

Sound Thoughts on Art – Season 1, Episode 1
Lara Downes and *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*
National Gallery of Art

{MUSIC PLAYING}

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome to *Sound Thoughts on Art*, a podcast from the National Gallery of Art. I'm your host, Celeste Headlee. Art can engage all of our senses. We hear music. We see a photo. We walk around a sculpture. We taste fine food. Standing close to a favorite painting, we can even smell the wood or oil paint. But it's when our senses work together that things get really interesting. When we listen, what do we see in our mind's eye? When we stand in front of a painting, what do we hear?

This podcast lives in that convergence. In every episode, you'll learn about a work in the National Gallery's collection from someone who knows the art and its context. You'll also hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts on Art* tells the stories of how we experience art and how it connects us.

[TRANSITIONAL MUSIC]

Art meets us where we are. In this episode, we'll explore Romare Bearden's 1967 collage called *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*. Bearden was born in 1911 and grew up in Harlem. Throughout his life, he was an advocate for and scholar of African American artists. His artistic work spanned decades and mediums, but this collage is a good example of how he portrayed normal Black American life. For pianist and activist Lara Downes, the collage feels like memories—fragmented, blurry at the edges, but cobbled together into something familiar.

Lara is no stranger to the Gallery or its art. She performed in the Sunday concert series on October 8 of 2017. When we asked Lara to create a musical response to *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, there was a clear starting point in the title, but that jazz standard became just a small piece of what she made for us—an audio collage featuring work by composer Nathaniel Dett. We'll let her take it from here.

[MUSIC - EDITH JOHNSON, "GOOD CHIB BLUES"]

Tomorrow I may be far away.

LARA DOWNES: So I put together sounds that were never meant to coexist. And when you overlay them, they have moments where they sit together really comfortably, and they have moments where they fit wrong. Laying the blues recording over the chords that I was playing on the piano, I just let it be. I didn't want it to line up exactly, because you know the recording is what it is. It can't be changed. So when you hear it, there are places where it aligns perfectly, and then there are places where it wanders a bit and then comes back together. And that was intentional, because I think that these sounds from different times and places need to have their own freedom to coexist the way they want to.

And then even laying the sound of a train under the whole thing, there were places where the rhythm of that train was absolutely pulsing along with the rhythm of the music. And then sometimes when it would stray from that and then resolve itself. And I think that that's just a metaphor for the way that life creates discordance and then hopefully resolves.

[PIANO MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away* invites us to interpret it, and yet it's also rich with abstraction and subtle details that even a trained eye might miss. For guidance, we spoke to Steven Nelson. He's the dean for the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery. And he's also an expert in both African and African American art.

Describe the work to me. If I were just seeing it on the wall for the first time, what will I notice first?

STEVEN NELSON: At first, you're going to notice the side of a house. And it's in these greens and yellows, and figures come out from it. And so there are three figures. One is looking out of a window, one is seated in front of a wall, and then there's another that looks like it's crouching in the front yard. They're disjointed figures, so that's part of the process that Bearden uses. There are a whole bunch of different kinds of papers. And so some of them he procured and colored with either charcoal or with pencil. There are also pieces that clearly come from print media—magazines. And so it becomes very intentional where he's using what kind of paper and how and for what. So we're looking at this house in this sort of yard with a lot of different textures and different colors. And it is a bit sort of disconcerting insofar as it's disjointedness through collage.

CELESTE HEADLEE: I want to take you back to the moment when you were staring at this piece of art and trying to pull meaning from it. Can we go back to that moment and what you remember thinking—what went through your mind as you were looking at this piece?

LARA DOWNES: That it's a puzzle. That it's a puzzle, and it's full of questions and unfinished business, which struck me so hard because, in all honesty, that's my life. That's the story of my childhood and my family. It's full of questions and puzzles and unfinished business. There are huge gaps in my knowledge of my own family's history on both sides. And this piece, for some reason, captures a lot of those in some very specific ways that were really startling to me.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Why are there so many puzzles and mysteries in your background?

LARA DOWNES: My father grew up in Harlem. And his father worked on the railroads, so he was never home. And my father's mother died when he was very small, so he was raised by a couple of elderly women who—I think one of whom was his godmother—in Harlem. So there's just this huge blank space where my dad's family's story belongs. And the few tools that I have to piece that together are my memories of him. He died when I was nine, so the memories that I have are childhood memories, and fractured ones at that. I don't even know how much I remember of my father versus what I have stored away from photographs. It's that strange disconnect in your own memory.

One of my favorite photos of my dad is this black and white photo. I think it's taken still in New York, and he's smoking a cigarette in this very elegant way that only belongs in the 1960s. Probably, honestly, that photo is from right around the time that this piece was made.

[PIANO MUSIC PLAYING]

STEVEN NELSON: The three figures aren't looking at one another. They seem not to actually be interacting with one another.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What do you think the relationship of these three people is?

STEVEN NELSON: As I was describing the painting, I thought, well, they're in front of this house. So there's a piece of me that wants to presume that they are relatives.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Yeah, they're on a farm.

STEVEN NELSON: They're on a farm, so they know each other. But it's not warm fuzzy family time. They're all individually together. They're all off in their little worlds. And so it's interesting. I don't see a connection between the three characters, if only because the one in the window looking out, the one on the left, is looking away. The one on the right has his head tilted just a bit to the right, and his hands are in his lap. He's sitting wide-legged. He's man-spreading, and he's just looking a little down and away. And then the figure on the right who is a woman is absorbed in her chores. And so you have these three very isolated figures in this picture.

CELESTE HEADLEE: I wonder if the title is also connected to that train in the upper right-hand corner.

STEVEN NELSON: Oh, the train. Well, there's the role of the train in travel. And that is the most obvious thing to say in the world. There's the train's importance for African Americans. And so if you think of the Great Migration from South to North in the first half of the 20th century and the Underground Railroad too, because even there, if you think about someone like Harriet Tubman, she sent a lot of her passengers North by train. So they didn't all walk, or they would get to a certain point and go further North on trains. And so they would go from places like Mecklenburg County to Chicago to Pittsburgh to New York City.

But travel is also metaphoric. So I'm not going to be here. And I'm not going to be here—maybe I'm going to travel to Pittsburgh or Chicago or wherever. But it means I also may just leave this life. Not that we're dying, but that we're going to go off to something different.

LARA DOWNES: The piece is inspired directly by a blues classic called "Good Chib Blues," which was recorded in 1929 by Edith North Johnson. And so knowing that the artist had this song in his ears as the inspiration for this piece drove me to start there, of course. And the title of this piece, *Tomorrow I May Be Far Away*, speaks of journeys and of voyages, physical and emotional—this notion that there's another place, that there's always another place and another reality, and we keep journeying to find it.

[MUSIC - EDITH JOHNSON, "GOOD CHIB BLUES"]

Tomorrow I may be far away.

Starting with that song and starting with this old recording from 1929, which has its own layer of patina on it, gave me direction about where to go. And where to go for me was backwards. This notion of journeys, I think, put me firmly into a place of thinking about the Great Migration and music that has traveled as a result of that journey. I wanted to think about where this moment, 1929, this recording—where does it fit in the story of the migration and the story of Black music. It was interesting. The piece that I chose by Dett was actually written in the same year that Bearden was born.

And for me, as a classical artist, this place where concert music and the Black tradition connect is a very personal and kind of obsessive place for me. So imagining where does this music go from 1913 until 1929 and the different lives that these various musicians lived and the life that this artist led—what were the different kinds of music that they would have encountered, and how did all of those kinds of music inform their experience and their artistry?

CELESTE HEADLEE: What do you think is the mood of this work? Is it somber? Is it hopeful?

STEVEN NELSON: It doesn't strike me as somber, and that's because of the palette. So if you think of the greens, the yellows, the sort of greeny-blue, those kinds of things, it's not somber. Maybe hopeful. Maybe contemplative. If you think about the positions of these people, they're looking askance or looking away, but they're not somber. I think they're deep in thought, and we just don't know what they're thinking

necessarily. But if we put the train together in it, it may be about being somewhere else. It may be about being someone else. It may be about getting out of the condition that you find yourself in.

LARA DOWNES: It's a feeling of the things that we take with us and the things that we can't leave behind. And in music, what that meant to me was to go all the way back to the beginning of where all Black music starts. And that's a question of spirituals. That's a question of music that's always expressing struggle and survival and journeying and hope.

[PIANO MUSIC PLAYING]

STEVEN NELSON: It's interesting—there's contrast, but if you squint at it, a lot of the differentiation in color fades away. And so the lights and darks all just start to compress into one another. For me, it means that you have to work harder to really see what's going on.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What do you take away from the colors that Bearden used? In other words, how do they strike you?

LARA DOWNES: I think there's a faded quality in all of the colors across the spectrum. And that, to me, references memory—the way that we transform things in our memory, and also the way that things become faded with time.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What does faded sound like when it becomes music?

LARA DOWNES: I mean, it's a hard question for me to answer, because I was going to say almost all the music that I play is something of the past. But it all is. I mean, it's all of the recent or distant past. And so the moment that it passes through my hands, the moment that it passes through a musical interpretation, there's this new layer that goes over it. So I don't know. Are we talking about fadedness, or is it a question of just layers of opacity? I'm seeing something in my mind that I'm not able to articulate very well. It's almost like translucent layers that begin to cover that original crisp score.

CELESTE HEADLEE: It may be hard to articulate in words, but this is the challenge that you faced in creating a piece of music based on the collage, correct?

LARA DOWNES: Well, isn't that the great thing about music? It's so much easier to articulate in music. Yes. Exactly. And that came really beautifully, and it was just a fun exercise in layering, again. And there are so many layers in this piece that I created. There's a layer of sound just of an old recording, which is such a distinct sound, and I think speaks to all of us. And then digging down into the layers of history and specifically of African American history to build my own musical collage.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Are there chords or keys in music that automatically reflect a color or mood? It's fairly common to think of a major one-three-five chord as upbeat and positive. But do you think that's true?

LARA DOWNES: I think that's so personal, and it's something that, again it's so instinctive. And it's always been true for me. It's an exercise I love to do with kids, because it's one of those games that you have to say the first thing that comes to mind. But for me, yes, B minor, which is a key that comes up in this piece, is a muted light blue, like a light-grayish blue. The green keys are G major and D major. E flat major is a deep purple. B flat major—dark green. I guess all the black keys have a darker hue to them.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Don't try to jive me, honey. Sweet talk can't make me stay.

LARA DOWNES: I've thought about this a lot, because I don't know that those colors actually have any relation to each other. It's not like you go up the scale, and there's some relationship that develops between the colors. For me, they're just these very random associations.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What kind of relationship do you think there is between the visual arts and music?

STEVEN NELSON: It's a great question. And of course, it's a question that people ask very often for Bearden. And for Bearden, people often talk about his work in relationship to jazz. And I think that in this particular case—so I think if we were talking about Bearden and jazz, the ways in which he works—so the collages that really come about—they're really a product of the 1960s for him. There's a fusion of what jazz might look like and his training in art making. And so he sees collages. He listens to jazz. How does one visualize this to think about something else, or in this case, to think about Black memory or Black life or his own memories or his own life?

CELESTE HEADLEE: What do you think music can do to change or influence someone's relationship with a piece of art?

LARA DOWNES: Well, I think that we all have different sensory receptors. For me, my first gateway in is always music. So if I'm standing in front of a piece of art, and I'm listening to something that is going to influence the way that I'm receiving or processing what I'm seeing in front of me, I think that music has this very different way and very profound way of establishing mood. But I also think that music is malleable depending on where it finds us. So I mean, I'm very aware that I hear pieces of music in different ways depending on where I am in my emotional state or my situation.

And I think when you put those two things together, you could almost do an experiment where you would have different people experience the same combination of music and a visual image, or have one person have that experience at different times and in different places. So I like to think that with this music, as you say, to close your eyes and see the piece, that this music puts you into a place of recovered memory, almost. It's almost like a physical memory, I suppose, that would allow you to journey inside this piece of art and receive these layers and these references and these memories in a deeper way.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Do you think you would have a different view of this piece when you were younger?

LARA DOWNES: Absolutely, and also eight months ago. And that's the beautiful thing, I think, about how we process music, art—it finds us where we are. I wonder what I would have thought about it when I was younger. I think I would have taken it much more at surface value. I think I wouldn't have been so committed to following these layers back to where they originate. The more that we go through our lives and question our own origins, the more a piece like this resonates with us.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Does that mean you might see it differently in a few years?

LARA DOWNES: I hope so. Maybe I'll know more. Maybe I'll know less. I've grown to believe that it's the stories that we can't know that mean the most. And I find myself as an artist continually going back to the stories I don't know. There's so many stories in my family going back even just one generation, but certainly the generations before that. And I won't ever know those answers. And those questions are what inspire me to keep creating and finding the meaning that I find in my work. So maybe that just intensifies as we go along. Maybe if I come back to this piece in five years, in 10 years, I will discover even new layers.

CELESTE HEADLEE: That suggests that the music you would write in five years would sound different. Is that correct?

LARA DOWNES: Absolutely. And the music that I would write two weeks from now would sound different. And the way I would play it would sound different. That, to me, I guess is the biggest difference between a piece of art and a piece of music, because a piece of art remains. And it asks us to find new things in it. As a performer, the piece of music is there for me. The notes are there for me, but I have the ability and also the responsibility to shape them differently every single time. I'm taking that role with my brush, my tools to make something that can never remain the same.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here is Lara's audio collage one more time, uninterrupted.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Ah, tomorrow I may be far away. Ah, tomorrow I may be far away. Don't try to jive me, honey. Sweet talk can't make me stay. Ah, tomorrow I may be far away.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks to Lara Downes for her music and her candor. *Sound Thoughts on Art* is a production of the National Gallery of Art's Music Department. The show was created by Danielle DeSwert Hahn, the National Gallery's head of music programs, and mixed and produced by Maura Currie. You can find more information about everything in today's episode at the National Gallery's website, nga.gov/podcast. If you enjoyed this episode of *Sound Thoughts on Art*, we would love for you to subscribe. Also leave us a review wherever you're listening. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until next time. Be well.