't want to be in the industry anymore. It wasn't enough to just have a gig, to get another gig, to get a bigger gig, to get, I don't know, more of the same, I guess. Notoriety, or a lack of, or the struggles that came along with it, and I was really discouraged. Anyways, I wanted to do something. I was at the verge of either leaving the music industry altogether, or what have you, at that point of decision-making.

I went for coffee with a friend of mine who founded an amazing charity called Music Heals, which is an organization that works with schools, care homes, community organizations, and individuals, to go in and create a custom music therapy program designed for their clientele and their needs. I was just so moved by their work, having experienced firsthand the power of music therapy through my work at the St. James Systema School in Vancouver. I really wanted to just do something in support, in a gesture of help, and see if we could raise a little bit of money and awareness about the amazing work that they do. So I put out a call to my colleagues, just saying, you know, 'it's the end of the season, let's just get together and play some beautiful music and raise some money for a great cause, what do you say?' I had such an outpouring of support, and it was all women. I realized that this was way more than, you know, a chamber group, or a Mendelssohn octet. That if we just grabbed some timpani and, you know, one more trumpet player, we would actually have an orchestra! So, it kind of took off from there, and after our first rehearsal, it was apparent that this was a thing that needed to continue.

It was right at the height of the #MeToo movement in 2016 when we founded, and there was a lot going on in the music community that was really unsettling, having to do with gender, having to do with minorities. Our creativity had been stifled as artists, as women, and we just wanted to get together in a safe space, and just be women, just create, and just focus on the music. Our motto is 'women helping women through music'.

A portion of all of our self-produced concerts for the public automatically goes to a charitable cause. Whether that is continuing to support our music therapy program that we assisted with raising seed funds for, or donating to Give a Home, immigration and mental health organizations, and

environmental causes. Every self-produced concert has a social action mandate, and our goal is to not only present an artistically and musically excellent and thought-provoking presentation, but also to give back in a practical way, through monetary support, and also raising the visibility of these organizations that are doing great work in our communities to create more of the world and the community that we would all like to live in, and see and participate in.

KS: *One kind of theme that's been coming up in the other interviews, too, is how great connections forge great music. It's almost inevitable. Erin and Louise, how about your involvement in the Chamber Orchestra? How did you get involved, and what are some of your favourite things about it?*

EJ: It's interesting that you talk about connections, and how things are built through that. Janna and I have been friends now for years and years. How many years? I don't even know, like, over fifteen maybe. (laughs) It's kinda scary. So very much in the spirit of that, I've had such a wonderful experience with Allegra, and also with other colleagues that I've known for years. I was in the UK, and then I was in Edmonton for a while, so I actually hadn't started working with the orchestra until more recently. I worked on the FestivELLE project, and there's a program coming up around mental health that we did a run-through of, which is a really exciting project. And then, Janna just came back from a residency in Banff. Hearing Voices. So all three of those projects have just been extremely rewarding, partly because of the atmosphere created by women supporting women.

I would say the atmosphere of what working in the orchestra is like is in contrast to a lot of other orchestras that I've been a part of. I think also, Janna's very intentional about what she programs, so it's not only about the environment, it's the repertoire itself which is along those lines as well, which offer connection and community-building, really, which I think is such an important thing. Every single time, it's been extremely rewarding to be a part of the orchestra.

KS: *I'll go to Louise. The same question for you, about your involvement, and some of the things you've enjoyed about the orchestra?*

LL: Oh, so many things, Keith. When I share with friends, especially friends outside of the music community about what I'm up to, without a doubt, every single time, when I talk about something I'm doing with Allegra, their eyes just light up. Because they're like, 'oh my god, that seems so interesting!', or 'oh, that's good', or 'oh wow, I'm really glad somebody's doing that'. So, when I think about Allegra, or even when Janna mentioned it to me and invited me to come and play with the orchestra a number of years ago, I have to admit Keith, the first thing I thought was, 'yes! All female, all women, yeah yeah yeah!', because I get a real kick out of that, as you can tell. Janna's mentioned this already, but there is something about working completely with a whole ensemble of women. There is

an unspoken connection, an unspoken background, a relatedness that we share, that you just don't get in other communities necessarily. So that in itself is very special for me, getting to play with fantastic musicians that otherwise I may not have the chance to play with is phenomenal.

I don't just mean the people within the orchestra. Over the years, we have collaborated with amazing people outside of the music community as well, for example, we did an event with the heads of various companies which are female, women-owned businesses. So these are entrepreneurs in the business world, in the corporate world, selling products unrelated to music, but they are all female, they're women, and they are there to make a difference to the community. I love the fact that Allegra partners with people outside of music, using music as a way to showcase and help heal, and to transport people to certain places.

Erin's touched upon this as well, one of the things that I love about working with Janna is how intentional she is, on who she works with, what she programs, the message we are always trying to send. With Allegra more than any other ensemble I play with, I am always *very* clear, very aware of why we are doing this piece, why we are working with these composers, what the message is we're trying to send overall about this topic, but about things in general for our society. To feel as though you are part of something bigger and so important, I think, is one of the key things I love about Allegra, because I really do believe that where we are right now in the universe - I'm sure every generation says this - but we're at a tipping point. With the things that have happened that we have seen globally over just even the last five to eight years, which would never have happened generations before, I feel as though we have a responsibility to speak up and to share and to raise awareness about certain issues that haven't been spoken about for multiple generations. And so, to get to be part of that is really rewarding.

“Everything we put out there was always put under a microscope”

FestivELLE and filming new music

KS: *Let's talk about music. I just want to say, I've been watching videos of FestivELLE, and I'm just blown away by the presentation, and even before we get into the music, just on the technical level. Of course, the classical community is one of many industries that's been hit hard by Covid. For the in-person stage experience, then, you know, everyone tried to figure out, 'how are we gonna do this online, how are we gonna make it work'. I've been a part of a few of these, I've seen many, and they range, even at its worst it's like, 'hey, you know, we're trying, we're still getting it out there, it's still a recording, maybe it might be a phone camera quality, you know'. But with FestivELLE, it wasn't just like you were making do, it was like an elevated level of seeing pieces as a video experience. So I thought it was just really impressive. The camerawork, the quality of the video, and also how that related to the pieces. After seeing them, I was like, 'well, they would work as music in a stage experience, but it's written into the piece - the video experience'.*

So those were some of the things that I got as a viewer. Maybe I can go back to Janna here to speak about FestivELLE pieces and how you prepared these as a video experience.

JS: Yeah, absolutely. I guess this was one of the unexpected blessings of Covid, that it really allowed us to expand our skills and reach a whole new audience through this new platform that we otherwise wouldn't have explored. For one thing it's hella expensive, but also, I've experienced over the years that everything we did, the nature of the work that we did, and everything we put out there was always put under a microscope, and we were analyzed just a little bit more harshly than more mainstream ensembles. Perhaps because of the nature of what we did, you know, I'd hear comments like 'sure they have a social action mandate, but can they actually play?' You know, things like that. 'Sure, they're all women, but is it actually a professional orchestra?' We do a diverse range of things, and so I draw my players from all kinds of communities that are the best fit for whatever that project is. So, I knew that if we put anything out there, it had to be excellent. I don't want to put anything out there that would draw attention to ourselves in the wrong kind of way. That being said, I feel really fortunate that we were able to partner with Opus 59 Films.

I'm very careful who we collaborate with, just based on the nature of the work that we do. Sometimes the topics that we touch on are sensitive, and it has to be someone that's a team player, like-minded with the mandate of the orchestra and what we're trying to achieve, and you know, work together with us in an artistic but also respectful way. I felt really fortunate that that was a true partnership with Opus 59 Films. Another thing that was unique to this project is that we knew that it would be livestreamed well in advance, like a year out. So we could kind of build that into the production value. Not that I wanted the composers to be influenced by that through their compositional process, but I think that they did give some really great thought into how they wanted things to be staged.

Like, there's the *Teatime Stories* with Sasha Kow. She very thoughtfully curated - not too many performance art things, but just in the right spots. Those close-ups of steam, and things you wouldn't necessarily experience from sitting twenty, thirty feet away in the audience. So we were able to bring the audience up close and into our world, which was a really unique experience. Also with the *Masquerada*, the Alice Ping Yee Ho cello and flamenco concerto. That was originally supposed to be for full orchestra, but due to capacity numbers, we had to change the plan. But I think it actually worked really well in that more intimate setting. The flamenco dancer, due to the fact that we had to be spaced out, was able to weave her way between the players, and you get these cool aerial shots of her from above, dancing in between the musicians. That probably wouldn't be able to happen in a traditional staging setting.

Actually, I'm having some discussions about how exactly we would stage that in a live performance, 'cause all of these nine pieces that were part of FestivELLE, they've been premiered, but

they haven't been performed live. I think it will be a really interesting experience to actually perform them for a live audience, and see what kinds of changes and tweaks we need to make in order for those same things to come across in a different context. As well, it afforded us the opportunity to showcase some really remarkable emerging composers alongside more established composers.

We had our composer incubator project that culminated at the end of this season. Normally these nine pieces would've been part of our whole year of programming, but because of the circumstances, we made it into a mini-festival. I think it was definitely a learning experience for all of us to do that much recording in that short a period of time, and also have that mind for the production value, and you know, not being able to make any edits. I mean, it's all straight through, because of the nature of the video recording. So that was also an added pressure on the ensemble, of course, and the creative crew, that we had to get a lot of things on the first or second try. Just like a live performance.

KS: *Again, you've taken a challenge or difficulty and flipped it on its head. I picture seeing one of these pieces again live, but then I'd be like 'oh, I don't get to kind of roam among the ensemble like I did'. With interactive chamber music too, it's so cool to feel like you're inside it, which is an experience I thought really came across. Maybe we can talk in a little bit more detail about some of the pieces, and the composer mentorship program, where we had six premieres by six emerging female composers. There's really awesome stuff in each of them. Were there some highlights, some challenges?*

EJ: As I mentioned, it was just such an amazing project to be a part of. It was very stressful to have to do the one take, the one run-through. That was, you know, up there as far as like, stressful times I've had, but it was worth it just to see the result that came out of that experience, and just how beautiful those films were of those pieces. The process was really fun, the rehearsals and learning the music, and working it all out was great. Then to have that concrete thing, in that sense that you don't often get as a performer too, 'cause once you've performed, it's just out in the ether. To have that, that something that still exists, is really exciting. I actually thought that each of the pieces stood on its own in terms of the meaningful element. Each one had something important they were trying to express, through the way that the composers used both the music and visual elements that could be brought into the work. Holly Winter's piece, with a graphic score, was really cool, and that was neat how parts of the score are actually put onto the screen as we were playing. There were these ink blots that were quite an emotional element of the piece that the audience is able to see through that video project, which they wouldn't have been able to in a more traditional presentation. Marie Alice Conrad's piece was really, really moving and really fun, and had such interesting sounds. It was sort of about dementia, and that was something that really affected her family. She brought in things like, knitting needles on a ukulele, and measuring cups, you know, things that her, I think it was her grandmother had. She associated very much with her grandmother so it was just... yeah, those are two examples that come to the top of my

mind, but each piece was really special in its own light. Just such a wonderful process to bring it to fruition and have that video. Hopefully in the future, there'll be some more performance opportunities with the works.

LL: FestivELLE was a lot of fun. It was a lot of work, as Erin has touched upon, but it was also a lot of fun. I had the opportunity to play some of the pieces by the emerging composers and also by their mentors. What I like about it, and Erin's touched upon this, is that it's not just music, it is very much an immersive, visceral experience using all of your senses, not just audio. So there is a visual element to it, there is a physical element to it. Janna's already shared about the flamenco dancer. Also, with almost all of these pieces, I was able to hear sounds, and sometimes create sounds, that I had never done before. Especially not in a traditional classical music kind of format, shall we say. What I loved about these pieces, is that not only were they all unique, not only were they so personal to the composers in one way or another, but they allowed, at least for me as a musician performing it, the real chance to kind of experiment, and to do things I don't normally do, which is always kind of fun. Slightly unnerving, like 'oh, what will happen if I do this with my instrument'? But it really allowed us as musicians to play. To experiment within the safe container that the composers had provided us. So that was a real treat as a musician, to actually get out of a metaphorical box a little bit as well. One of my favourites was actually a piece written by one of the mentors. I will always remember this vividly. It was written by Rita Ueda, and it involved a lot of ping pong balls. And to this day, I can't see or hear a ping pong ball being dropped without thinking of that marvelous piece. That really was one where it is very visual as well as auditory and using sounds and things that you would never normally think could work.

KS: *I like how you see it as 'playing within a safe container'. Through the presentation that Allegra did, they programmed so many different approaches, but they were all given equal weight. Given equal conviction. Janna, one that stood out for me is about your role as conductor in Holly Winter's piece, I'm(post)ber, where it became, for me, suddenly a bit of theater, where the chamber ensemble is breaking down, and criticisms are thrown around. You were getting out, interacting, and kind of took on a role. I was wondering, is this something you've done before as a conductor, to experiment with your role, or was this a new thing? Just how did you feel about that, breaking that down?*

JS: One of the things I loved about that piece was that I think Holly challenged each and every one of us in stepping outside of our comfort zones. There was one section where she was like 'here is some suggested negative self-talk that I say to myself, but feel free to insert your own'. And so, as the more we lived with it, the more and more raw it got. It was exhausting - Erin can attest to this - it was exhausting to rehearse it, and for myself, I was like 'how do we even rehearse this?' We just have to go into this dark

place, then come out of it, and push the boundaries every time. I kind of wish that we would have been able to take some of that raw footage from rehearsals, 'cause it was just so real and so raw. Under the stress of recording and wearing masks and everything, some of that maybe got lost a little bit, but I still think the musicians did an amazing job. It was interesting because Holly saw me as the conductor as kind of like the provocateur, I guess. The person that walks around and causes people to second-guess themselves, and causes people to think badly about themselves. You'll see me walking and looking up to the players and judging them, or saying things to them, or they're saying things to themselves after interacting with me. Definitely that was something I had done - performance art, and performative, interactive pieces before, but not to that extent. That was definitely a very, very personal experience that I think all of us went on, individually and collectively. It was definitely uncomfortable, and when I first saw the score and first had these initial conversations with the composer, I was like, 'I don't even know if the players are going to do this'. I was like 'I don't know if I'm going to be able to do this!' It was something that we all had to really make sure that, you know, we were creating a safe space. I also just had to really put it in the hands of the players and really trust them. And it turned out completely differently than I ever would have imagined or thought. We've been in discussions with the composer about how to remount that and what that would look like, and how we could bring that across and execute it in the same kind of way. When you're doing things like this, you walk the line of really provoking the listener, the observer, and of what is appropriate. How do we, as artists that are bringing these things to the forefront, how do we bring that to audiences in a way that is respectful but at the same time thought-provoking?

"What I learnt in orchestra has clearly stayed with me forever"

Career paths

KS: *Given some of the backstory of the orchestra, coming out of an industry where you've been in the position of having that self-doubt put on you, it must be a cathartic experience, to repurpose that, and showcase it as a piece of art. Getting more into careers, it always fascinates me when people are musicians and they also have other pursuits. Erin, I thought it was interesting to see your career as a musician, and your career in textiles. Having kind of two artistic pursuits in two very different mediums. How do you see your artistic practice? Do those overlap and intersect, or are they totally different worlds for you?*

EJ: I definitely see them intersecting. I think that music and sewing, or design, have always been my two passions. I'm actually in the middle of a doctoral degree in violin performance right now. I think when I was trying to come up with a thesis, I desperately didn't want to pursue a lesser-known work that maybe is lesser-known for a reason. I think that's a lot of what violin performance theses tend to be about. I just wanted to be really authentic and true to myself, so I proposed to do sort of a

costuming of chamber music as my thesis work, as my thesis piece. I don't know if you know about the SSHRC funding, it's available to any Canadian institutions, social sciences and humanities. SSHRC ate up my proposal, and I got funding for this project. It's actually to costume *Verklärte Nacht*. So I freaked out and then I went to fashion school because I thought, well I need to know how to do this properly if I'm gonna be getting money to do it. So that's a project I'm working on right now. Actually, Janna and I in Banff, we did a little bit of a costume element to our performance there, so that's been a really fun way to bring it to Allegra. I've also styled the most recent Allegra photoshoot with some pieces that I made. I hope this is something that we can continue to expand, as I develop my practice, and as the orchestra develops as well. So for me it's really exciting to see, especially when you're talking about a visual element, and the fact that our culture is so visual. That avenue of bringing people into the performance, bringing people more vividly into the musical experience, is really exciting to me.

KS: *Presenting music, presenting costume. The way you talk about it, it seems only natural. I think that's something that even sometimes in classical music, people don't think enough about. It's like, at the end of the day, people are watching. It's inspiring, because I've met a lot of people, especially through music school, who feel like they need to shed their other hobbies, their other interests, to focus on music, to realize their goals. It should be the opposite, it should be those extra things, that's what makes you unique. Louise, I understand you work as a leadership coach. Same question to you, do you see your music training and your coaching, do you see them as overlapping? Or are they different worlds for you?*

LL: Both. They're overlapping but they're also very different worlds. It's funny, I was just talking to somebody yesterday about this. They were asking me a question about leadership, primarily in the corporate world, but their question was 'okay, so how did you learn about leadership? When did you become interested?' My answer to that is, I learned about leadership through playing in orchestras when I was a little girl. That was my first taste, and that remains to this day, shall we say, the best on-the-ground training, apart from doing jobs in the corporate world, which I have done for many years. What I learnt in orchestra has clearly stayed with me forever. Things such as how to listen to others. How to work together with others. How to be responsible for doing your own part, making sure you practice, making sure you show up prepared. You know how your part goes, you know where you come in, you know what else is going on around you. Not only that, but I had the opportunity even as a little kid to sit in the concertmaster's seat, and so that in itself came with additional responsibilities, which as a fourteen, fifteen year old, it's kinda like, 'oh, okay, alright, I'm responsible for a certain group of people, and for a certain kind of experience in the orchestra'. So, there's very much a tie between the leadership work that I do, and my background as a musician in that, leadership really is pervasive in the music world in a very good way. I think it allows us to really embrace what leadership means to us personally, and how we can bring that to make a difference, not just to people

we play with, but how we then collectively communicate our musical message and otherwise to our audience.

“I’m more terrified because another layer of me is being revealed”

Artistic authenticity

KS: *Right now I feel like there are people who might not consider themselves composers - people who are working in music in different ways, but maybe seeing themselves as a bit of an outsider to the classical music world. Or, they’re making art, but maybe they don’t see themselves as an artist. Would you have any advice, based on your experiences, for people who are full of art, full of things to give, but maybe feel like there are things holding them back?*

JS: Great question. I think that the thing that set the compositions from our composer incubator series apart so much to me, was how uniquely personal they were. How these composers were able to transform their own personal experiences, whether they be positive, negative, struggles, everyday, the mundane, the extraordinary - they were able to take those very personal experiences and make them into art. In some cases, transform those experiences, redeem those experiences, and create new connections and greater understanding between themselves and others. Perhaps even just the working-out of the creation of the piece of music was a learning and growing experience for them. I think that when I set out to do things that were uniquely me, those were the things that terrified me the most. Like launching Allegra, like launching my own projects, and everytime I dream up another project, I’m always terrified that this is the biggest disaster I’ve ever engineered. Those are the things - then I know I’m onto something. The more scared I am, usually, I’m more terrified because another layer of me is being revealed. That’s my most authentic voice coming out. That’s when things actually started to work. I tried to go the more traditional route of working in an orchestra as a violinist and pursuing those more traditional paths. There were amazing experiences there, but it was beyond that that I needed to go and needed to figure out. Once I started actually following those instincts, that’s when things actually started to come together, and things actually started to work. And then I had limitless energy to work on them. I guess what I look for in a collaborator and those that I work with, is that kind of authenticity, and willingness to be uniquely and unapologetically themselves.

EJ: I love that. I think that’s very much been my experience too. I’m not trying to do this route that is the conservatory, and then the orchestra, you know, the things that are traditional. I mean, to a certain extent, I did do that, and I don’t know that I ended up being very happy in that place. I think that was sort of a wake-up call for me. It’s very important to find out your role in the music world, or wherever you’re working, what that happens to be, and to pursue that wholeheartedly. It’s such a treat to be

surrounded by other women pursuing the same. It's a daily process to uncover those things which are your path. It's very exciting, and wonderful to be in the presence of other women who are doing the same.

LL: The coaching me is wanting to say so many things about so many things. I love what Janna and Erin have already shared about bringing yourself to your performance, to your compositions, your pieces. We touched earlier upon Erin's work with textiles, and one of the things that came to my mind is that music is very much a form of self-expression, and so are the clothes we wear, so are the words and language we choose to say, so is the route we take to walk to our favourite park. It is a form of self-expression. When composers, either experienced or novice composers, when they have the courage to really tap into what that means for them, like the bit that is, as Janna said, uniquely them, that is what we need more of in the world. Everybody expressing themselves in a way that feels right for them. If we are able to showcase it, you know, put it on a stage, and have it reach eyeballs and eardrums, then I think our world will only be richer and more fulfilling in that sense. And it will inspire others to do the same. So if there's somebody who's thinking 'oh, I think I have a little piece inside me, how do I get it out?' Get it out. Doesn't matter how you get it out. Doesn't matter what it sounds like, even. Just allow it to come through, trust it, and it will evolve into something so meaningful and special for all of us.