

Compose Like a Girl Podcast

Dale Trumbore: The Pressure of Proving Ourselves, Reclaiming Space, and Healing

Jocelyn 00:00:03 Welcome to the Compose Like A Girl podcast! I'm your founder, host, and composer Jocelyn Hagen. My Compose Like a Girl initiative amplifies female-identifying composers, helps conductors diversify their concerts, and works toward more equality in music programming and commissioning. I have been sitting down for conversations with some amazing composers, and I want to invite you into these deeper explorations of art and life. I hope you leave with some inspiration just as I did.

Jocelyn 00:00:43 On today's episode, I'm sharing a recent conversation I had with Dale Trumbore. Dale was one of the first composers I approached for this podcast, as she is one of the most thoughtful and talented composers I know. I also knew we could easily have a candid and honest discussion about many topics related to composition. She's a pianist, like me, and we share a lot of the same musical values and interests. I love the fact that she is also a proficient writer, and her book, *Staying Composed: Overcoming anxiety and Self-Doubt Within a Creative Life*, is full of insight into the practicalities of the daily grind of composition, with personal examples, bits of humor, and workable strategies for living a creative life.

Jocelyn 00:01:26 Dale, thank you so much for sitting down with me today. I love our conversations.

Dale 00:01:31 I agree. It's always a joy to talk to you as well.

Jocelyn 00:01:34 I think, as women, there is extra pressure on us, both extrinsic and intrinsic, to prove ourselves over and over again. How do you deal with that pressure?

Dale 00:01:46 I, I think that's absolutely a real thing. Um, and, and just real to all composers of any gender. I think there's so much insecurity that comes with being in this profession and constantly confronting the questions of whether the music you're writing or, or whatever you're creating is good enough. Um, whether enough people are hearing it and responding to it, programming it, commissioning it, buying it. Um, all of that is just wrapped into this profession, I think. But, then to be in any sort of historically underrepresented category, that's basically not, you know, like a white cisgender male. Um, it comes with the added expectation, at least for me, of having to really find your own, I guess your own, not mentors, but, uh, just your own figures of like who, who is like me, who has succeeded. You know, I, I don't want to write music like Bach or Beethoven, but I could, I, I mean, I could, I could look up to Jocelyn. I could, <laughs> I could, you know, look even to someone just slightly ahead in their career. Um, this was so true when I was, when I was a younger composer, I just looked up to composers who were slightly ahead or even, even where I was, but just approaching things in a different way where we all just, we all have things to share. I think, um, that's the beauty of

writing music now is it's so easy to find that kind of support, even when it does feel just so daunting sometimes to write music at all.

Jocelyn 00:03:28 That's definitely true. Representation is so important. Seeing, seeing people like us doing what we want to do. Uh, and I remember, for me, Abbie Betinis was a real role model. And she's not that much older than me. Um, but she was definitely ahead of me. And I, I just always looked up to her and, you know, kind of saw what she was doing and thought, okay, how could I do that, but make it my own, you know?

Dale 00:03:55 I actually, I, I emailed Abbie. I, I talk about this often, how I sent an email to Abbie as a junior in college and asked like, how do you do what you do? And she wrote back the most thoughtful, helpful, long email. And I just, I just treasured that and relied on that advice for, and, and I'm still relying on that advice. Like if you're at a conference and you want to go talk to someone, but you don't know them and you can find someone who knows you and who knows them, you can ask them to introduce you. Like, it was just full of this practical, actionable advice, and I just think Abbie is wonderful.

Jocelyn 00:04:34 Yeah. Yeah, she is. Um, and are there any other mentors that you think that you'd classify, um, that have really helped you in, in your career development?

Dale 00:04:46 I think, my aunt, who is also someone I talk about often as having just a huge influence on my life. Um, my aunt, Julie Kane, is a poet and, uh, she likes to take credit as the first person who gave me a keyboard. It was like a tiny, like one or one and a half octave, little digital keyboard, um, when I was, you know, three or something <laughs>. But, um, but she's always been a model for living an artistic life, a creative life and, and doing it with grace and also just persisting, uh, no matter how challenging it is to make a living as a poet. And I think it's even harder to be a poet because there's even less funding in that field. I think a lot less funding where really you have to be teaching, unless you're one of, of a handful of poets, you don't make your living just writing.

Dale 00:05:40 You have to also be speaking and lecturing and yeah. So to see her to grow up, seeing her do all of that, um, and to read her work and to talk to her about her own process and see in her poems because her, her life, her work is very autobiographical. Uh, and also she's a new formalist, which is interesting. It's a school of poetry where you're going back to old forms like villanells and sonnets, um, and sestinas and you're, you're making them new. You're doing kind of experimental things with the, the line breaks and the rhyme, and to, to witness that attention to form and detail and craft, I just was so lucky to have that growing up.

Jocelyn 00:06:35 Alright, so I'm going to, I'm going to start talking about *Ininitely and Without Apology*. First, I'd like to read an excerpt of the program note for *Ininitely and Without Apology*:

Ininitely and Without Apology considers the struggle between self-confidence and self-doubt. This piece explores the idea of developing confidence, particularly, but not

exclusively, as a woman. Women are often socialized to be quiet or to not take up space. In the face of that, how do we develop the kind of resilience it takes to project and share our voice? *Infinitely and Without Apology* takes its title from a phrase of Grace Gorski's poem "A Fat Girl's Guide to Loving Her Body," from the anthology, *Nasty Women Poets* (Lost Horse Press, 2017). The full line of the poem from which the title is excerpted reads: "Remember, your bones contain fragments / of galaxies, and if the universe can stretch / infinitely and without apology, so can you." This work was commissioned by the Pasadena Symphony Association and Margaret H. Sedenquist. This piece was premiered by the Pasadena Symphony (David Lockington, conductor).

Jocelyn **00:07:50** Can you describe how this piece came to be?

Dale **00:07:53** Yes. So this, this is the piece, and I, I, I've mentioned this before, but I don't know if I've explicitly said that this is the piece where this happened, but I, I started this commission thinking I was going to write a piece about outer space. And, obviously, this piece is not about outer space. It's not about, um, it's not about that at all. The original partner for this commission changed. And I'd written about a minute of music, and then, uh, Margaret Sedenquist, who you mentioned, it was in the program note, uh, stepped in to fund this commission. And so, the theme of the program changed, and I had this minute of music, and I was just thinking about like, if now the theme is women, which is my least favorite theme of any theme that I've had to write music about.

Dale **00:08:46** And yet, it, it used to be, I think this is changing, but it used to be that that was a very common thing is, I would get a commission request and it'd be like, oh, we're doing a program with all women. Write a piece about being a woman. And that's so, that doesn't mean anything. Like if I, I can write about a little slice of my personal experience, but I cannot write a piece about the experience of all women because that is not something I have access to. I have access to my own experience. Anyway, I was thinking about all of this and I was reading this anthology, which my aunt co-edited *Nasty Women Poets*, and I found this poem. And I just love the idea of, this one line links those two themes together, right?

Dale **00:09:29** We have the universe stretching *Infinitely and Without Apology*. Um, and then we have the idea of just taking up space. Taking up space as a person in the world and not apologizing for it. Like, as children, how do we take up space? How, how, how are we ourselves, um, before we know how, how we're quote unquote supposed to be? So, I know I struggled a lot with, like, I never raised my hand in class pretty much all through, like up through high school. I just didn't really talk in class at all. Uh, and it was really quiet. And I think a lot of that was just this, making myself smaller, that I've worked really hard in my adult life to shatter.

Jocelyn **00:10:16** Let's listen now to *Infinitely and Without Apology*.

[Audio of *Infinitely and Without Apology*.]

Jocelyn 00:12:00 I really was impressed with the orchestration of, of your work, *Infinately and Without Apology*. Especially at the beginning. I, I do think you nailed it in terms of the universe, you know, thinking about this, you know, this thing that's constantly expanding and getting bigger, right? And, and is so vast and expansive that it's hard to comprehend. And I felt that in the beginning of your piece. How do you think you did that? How did you get us to feel that way?

Dale 00:12:29 I mean, I think a lot of it is the, the strings are sort of doing this shimmering glissando thing, and that's the sort of ethereal effect that I was talking about.

Jocelyn 00:12:40 I love this feeling of stretching, you know, which is in the line of poetry that inspired the piece. But also, I just heard it, especially in that opening, I think it's the glissandi in, in various instruments, I heard that little bit of stretching happening. Um, but I thought that was really beautifully done, and well crafted in the work. And then, I noticed, when in the middle of the piece, the music gets a little bit darker and a little bit moodier. Um, and it seemed to me that all of the intervals shrunk that, that, I don't know if you intended for that, but that's what I heard. And that's what I felt is that all of a sudden, there was a lot of the minor third in there. And it just, it felt small and it felt like insecurity. I mean, I guess you, you said that a little bit, but I don't know if you want to say anything more about that.

Dale 00:13:29 Yeah, I was definitely thinking about stripping things away from this richer texture that, in this piece, represents confidence. Um, and getting to the little like insecure kernel of self-doubt that I think is within all of us and motivates a lot of bad things. A lot of negative things come from that, from not tending to that little insecure, maybe childlike part of yourself.

Jocelyn 00:13:55 Yeah.

Dale 00:13:56 I was thinking about making the texture smaller, and I think everything did kind of condense in that moment. And then, from there, it's important to do that in this piece because then we get a sense of richness and fullness when we come back into the ending of the piece.

Jocelyn 00:14:13 The choral work that I'm excited to share with the podcast listeners today is, *Breathe in Hope*. Could you share a little bit about how this piece came to be?

Dale 00:14:22 Yeah, so this, this piece was unique in that I used a text from social media, which does not happen often. Although, I do have one other piece that sets, uh, a tweet <laughs> from Twitter. Which is, uh, again, not where I usually look for texts, but, uh, Maya Jackson, uh, is, uh, an actress. Uh, and she does, she does many things. Um, but I knew her, uh, at our time at the University of Maryland as undergrads, um, as an actress. And she was actually taking voice lessons for a little bit, and I accompanied her. Um, I was also friends with some of the, the theater kids, and Maya was in that circle. And so, I knew her, uh, through that. And, this is years, years after college, I read two posts, um, posted about the deaths of

Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. Uh, the, the, I say deaths, but I, usually, when I'm talking about this, I say murder. Like, death at the hands of police officers, um, who should not have killed these men.

Dale **00:15:31** And, Maya's response was so, so graceful and so powerful at the same time. And, it expressed, I think all the best, uh, poetry does this, where it expresses a feeling we've had, but haven't known how to name or what to call it. And so, for me, the line, uh, "This is going to sound wrong, but I hope this pain lasts." That served as just that moment of recognition where I was like, yes, I have had this feeling of like this, this situation is so awful. And our instinct is to move past the awfulness. It's to just like, how do we move forward? How do we heal as a country or what, you know, all these things like we, we say. But, that's not always the right impulse. Sometimes, if we're witnessing police brutality, like, the response is not to heal quickly and move on, it's to ask what we personally can do. How we can show up, uh, in our communities, in our lives to enact change. And I think the piece, obviously it comes from this one specific situation, but I think this is true of so much of what's happening in the world right now, where the impulse to heal as quickly as possible is not necessarily the right instinct. And it's more helpful to stay in that moment and ask how it will change us.

Jocelyn **00:17:00** Yeah. So true. And, this piece is a few years old, but it became so relevant again recently. And I hope, for the reasons you just talked about, that it continues to be a conversation that we have, um, until we feel better about it. Which I hope someday we do feel like we've done, like we've really made progress in this, um, unfortunate circumstance and, uh, problem that we have.

Dale **00:17:29** I hope this piece doesn't get performed. Like, I hope there's a time where no one's performing this piece. Which is a really strange thing to say about your own music. Especially, about a piece that I do really love, that, I think, I mean, I just, I'm happy with how it turned out and that's not always the case in every piece that I write. Um, this one, I feel, I, I stand behind the music and, and Maya's words. And, at the same time, it would be great if no one was like, "this piece is so relevant." If everyone was like, "but this has no bearing on, <laughs> on my life because there's nothing to fix in this way." Like, we've, we've seen the kind of fundamental systemic change that needs to happen.

Jocelyn **00:18:13** Yeah. So, *Breathe in Hope*, is available for SATB, SSAA, and TTBB choirs, uh, with piano. And today we're going to listen to the SSAA version, which is the piece in its original form. And, before we do that, I just want to read an excerpt of this amazing text:

We must breathe in hope.
And so have I. Taken in joy. And beauty. And selfishness. And frivolity. And laughter.
We are wonderful. Humans.
We find the light.

[Audio of *Breathe in Hope*]

Jocelyn 00:25:25 *Compose Like a Girl* was produced by Justin Schell, Laura Krider, and me, Jocelyn Hagen, with special help from fellow composers Erika Malpass and Addie Struckman. The *Compose Like a Girl* theme music was composed by cellist Cicely Parnas. Thank you all for helping me with this vision. Thanks also to the Pasadena Symphony and Los Angeles Children's Chorus for their performances that were played on today's episode.

Jocelyn 00:25:51 You can learn more about [Dale Trumbore](#) and [her](#) music at daletrumbore.com and by following [her](#) on social media. Check out the links in our show notes, visit jocelynhagen.com/composelikeagirl, and follow us on Facebook and Instagram to listen to the music we talked about today, learn more about the *Compose Like a Girl* initiative, and check out past episodes. You can also find choral programming ideas by checking out the *Compose Like a Girl* choral series distributed through Graphite Publishing.

Jocelyn 00:26:21 To ensure that we can keep bringing these conversations to you, please consider joining our *Compose Like a Girl* Patreon page and giving what you can. Subscribe to the *Compose Like a Girl* podcast wherever you get your podcasts. And, if you're so moved, rate us on Apple Podcasts and share it with a few friends who you think will find inspiration. Until next time, trust your instincts. Be brave and unapologetic for your talents. Thanks for listening!