

TMDTA 48 Betty Marinsky

Tue, Sep 20, 2022 10:24PM • 1:03:56

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

singers, audition, people, feel, teacher, classical music, singing, johnny, opera, voice, project, music, lots, life, bit, nice, musicians, dance, organisation, thought

SPEAKERS

Betty Makharinsky, Rebecca Toal, Hattie Butterworth

Hattie Butterworth 00:00

Just before we start this episode with Betty, I just wanted to say, again, I'm really sorry, this one as well has some interesting background noises. We recorded this episode on a day of rehearsals in Stanley Arts in Croydon, and I had a great time watching a bit of the rehearsal of Vache Baroque festival. And then Betty and I found the room to do the recording in but we just kept getting interrupted by hoovers and other weird and wonderful sounds. Almost feels like a sound bingo. You can hear a siren at one point, someone whistling at another point, big Hoover moments ... it hopefully doesn't take away too much from the wonderful conversation I had with Betty. Yeah, just for a bit of context, because I don't think I explained it very well in the actual interview. Betsy Makharinsky is an amazing soprano. And she's also the co founder of the Vache Baroque Festival, who just had a wonderful run of shows beginning of this month, so beginning of September, but they have lots more planned for the rest of the year and going on to the future. And it was also just great to learn more about Betty and her life as a musician and singer as well. So yeah, once again, huge apologies for the beautiful array of sounds. Also just a quick reminder, it's brilliant if you can take a minute to subscribe to the podcast, wherever you're listening to it. Also, if you're on Apple Music, if you could review that will be insanely cool and really helpful apparently. Apparently it's is a very good thing in terms of getting up listenership and stuff. So if you have a moment and have Apple podcasts, please write us a little review, that'd be really helpful. Also, we're on Patreon if you want a few more extra episodes, and a bit of the behind the scenes and just want to support us monthly. It's three pounds a month. And we'd love to see you over there and connect with you all a bit more. So yeah, thank you so much. I really hope you enjoy this interview with Betty Makharinsky.

Hattie Butterworth 02:17

Hello and welcome to Things Musicians Don't Talk About with your hosts Hattie Butterworth.

Rebecca Toal 02:23

And me Rebecca Toal.

Hattie Butterworth 02:25

Within our vibrant musical world, it can often feel that the struggles and humanity of musicians is lost and restricted.

Rebecca Toal 02:32

Having both suffered in silence with mental physical and emotional issues, we are now looking for a way to voice musician stories and discuss them further and to connect with the many others who suffer like we have.

Hattie Butterworth 02:43

No topic we'll be out of bounds as we're committed to raising awareness for all varieties of struggle.

Rebecca Toal 02:49

So join me, Hattie, and guests as we attempt to bring an end to stigma by uncovering the things musicians don't talk about.

Hattie Butterworth 03:18

Thank you for having me.

Betty Makharinsky 03:20

Thank you very much for coming.

Hattie Butterworth 03:21

It's amazing to be here.

Betty Makharinsky 03:22

So lovely to have to be together in the room, for this process. I'm the company manager of the Orpheus production. And I am, meanwhile, running lots of things behind the scenes. We went into the room together and saw a run of a section of the first act. And the dancers were also watching it with us. And it's cool to get goosebumps and to hear the singers coming together and sounding really lush. And yeah, the quality of performers in the room is really exciting. That's been something we've been very fortunate to have from day one. And it's very cool. It's a huge privilege to work with talented, highly trained singers and musicians and to see them doing their thing.

Hattie Butterworth 04:05

So how did you kind of get together this group specifically? Was that something that you did yourself or...?

Betty Makharinsky 04:10

Urr, a combination. So this cast and group of instrumentalists and dancers came together in a variety of ways. The seven singers who you heard today all responded to open audition calls, and we had over 100 applicants.

Hattie Butterworth 04:30

Wow.

Betty Makharinsky 04:31

Then we saw ... I say 'we'. I actually wasn't in the audition room. That was Jeanne our director, and Johnny, my co-founder and the MD of the opera. They auditioned about 25 singers for seven roles. That was an interesting process. It's always great to see people coming in and being a little bit nervous and a little bit performative. And then if you can do something to make them relax, and actually feel comfortable in their own skin, and in the setting of an audition and actually perform how they have the potential to perform, you can see, "okay, this is who they're going to be as part of the production" as opposed to "okay, you know, quick two minutes, did they manage to perform under huge pressure?" Okay, sometimes some people are really good at auditions and showing themselves in the best light immediately, but some people aren't, they need a little bit of time to open up. And Johnny and I ... I keep saying all of this as us. We talked about the process lots and I was stewarding one of the auditions, so I sort of listened from the back of the room - sneaky! And but I don't think it is the same thing as performing in a show or in a concert because everything about an audition is false. There's no vibe from the audience, you've got two people sitting in front of you writing in notebooks. And even if they try and be really friendly and encouraging, they can't create the same relaxed, inspiring, live performance atmosphere. So I think, credit to Johnny, he's really great at running the audition room, we've had lots of really nice feedback from singers about the fact that he's really tried to put people at ease. He's a singer himself so he's been in that position. And he feels very seriously about being responsible for their wellbeing and enjoyment in that moment and helping them to try and show the best of themselves.

Hattie Butterworth 06:34

Yeah, I think that some of my best audition experiences have been in that kind of context as well like playing an excerpt and then knowing it went a bit wrong and they know it went a bit wrong, so you can do it again and they ask you, you know, "oh, why don't you play a bit slower? Or..." you know, I just yeah, it completely changes your experience.

Betty Makharinsky 06:51

Absolutely. And also you come away with something other than just having gone and performed something and thought okay that was either good or not so good. You come away with a tip or like a mini coaching, essentially, which is called as one, then the whole audition process, if you don't get the role can be more positive. And it means that fewer musicians and singers will feel burn out from the constant application process. If it's a...

Hattie Butterworth 07:21

Of course, yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 07:21

... fulfilling process in and of itself. It does mean that you can see fewer people, and that's tricky. Rejecting people before they even get in the room. And we haven't found a solution for that yet. Maybe in the future, when we have more resources and more budget and more time, we can do multi day auditions and see more people because that would be cool, but it feels more important to give people more time in the room. Anyway, all of that...

Hattie Butterworth 07:48

Yeah! No, it's really interesting!

Betty Makharinsky 07:50

... we gathered this group of singers from open calls and really excited at the standard and the individuality of all of their voices. They've all got very beautiful voice colours.

Hattie Butterworth 08:01

Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 08:02

And they're all brilliant.

Hattie Butterworth 08:04

Very good actors as well.

Betty Makharinsky 08:06

Exactly. Really important. As part of the audition, they asked them to do some physical movement and some acting and putting on a character for one of the extracts that they were asked to prepare. And they're all really nice people...

Hattie Butterworth 08:19

Aww.

Betty Makharinsky 08:19

... which is really important, because that's the one thing you don't know until everybody gathers on day one.

Hattie Butterworth 08:41

Yeah, it does feel a really wonderful like gel. And obviously, you're a singer yourself.

Betty Makharinsky 08:48

Mhmm-hmm.

Hattie Butterworth 08:48

And that's what all your training is in. And I'm wondering how, like your own experience of auditions has been and like, has that impacted in the way that you see auditions for this? Or how you want to support singers for this project?

Betty Makharinsky 09:03

For sure. That's a really nice thing to think about. I've had some great audition experiences. I've had ... I think the best ones have almost been for the projects where I didn't get it. But I received an email saying "you were our second choice."

Hattie Butterworth 09:18

Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 09:18

Or some really nice comment that made me feel validated, because when you get it, that's a huge celebration, and you feel amazing. And then you kind of forget what the audition was like, because you think "well, I got it and obviously it went well." Whereas if you didn't get it, and you don't get to do the project, but somebody makes the effort to say, "but we really liked you. And we just chose somebody with more experience or more ... perfectly fitting for the role." That is still a really nice confirmation that you are ... that your singing and music making is valid and that you deserve to be in this industry. And ... or keep trying and keep auditioning for things. And I also really enjoy auditions where there's some movement or where there's some workshopping with the creative team. I always think that's fun. I did one audition, which was an entire day of workshopping. And that was so cool. They gathered a group of about 30 people. It was essentially an R&D mixed audition process that was really interesting and enjoyable. I've had some very scary auditions where you walk in and the panel is sitting far, far, far away and they don't really look at you or smile at you. And they ... and I ... having now been not on the audition panel, but on the other side, I realise I have learnt talking to colleagues who are on audition panels a lot, particularly directors, I have one in mind who's very verbal about trying to make auditions a more positive experience for singers. And I remember her saying, "you can't control what the panel are thinking, where they've come from, what's happened in their personal lives that morning, whether they're hungry, whether they are tired. You can't control what they're bringing to the room, so don't worry about it. There's no point trying to second guess. Did he enjoy that phrase? Does he look a bit bored? Is he texting somebody? Is she getting up and leaving the room to go to the loo? Does she not want to hear me?" It's much easier said than done, but it's encouraged me to try and be much more mindful about my audition process and to treat it as a performance and as a situation where I can only control what I'm doing. And the audition panel will take it or leave it, but if I am confident and bold with the choices that I make and I can walk in there and settle my nerves such that I can actually sing how I want to sing, then it will be a positive experience, whether I get it or not. And then the process of whether they make it extra good for me is then a bonus. And if they're really engaging and friendly, then you're much more likely to ... well, I'm much more likely to be able to relax into it and feel good about it.

Hattie Butterworth 12:13

And to sort of want to follow their project, even if you don't get in, you know. And want to be involved in, in maybe in the future, or consider reapplying or whatever.

Betty Makharinsky 12:23

Definitely.

Hattie Butterworth 12:23

I think that's something I've also had recently with job interviews: people who have, you know, made it so that they really look at you and listen and ask questions and really, you know, like, that are really personal to you and learn properly about you like that. That can kind of make or break how you feel if you get a rejection, which so often you will. It's just gonna happen.

Betty Makharinsky 12:49

Exactly.

Hattie Butterworth 12:49

But obviously, like, you were a singer, trained as a singer, you must have a lot of singer friends.

Betty Makharinsky 12:56

Yes.

Hattie Butterworth 12:56

I'm really like ... has this been a difficult thing to kind of have this project and, like want to ... I don't know how to put it, like not want to sort of hurt anyone or not want to kind of intertwine like your personal singer friend world and like ...

Betty Makharinsky 13:14

Big time.

Hattie Butterworth 13:14

Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 13:15

And I think that's probably the reason that I have chosen not to be on the audition panel, and I've shifted that responsibility on to Johnny.

Hattie Butterworth 13:24

Nice.

Betty Makharinsky 13:25

He has a bit more, he has a bit more experience with being a music director and a conductor and walking that really difficult tightrope between friend colleague: "Okay, now in this situation, I'm your boss, because I'm telling you what to do in the rehearsal room." And then suddenly, lunch break comes and we switch into chill friend vibes. He's struggled with it. In the past, he's often got very worried about whether he's hurt someone's feelings or whether he treated like, the communication with somebody in the right way before and after. But with experience, hopefully you get better at it. And also, you realise that ... this is me speaking, speaking on his behalf, but he does say it is important in the rehearsal room to be able to have some authority. And perhaps that's why as conductors and music directors and directors progress along their careers... Yeah essentially. I think for me, personally, I've avoided it.

Hattie Butterworth 14:23

Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 14:23

Betty Makharinsky 14:27

And I ... it's yeah, it's very tricky. And for that reason, I've slightly deflected and said, "Oh, that's not my realm of decisions. Please apply and, you know, the creative team on the project will either hear you or not hear you, but I'm not involved in that process." And that has made it much easier. And ... but it is tricky when you have friends who really want to help them succeed.

Hattie Butterworth 14:36

Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 14:42

And yet also you run an organisation which you want to have integrity of casting and it not being a handshake behind ... I don't know what the correct saying is.

Hattie Butterworth 14:50

Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 14:51

But it's not fair on other singers.

Hattie Butterworth 14:53

Yeah, yeah, it gives it a bad reputation.

Betty Makharinsky 14:54

Absolutely and if other singers think, "Oh, well, I'm not gonna get cast anyway because they only cast their friends", then they won't want to apply surely. And also, you will get a better cast on average, if you cast openly because you're choosing from a bigger pool. There's always the tricky thing of if you know somebody and if you've worked with them, you know that they're reliable...

Hattie Butterworth 15:19

Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 15:20

... and you know that they can deliver. And we have ... last year we cast somebody that was in our 2020 production. Sorry, two singers were cast from Dido who came to audition for Acis. And I know that Johnny did his best to be objective about it and think, "Okay, I'm going to assess them side by side with the other singers." It might be that they were more relaxed in the room because they knew what to expect, and they knew him. But they did walk in there and put on extremely convincing performances that were way, way more compelling than other people. And it's, you never know, the reasons for somebody's good or bad audition. And you have to go on that 20 minutes for casting because otherwise, it's impractical.

Hattie Butterworth 16:06

Yeah. Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 16:07

Maybe in the future you can have a longer process. But it's tricky, because of it's a big administrative and time, and resources burden on any organisation. And as we all know, the arts are squeezed from every direction. So it's a luxury perhaps that at the moment, we can't afford, and I'm sure lots of other organisations can't either.

Hattie Butterworth 16:20

For sure. Going back to the sort of just bare starts of this whole thing ...Yeah. What was it that you wanted to bring to the arts world with this project?

Betty Makharinsky 16:30

We started in the summer of 2020. And the motivations were quite straightforward. At first, we wanted to create work for singers. And we wanted to create things for people to go to as audiences at a time when there was nothing going on. And audiences didn't have live performances to go to. It was a very specific setting: COVID, and that first summer where everybody thought, "will we ever go back? How long is it going to take? Will there be a vaccine?" We didn't know. So we were motivated by that in the first instance. But then very quickly, we thought, "okay, we don't want to put on something for the sake of putting on something. We want to do it in a way that motivates us." And the way that we came up with was to try and make it really fresh and young and accessible. And I know that that's what, you know, that's the in vogue thing to do, and for good reason. People need to bring new audiences to classical music. But we were really motivated by that. And we set out some things from the start i.e a free dress rehearsal that we encourage people to sign up to via Google form. And the idea is anybody who can't afford tickets, or anybody who can't justify the spend on tickets, so for instance, people who've never been to an opera before and think, "Well, I could maybe afford a ticket but actually..."

Hattie Butterworth 17:57

Do I want to prioritise that?

Betty Makharinsky 17:59

Exactly, and I've got other things that I want to spend money on. And the idea is that if we get them to come along to the free dress rehearsal, and they love it, maybe we can convert them to a classical music concert goer and somebody who wants to go and see shows and spend their money on that. We had Under 35 tickets freely available on our site to book. You don't have to sign up to any mailing lists and like get notified about it. They're just part of the offer online. And they were ... I can't remember what they were in year one, either 35 pounds ... Maybe last year they were 30 pounds. This year, we just decided to make them 25 pounds. Because I think the under 35s are getting squeezed more than anybody else at the moment in this recession and that's the priority age group, I guess in terms of who is missing genuinely from classical music audiences and from the very outset as well, we had a 13 year old chorister take part in Dido and we realised that we loved having 'education' in inverted commas integrated into our main shows, and that triggered us setting up a kid's choir last year and having them involved in our big Bach cantatas programme alongside really established, fabulous singers and players and actors. And what Johnny and I both really believe in is the fact that seminal, exciting, inspiring experiences as a young child will stay with you forever. I still remember Carmina Burana at the

Albert Hall with my school or county choir, I can't remember exactly who it was. But I remember being in the hall and feeling the sensation of the adrenaline and...

Betty Makharinsky 18:32

Feeling kind of important and part of something as well. Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 19:42

Totally. And that's what we're trying to provide to kids. We think there's lots of brilliant music education provision, but we think maybe there's not enough opportunities for kids to be side by side with adults on professional stages, where they contribute a little bit, but feel part of something important, and they feel, "okay, I belong here, I might feel inspired now to continue my journey with classical music. Maybe I was finding piano lessons a bit boring, but now I'll be more motivated to keep going with it." I mean, that's a silly example but ... and also ...

Hattie Butterworth 20:16

But they can be boring.

Betty Makharinsky 20:21

And by making a kid's choir actually, we hope that children who haven't had very much music education beyond the school classroom, can take part and year by year, we're hoping we can prioritise applicants who can demonstrate need to take part in a free project. And also a decent singing voice and ability to pitch. But ultimately, more importantly, we are looking for enthusiasm and need or people who haven't had kids who haven't had those experiences who could really benefit from them.

Hattie Butterworth 20:45

Wow. Yeah. I also would really like to hear about the decision to include contemporary dance as well. Like, where did that come from? And was that something also that you wanted from the start? Or...?

Hattie Butterworth 20:56

Wow.

Betty Makharinsky 20:56

Yeah, BirdGang Ltd are this super cool dance troupe. They are based in Croydon at Stanley Arts, actually, where we are here right now. And they were co-founded by Ukweli Roach, who Johnny was at school with. And when we first thought, "Okay, let's do a festival", in that first year, when we put everything together in 12 weeks, we did cast from our friends and through people that we knew, because like, it was impossible, we couldn't have run an open application process. And Johnny got in touch with Ukweli and said "do you wanna collaborate?" and they'd always chatted about possibly doing something together. Ukweli's a really talented dancer, but also a choreographer, an actor, he's quite successful, been in a number of TV dramas, actually, he's currently filming something quite high profile, hire, look him up. He's a fabulous guy.

Betty Makharinsky 21:07

And he was upfront. He said, Yeah, I'll be your choreographer, he went above and beyond, put loads of time in and got two dancers involved. Actually, the reason for why them and why contemporary dance, we thought it would work really well. Dido has a number of specific dancers, instrumental pieces that are supposed to be danced to, and we thought, why not surprise people with the genre of dance? Why ... instead of maybe doing something more traditional, and it went down extremely well, people. Audiences gave us really nice feedback, but a few reviewers, one of them said I could watch an entire hour of BirdGang's choreography. Somebody else said the other dancers lit up the stage and they were two fantastically talented dancers. Ukweli's an amazing choreographer But there's also something wonderful about collaborating with another organisation, and BirdGang have been running for some time. And at our inception, it was really cool to have an established thing coming in and collaborating with us. It was lovely, very flattering. And...

Hattie Butterworth 23:40

Is it hard to persuade donors into, including, you know, what, I suppose you're approaching donors who maybe would have an interest in opera or in Baroque music... And then to show them this idea of, you know, having something so contemporary and so fast moving alongside it, have you found that people are really supportive of that idea, or has it been quite hard to persuade people that it does work? And...

Betty Makharinsky 24:02

Great question. I think we've benefited from doing it in year one.

Hattie Butterworth 24:07

Right.

Betty Makharinsky 24:07

And year one, we were on a super tight budget. Lots of people ... everybody who took part, did it on relatively small fees, and we had a very small costume and set budget. So we didn't have that many donors involved at all, in year one. And then we had the film material of Dido to go forward with and to pitch to people with and I think it sold itself for us.

Betty Makharinsky 24:33

BirdGang don't have one particular style of dance that they do. They have a number of dancers who have different specialties, so for instance, some of them might be particularly into popping and locking and some of them might be more into sort of more fluid, somewhere between street and contemporary. And therefore collaborating with them isn't like a foray into one type of dance. It's kind of just this world of contemporary and modern dance. They call themselves movement architects, which I love.

Hattie Butterworth 24:34

Yeah that's great.

Hattie Butterworth 24:40

That's brilliant, yeah.

Hattie Butterworth 25:05

Yeah, yeah, it really ... well, the very, very bare bones that I saw this morning, it was just, yeah, really exciting to, to have it side by side. And to kind of like ... this, this music, it's like Baroque music, and especially the Charpentier that you're doing, like, it is so colourful, that you just naturally want to, I don't know, it just makes sense to have dance alongside. And I think the way it's been choreographed, it really draws out certain things in the music by watching the movement, like that's kind of what hit me.

Betty Makharinsky 25:46

So I think dance can help to make this sort of music accessible for that exact reason. You can visually illustrate phrases and take people in much clearer journeys. Also dance is just another touch point for some people who might not be into classical music, but they might have danced when they were younger, or they might love watching ballet, or they might love watching ballroom dancing. I know I have a particular friend of mine who is a really keen ballroom dancer, but she's not a very confident classical music audience goer. And I've had loads of interesting conversations with her about what she feels when she's there, and what we could do to make people like her feel more comfortable and not like a imposter. And that's the key, I think, to broadening the audience demographic: understanding what is making people feel uncomfortable, or making people feel like that's not for them, and then doing something about it. And then gradually, you will bring people on board. And I think the cool thing about classical music, and Baroque music ...I say classical music sort of in the broadest sense, is that it is complicated, often, and it does take a few listens to get into, and often, for somebody without musical training, it will take somebody explaining "this is what's going on here. This is the context, this is, when this composer was living, this is the historical context. This is the country where they were. XYZ would have been happening in the court. This, this piece would have been written for this occasion." And then people feel like, "Okay, I have context. I can now relax into the piece itself." And then at least I found that people who aren't ... don't have classical music training love being given some pointers of what to listen out for. And yeah, I feel fortunate, and Johnny as well, we feel fortunate to have a number of friends who aren't classical musicians as well. And I think they are extremely useful resources for us as producers. And we talk to lots of them about this a lot to try and figure out what we can do to appeal to them.

Hattie Butterworth 28:37

Yeah, you're so right. It's so important to have people on the other side who can be honest with you. Like, I've found that the same with the projects I do. And often you know, my siblings are the best people because they're so honest.

Betty Makharinsky 28:50

Sometimes too much.

Hattie Butterworth 28:53

But they have often been like, "Ah, I just hate the way that musicians always do this" or "do you not know when you're all together you're really frustrating because..."

Betty Makharinsky 29:00

Yeah, hopefully. And I think the whole "okay, well, we need to get new audiences in", needs to be not from a position of, because we're the best, because classical music is head and shoulders above any

other type of music. That's, for me, not the right attitude, either. But equally, we're allowed to be advocates of it, and super passionate about it and say, "I just find this music, amazing to listen to, it gives me shivers, it helps me process my emotions. I can listen to it 20 times and repeat and I don't get bored." And I want to share that, I want to share, like the ... I guess the spiritual side of it, like how it makes me feel, and how it improves my life.

Hattie Butterworth 29:40

I'd really like to go on to talking about your education. But I think that's something I lost in my education, speaking from me, and I've only gained back since graduating, and taking time to play the cello on my own without the structure is..."Oh my gosh, yeah, this is a real, spiritually important thing in my life." And this music, there are so many different pieces of music that means so much to me that I kind of forgot about because it felt like the whole industry and world I was in was so suffocating for me. And that is a very, you know, specific example, and I didn't have a great time, and I've been very honest about that. And that's not necessarily the college's fault or anything. But yeah, like I think there's a lot of what you say about the spirituality of, of classical music and what it can do in people's lives that I really ... Yeah, I really feel like I've really like got back in touch with recently which is...

Betty Makharinsky 30:29

That's amazing.

Hattie Butterworth 30:30

Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 30:30

It's almost worth losing it for a bit.

Hattie Butterworth 30:32

Yeah, exactly.

Betty Makharinsky 30:34

To feel how amazing it is when you can get it back.

Hattie Butterworth 30:36

Yeah yeah. So you started off .. you read like music education, singing education ... how did it all start?

Betty Makharinsky 30:43

So I used to be a violinist. And that was my first study, throughout school. I was really lucky to have some awesome, really inspiring teachers. And I also took part in National Children's Orchestra and National Youth Strings Academy, I think it's called, and did some amazing residential summers, playing in orchestras and playing in string orchestras and doing chamber music. And I was also doing loads of ballet. I was mad about ballet. And actually, I was more mad about ballet than was about violin. And I was dreaming of being a ballet dancer but it was never going to be ...

Hattie Butterworth 31:16

Why not?

Betty Makharinsky 31:16

...because I don't have, it's just quite ... I don't quite have the right body physique and turn out the hips. And when I was about 15, I stopped dancing. And that's sort of when I started singing more. I'd taken some singing lessons before them, but I hadn't sung that much. Mainly focusing on dancing and violin. And then I changed schools at sixth form, and I was really fortunate to go to a brilliant school with an amazing, quite intense chamber choir. And I hadn't been in a choir before. The Director of Music said, "Why don't you audition?" And I did. And I got into the chamber choir, and I was cast in an opera production as the main soprano. And it was like, there was this whirlwind term and it made me think, "Oh, my goodness, I'm good at singing. I can do ... I could do this." And what was really exciting, was it it combined my favourite bits of violin and ballet. And...

Hattie Butterworth 32:12

Yeah, of course.

Betty Makharinsky 32:13

So it was very cathartic for me , cos I thought," Okay, I could still be a type of ballet dancer, I just have to be an opera singer."

Hattie Butterworth 32:21

Yeah wow.

Hattie Butterworth 32:22

Because, yeah, I love moving to music and singing feels amazing. Then when I started my music degree at Oxford, I combined that with singing lessons in London with a lady called Nelly Miricioiu, wonderful Romanian opera singer and teacher. And that was real baptism of fire. She was intense, very serious about opera, very serious about how dedicated you have to be to vocal training to get anywhere. And what was really cool about taking lessons with her was that I felt part of ... I felt a bit in the 'in crowd'. Before, I'd been to see like an opera or two, but I didn't know that much about it. My parents go to classical music stuff and actually, as I've become a singer, they've got super engaged with opera, which is so lovely. And they go to stuff independently now of me. And I felt when I was taking lessons with her that I was connected to somebody who had a really starry career, singing on the stages of the Met and the Royal Opera House and La Scala, And she had all these amazing stories. She has all these amazing stories. I'm still friends with her and very much in awe of her achievements as a singer and as a teacher.

Betty Makharinsky 34:39

I studied with her while I was at Oxford and then I took a year out, applied to Guildhall and went to Guildhall to do Masters studies. Ended up only staying for a year for various reasons. And then, sort of the rest since then has been individual lessons with various teachers. And I just felt that I wasn't quite finding what I needed technically. Until last year, I met a teacher in Italy called Antonio Lemmo. And for the last 13/14 months, I've been going to his house between Rome and Naples, and staying with him, taking daily singing lessons. And that has been totally transformative for my technique, but also my

confidence. And now I'm in a headspace that I want to make room in my life for doing lots of auditions in the coming year or two. And to do some opera at a level that I have been dreaming up my whole life. So I'm kind of in a yeah, in a second stage of my education, but I just went totally private and individual lessons. The college system didn't really work for me, either. I think possibly the main problem for me personally, was that I went too early. I was desperate to get in to conservatoire. And then I got my Guildhall acceptance letter, and I was over the moon and I thought "that's it. I'm 21."

Hattie Butterworth 36:18

You've made it.

Betty Makharinsky 36:19

"...just turned 22, I've made it."

Hattie Butterworth 36:20

Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 36:21

And how wrong I was!

Hattie Butterworth 36:22

Yeah,

Betty Makharinsky 36:23

I think conservatoires or specific... I can speak about Guildhall, specifically, I think it's a brilliant, very exciting place. If you are ready to make most of it. If you are not in a headspace or technically ready, then it can be not productive at best and damaging at worst. I don't know what needs to happen more, I guess people like me, and like you need to talk about it more. But on the other hand, I do feel like people were telling me that at the time, and I just wasn't hearing them. Because when you're young and ambitious and excited, you just tune out everything that doesn't work, but your narrative.

Hattie Butterworth 37:13

You think they're trying to sabotage you or whatever.

Betty Makharinsky 37:15

Exactly, yeah "I need to go now."

Hattie Butterworth 37:17

Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 37:17

Somebody else might be like, "well, maybe it'd be better for you to take another few years out and gradually developed your voice with a teacher privately" or, you know, like got some life experience, get a job, go abroad, do something else first. And you think "no. They're trying to knock me off my career route!" And it's tricky because some people it works for and that's awesome. And that's all they want to

do. And I think I was one of those people. It was all I wanted to do. And I wanted to do it as soon as possible. But it wasn't right for my voice. And I don't know whether right now it's because I've met this teacher. I don't think it's just that. I think it's a combination of the teachers I've been to over the last 10 years, and also where I am in my life in my head where my voice is, I think it's a voice that needed more time to mature. And previously, I was super frustrated that things weren't working. And I think probably teachers who I was working with were frustrated that things ... they sort of saw potential, but it wasn't converting somehow. And I say all of this preemptively because I still don't know what will happen with my career.

Hattie Butterworth 38:32

Yeah yeah!

Betty Makharinsky 38:32

But I feel much more confident that I have a good chance now, and I'm also totally realistic about it that if it doesn't happen, at least I've given it a really good shot. And I've already done some really cool projects that I'm really proud of. And maybe I'll just rethink and go in a different direction if the mainstream opera thing doesn't work out, but at the moment, I'm feeling very motivated and inspired to chase it.

Hattie Butterworth 38:58

Wow. Yeah. Do you feel like your confidence was sort of compromised after college?

Betty Makharinsky 39:03

Yeah.

Hattie Butterworth 39:04

Okay.

Betty Makharinsky 39:04

Definitely. I felt, I felt like ... the techniques vocally that I was attempting were just not working for my voice. And I thought, "Well, I'm just obviously not a good enough singer." And at the same time, there were some wonderful people from all parts of my life, trying to reassure me that I still had things to give to this career.

Hattie Butterworth 40:40

Yeah, you really need ...

Betty Makharinsky 40:43

Cheerleaders.

Hattie Butterworth 40:44

Cheerleaders, for sure.

Betty Makharinsky 40:45

Yeah, you need other people who believe in you and to boy you up, and to help you stick with it. But also you are the CEO of your mini company. You're the captain of your ship. Sorry, these are all metaphors that I use for 10 year olds.

Hattie Butterworth 42:06

I love them.

Betty Makharinsky 42:07

It's very empowering to feel that that you are in charge of your life and what you do. It's easy to slip into a mode of being where you think your life's happening to you and you're stuck. And you'd have to carry on XYZ trajectory, because that's how it's been and ...

Hattie Butterworth 42:45

You've put money into it or time into it or whatever. Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 42:48

Totally, without sounding too hippy, you know, life's short, and you are in charge of your own life. And if you are able to make the changes that you want to make, do it because why not?

Hattie Butterworth 43:01

Yeah, when you're speaking to be it kind of, it's really highlighting why maybe some of my teacher-student (me being student) relationships were so difficult and like so toxic for my development as an artist. And it's given me a lot of faith listening to you say that you've now found a mentor that is ... you're getting such brilliant results from and such excitement from, because I feel I still haven't had that yet. Probably.

Betty Makharinsky 43:31

Definitely that but also, I'm in a headspace now where I wasn't expecting him to sort all my problems out.

Hattie Butterworth 43:33

Mhmm, oh right.

Betty Makharinsky 43:33

I think that's what I was expecting when I was 21 or 18. I was coming to a singing teacher and saying, like, "teach me everything, and be in charge of my voice." And it can't work that way. And it is really difficult when you're a teenager and to be vulnerable. And you don't have experience yet. I mean, it just takes time to build up life experience to feel confident to have ownership of your own life like that. I think there are some teachers who exploit that slightly and who don't encourage teenagers and early 20s students to feel empowered and to feel really responsible for the development. They do the school teacher...

Hattie Butterworth 44:20

Spoon feeding thing...

Betty Makharinsky 44:21

Thank you.

Hattie Butterworth 44:21

Yeah, it's all good, because I've had it and it was really hard. And I've even heard, I've even had interviews with you really top musicians who've said ... actually one that's come to my mind is Laura Van der Heijden, the cellist who said she didn't feel she was good enough, at age sort of 17 to play her own concerts without her teacher having heard it first or her ...you know, I think we have all had that kind of like "they need to tell me, they need to give me the validation that this is ready to be performed."

Hattie Butterworth 44:54

You'll ruin your confidence as well.

Betty Makharinsky 44:54

Definitely. And I do think it's important particularly as a singer actually because you can sing some things that will damage your voice. And it is important to have guidance when you're starting out about what's healthy, and what's sensible to be doing. And what's like strategically, the right decision, ie hold on to singing that repertoire for another 10 years. And in 10 years time, you'll bosh it. Whereas if you do it now, your voice will be ...

Betty Makharinsky 44:59

Yes, absolutely. But it would be really nice if they could do that in a way that didn't take away all agency from you.

Hattie Butterworth 45:32

Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 45:33

Because I think I totally agree with you that whole, "I need to run every single thing I do past my teacher". It tricks you into a false sense of security somehow that once they've signed off on it, then it's definitely, definitely the right thing to do. Whereas I think maybe a healthier thing would be a combination of that and "well, what do you think? Let's spend more time maybe discussing why this could be right or could not be the best opportunity right now." Maybe it's unrealistic, but it would be nice, because maybe that would kick more young musicians and singers into a mindset of feeling like they are in charge of their own career.

Hattie Butterworth 46:15

Yeah. You know, I mean, maybe this is very much my own experience of feeling very ... yeah, not good enough at college. But yeah, it's difficult to feel that autonomy when your teacher is sort of the god in your life.

Betty Makharinsky 46:30

The tricky thing for singers is often the balance of choral and solo singing.

Hattie Butterworth 46:35

Right.

Betty Makharinsky 46:35

I don't know if you know much about this.

Hattie Butterworth 46:37

No, not at all.

Betty Makharinsky 46:38

They require quite different techniques and lots of conservatoire teachers will shudder at the idea of you going and doing a Sunday church job, being part of the choir.

Betty Makharinsky 46:51

Where, especially as a soprano, where you might be asked to sing straight tone, and it's for good reason. Because, again, while your voice is forming, and while your technique is solidifying, trying to blend your voice can be quite, not damaging, but regressive. Sometimes it can be damaging as well, of course. But I think in most situations, it just means that you don't move on as quickly with your solo technique.

Hattie Butterworth 46:51

Wow.

Hattie Butterworth 47:20

Really?!

Betty Makharinsky 47:21

Where it's all about freedom and trying to get as much ring as possible and be being really connected. Whereas in a choir... , also just logistically, what's happening, somebody is conducting you, and you're trying to come in, at the same time as let's say 15 other singers, that body language is very tense, like, you will have to breathe at exactly the right moment, and then start your onset at perfect time. Whereas when you're training your solo voice, it's all about trying to breathe super freely, and then getting a really clear, clean onset, or depending on the type of phrase you want to sing, but getting an onset that is relaxed, and then releasing and trying to remove tension from your throat as much as possible. And sometimes, often, choral singing is not conducive to that until you're in point with your technique, where you're so confident that you can manipulate your voice to achieve the vocal effects that you need without damaging or without regressing somehow on your journey.

Hattie Butterworth 48:31

So stressful.

Betty Makharinsky 48:32

It is stressful. So I say all of that to point out that...

Hattie Butterworth 48:37

Yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 48:38

The pressure from teachers can sometimes come from a good place.

Hattie Butterworth 48:42

Yeah, yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 48:43

And I wonder what the equivalent is with sort of a cello teacher saying, or making you feel ready?

Hattie Butterworth 48:49

Yeah, it's it's tricky.

Betty Makharinsky 48:51

It's really tricky. And also surviving as a student, musician and singer in London is crazy!

Hattie Butterworth 48:59

I didn't survive very well.

Betty Makharinsky 49:01

Exactly.

Hattie Butterworth 49:01

Yeah yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 49:02

So stressful.

Hattie Butterworth 49:17

Yeah. Yeah. I'm really interested, though, with your kind of really exciting new, not new, sorry, but like, relatively new, like, the gusto for auditioning and being the best thing that you can be and just feeling free and excited to do that. How is that in your future mind, like, how does that feel alongside the Vache project?

Betty Makharinsky 49:46

Great question.

Hattie Butterworth 49:47

Is that quite a stressful like, idea of combining the two and like trying to have the two side by side?

Betty Makharinsky 49:52

Yeah, it's tricky. When we started Vache in 2020, we all had and I say we all mean the four of us, me, Johnny, Daniel and Amelia. We sort of were the core team, and we had lots of other people volunteering and helping us. We all had loads of time. So we didn't have to make a choice ever. We just did VBF and we worked crazy hours and made it happen. Then last year started to become more difficult because life was sort of starting up other singing projects were starting up. But it was still somehow quite low key. Like we were in and out of lockdowns and lots of projects were still on pause. This year, it feels like everything is back to 100%.

Hattie Butterworth 51:12

Yeah, it does.

Betty Makharinsky 51:13

There's so much on.

Hattie Butterworth 51:14

So many ideas and opportunities and ...

Betty Makharinsky 51:17

Exactly so many concerts, yeah, and opportunities to audition for and things to be part of. And that has felt a little bit overwhelming at times. But as soon as I get over that, it's just really exciting. And we are in a cool place as an organisation and charity in sort of year three of existence in year two of being a charity, that we've now built up loads of structures that were really difficult and time consuming to do. But we now have a board of eight trustees, and ...

Hattie Butterworth 51:53

Wow, yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 51:53

We have a bigger team, we have trustee meetings in person in a boardroom. That was amazing, and very scary the first time it happened. But it really made it feel like a real thing. The dream is to bring more and more people on board VBF that can start taking over some of the management roles that Johnny and I have been covering. For that, obviously, we have to fundraise, which is difficult, especially in this climate. But this History of Sound project we have started in the last few months and that where, we've just submitted a big Arts Council bid for ...

Hattie Butterworth 58:28

Oh well done.

Betty Makharinsky 58:29

And hopefully ... yeah, it's a huge piece of work.

Hattie Butterworth 58:31

Huge, yeah.

Betty Makharinsky 58:32

We will hopefully, that will hopefully be the focus of VBF first half of next year, if it's all funded. And if it's all in schools, and we've already got all our school partners lined up, the idea is that we do hands on workshops after the show. And kids will be able to, like experiment with household objects, carve their own pipes out of carrots, which is really fun. We've done lots of YouTube tutorial carrot drilling to experiment.

Hattie Butterworth 59:40

It's probably nice to have another focus in a way. I think we can get really like screwy about if we just have one thing.

Betty Makharinsky 59:49

Big time, oh my goodness. Yeah, I think it's really helped me not to have to attach all of my self worth to my singing career. And when we do a VBF project that I feel really proud of, and it goes well, and that is so much more in my control in my singing career is, I feel so much more confident and balanced, going in, like putting myself out there for singing stuff, because then if I don't get it, I don't think, "oh my goodness..."

Hattie Butterworth 1:00:19

I'm a terrible person.

Betty Makharinsky 1:00:21

Exactly. I think, "okay, like this part of me is not working out to plan right now." But like, it's much easier to stay motivated, because I've got VBF helping me feel like I'm achieving stuff. I think that's probably important for all musicians and singers to have another project. And it doesn't need to be big. And do you know what, actually my teaching and tutoring work, I've really changed my opinion on that, because it used to be something that I thought I had to do, just to earn money, but I didn't really put very much thought into, like how I was as a tutor was a good tutor. Do I enjoy it, I just sort of, again, I wasn't doing very mindfully, like I wasn't trying to enjoy it. Whereas maybe it's thanks to this organisation offered, and they provided those training for their mentors, and they provided those materials. And I just feel like a much better qualified tutor. Now, like I can actually, again, feel proud about it, rather than it just be a thing that I do, and don't really care, man, I think, yeah, teaching is that for lots of musicians. And I think the more you can do it in a full hearted way, like you have a day a week in a school, okay, not to sound preachy at all, but I just think doing things in a way that you like, really take ownership of it and try and do really well, while you're doing it will help your confidence in your singing career or your playing career. Generally, I just feel more and more that it's important to do everything that you do in your life full heartedly, whether that be your other projects, whether that be doing exercise, or doing or socialising, like just trying to, in a full hearted present way. And it will help everything else.

Hattie Butterworth 1:02:19

Yeah, you're less inclined to kind of, I suppose be hugely affected by one rejection or one negative thing that happens in your life. Yeah, I think that is a really wise and like, important thing to remember, I think. Yeah, hopefully take the it's no kind of massive rush or, or like right way or timeline that things

have to go. And I love that message that you've brought through all your projects and the time taken and finding the right people to help and support you.

Betty Makharinsky 1:02:57

Yeah, definitely. There's no rush. And your way will be the right way. And it's so hard to swallow that when you think it's going wrong. And I've definitely been there and I've had a few corners where I thought, "oh my goodness, how can this not be going the way that I've envisioned but it will work out and you'll do some cool things instead. These lessons in Italy have been and continue to be such a fun adventure.

Hattie Butterworth 1:03:23

Yeah, also to be in Italy.

Betty Makharinsky 1:03:25

Yeah.

Hattie Butterworth 1:03:26

Bloody hell!

Betty Makharinsky 1:03:26

It's amazing.

Hattie Butterworth 1:03:27

Very nice.

Betty Makharinsky 1:03:29

I feel very lucky.