

Black Theatre Workshop's La Parole

Episode 5 – Harmony in Narratives

Exploring the Intersection of Music, Theatre, and Black Storytelling with Brainerd Blyden-Taylor
Featuring Dian Marie Bridge (Dian), Lydie Dubuisson (Lydie), and Brainerd Blyden-Taylor (Brainerd)

[00:00:00] – [Theme music: "Cocktail Music" by Francesco Biondi]

[00:00:14] – **Dian:** Welcome to La Parole, BTW's podcast series. Black Theatre Workshop is launching a new podcast series to reach all of the artists and storytellers across Montreal, into Quebec, and into Canada. We are bringing you conversations with some of Canada's most exciting theatre artists, musicians, and storytellers, and we're so happy to have you join us.

[00:00:43] – **Lydie:** Before we start, we would like to recognize that the province we call Quebec is a fusion of traditional territories of the Innu and Inuit Nations, of the Algonquin Nations, as well as Mohawk Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Kanienkehaka and Anishnabeg ne sont que deux des langues originales de ce territoire. Kanienkehaka and Anishnabeg are two of the many original languages of this territory. L'Atikamekw, le Cree, L'Inuktitut, et L'Innu-aimun, font également parti des nombreuses langues autochtones parler à travers le Québec comme langues majoritaires all long before French and English. We, therefore, recognize the important work accomplished by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, to revive the traditional languages of these territories and the advocacy for the official status of Indigenous languages. Nous exprimons notre plus profond respect aux aînés de ces communautés et à tous les peuples autochtones. Yes, we express our deepest respect to the elders of these communities and all Indigenous people who tell the story of the land and waters of Tiótiá'ke, who take care of Turtle Island, and who are here at home. We see you. We support you. We are honoured to share our stories on these lands. And now, time for La Parole.

[00:02:08] – **Dian:** Hello, and welcome to an episode of –

[00:02:13] – [**Dian and Lydie simultaneously**]: La Parole!

[00:02:14] – **Dian:** which is Black Theatre Workshop's podcast series. My name is Dian Marie Bridge, and I am the Artistic Director at Black Theatre Workshop.

[00:02:24] – **Lydie:** Bonjour, hi, my name is Lydie Dubuisson, I am your co-host.

[00:02:28] – **Dian:** And Associate Artist at Black Theatre Workshop.

[00:02:32] – **Lydie:** The first. The first. (Dian laughing)

[00:02:35] – **Dian:** So La Parole is really a series of cozy conversations with some of our favorite artists uh working in Montreal and across the country really. Um, and we are just taking the opportunity to, to talk with people who are, uh, performers working in theater or working in music, working, uh, in performance of all kinds and just having some really lovely conversations with them about their practice, their art, and how they see the industry moving forward.

[00:03:03] – **Lydie:** All the lovely people that we love, it's a cup of inspiration for the year.

[00:03:09] – **Dian:** (chuckling) So today we have the privilege of welcoming, um, the founder of the Nathaniel Dett Chorale and all around just very lovely human being, um, who is a—

[00:03:21] – **Lydie:** Talented human being.

[00:03:22] – **Dian:** Talented!

[00:03:23] – **Lydie:** Um, conducted several university youth and concert choirs, most notably a list of like Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Symphony Nova Scotia, Hannaford Silver— like there's a whole list and then we can finish with the Harriet Tubman Institute at the York University. We can also add in 2009, um, the inauguration—

[00:03:45] – Dian: Of Barack Obama! The Nathaniel Dett Chorale performed at the inauguration of Barack Obama!

[00:03:50] – Lydie: Like how can you— exactly so this, this is what we're bringing to you today.

[00:03:55] – Dian: And we're, we're thrilled to welcome Mr. Brainerd Blyden-Taylor with us today.

[00:03:49] – Lydie: (singing) Welcome!

[00:04:01] – Dian: Um, so can you let us— tell us a little bit about the Nathaniel Dett Chorale? Like when did it start, when did— what was the impetus for creating the Chorale?

[00:04:15] – Brainerd: Well, um, let me see if I can shorten it a little bit, but um, I guess, uh, the impetus had been building in my, in my heart for maybe, I'm gonna say for about 30 years.

[00:04:35] – Dian: Wow.

[00:04:37] – Brainerd: I, um, you know, I've been— I came to Toronto from the Caribbean to be a director of youth and music at my uncle's church, and then sort of got into classical music, um, through the Hart House Chorus at University of Toronto and, um, other things and then I became the assistant conductor and then the associate conductor of the Orpheus Choir of Toronto and, um, was doing, you know, a fair amount of work with uh, with community choirs, concert choirs, children's choirs, um and um began to notice that um, you know, there weren't a lot of people like me doing that kind of work.

[00:05:24] – Dian: Mhmm.

[00:05:24] – Brainerd: Um, one of the things that drew me to the Hart House Chorus at the University of Toronto was the fact that a Black woman of Jamaican, uh descent, who was professor of ethnomusicology at Queen's University, was coming up to Toronto every week to conduct the Hart House Chorus and I went, “Wow, I need to get to know this person,” ‘cause that's like a unicorn, that's on, you know.

[00:05:52] – Lydie: Mhmm.

[00:05:53] – Dian: Yeah.

[00:05:53] – Brainerd: Um, and so when I first approached her and said, “May, I may study with you, may I work with you a bit,” um, you know, she was, she was a little suspect, you know, of another Black person, you know, coming in, as she put it, “nipping at her heels.” But I think she saw that um, you know, I had a real, not just interest but inclination, and as she put it, uh a gift of inviting music out of people.

[00:06:27] – Dian: Mmm!

[00:06:28] – Brainerd: And so I started to, to work with her. But, I mean, I noticed that even she, um, wasn't doing a lot of the spirituals or necessarily a lot of music of, you know, by Black composers. Um, we did a couple of spirituals, but most of the music that we did with her was, you know, from the European canon. And as I continued to work in Toronto, um, you know, a lot of what I was doing was of the, of the European canon, but then I, I found that people started to ask me to come do workshops for their choirs every time they decided they wanted to approach a spiritual or a piece of gospel music or whatever.

[00:07:12] – Dian: Mmm.

[00:07:13] – Brainerd: And I thought, “Are you asking me just because I— my skin color looks like this, like, why are you asking me?” because that's not what people knew me as having done a lot of necessarily. Um but I did, and um, and over the years um, it just, I became aware that there was, there was um a gap, a hole, if you will, in the, in the, in the choral landscape for this kind of music. Um, I was one of the people— one of the founding members of what was then called A triple C, the Association of Canadian Choral Conductors and every time I'd go to our, our national conferences, again there would be more of the music of the European canon, and not as much of the music um, you know, of other cultures

and of, of uh Afrocentric choral music in particular. And um—so I guess the burden was just laid on my heart then, you know, to get something like this started.

[00:08:27] – Dian: That's amazing. That's amazing. I think too, because um as Black folks, music is such a huge component of how we experience the world and how we express ourselves. And that there was that big a gap in the, in the art scene is really telling about what we left behind when we immigrated here and what we had to get back to.

[00:08:51] – Brainerd: Well, you know, and this is it, you know, I remember when they you know, so... we're jumping around in, in terms of the chronology, (Dian laughing) but it doesn't matter so much. I mean, but— I remember, when I finally got the Chorale off the ground, um, a little over 25 years ago, um, you know, and we did the media launch, and I said this was going to be a choir dedicated to Afrocentric choral music. And people kept asking me, “What do you mean by Afrocentric? What— what is Afrocentric choral music?” And what you just said earlier, is so important to that. “Music is the way in which...” what did you say? “We see our.. ourselves in the world...”

[00:09:40] – Dian: Yeah, we express ourselves or it's such a huge part (Lydie coughing) of how we see ourselves in the world.

[00:09:44] – Brainerd: That is correct.

[00:09:45] – Dian: Yeah.

[00:09:46] – Brainerd: That is correct. And I, you know, and so I, you know, I had to, uh, try to explain that to people, you know, and then people you know, would said, um you know, “So are you only doing music of Black composers?” and I said, “No, I'm not just only doing the music of Black composers.” Um, I want to give myself a slightly larger sandbox in which to play. So I also want to do music that's been written by composers, um, who have been profoundly influenced—

[00:10:21] – Dian: Mmhm.

[00:10:21] – Brainerd: by African heritage traditions—

[00:10:24] – Dian: Mmhm.

[00:10:25] – Brainerd: um, whether it's, it's art, or it's style, or it's religious, religious practices, for instance. Um, so those are some of the things that kind of drove me in the, in the early years.

[00:10:38] – Dian: Yeah, I think too, there's, there's a conversation I've been having with other artists recently, that has to do with the idea of, um, mass immigration from the Caribbean in the 60s and 70s, to come to Canada.

[00:10:51] – Brainerd: Mmhm.

[00:10:52] – Dian: Um, and that people had traditions of art, artistic traditions and practices in the Caribbean, that they had to leave behind.

[00:11:01] – Brainerd: Mmhm.

[00:11:01] – Dian: And so just for survival, you know, just for being able to make ends meet here. And, um, the idea... Yup.

[00:11:10] – Brainerd: I mean, that's very true. And I would say that that is true. Um, for, for a lot of peoples in general, I mean, here in Toronto, we see it a lot. Um, and particularly those of African descent. Um, you know, and since we are actually almost at the end of the UN designated uh, International Decade for People of African Descent—

[00:11:39] – Dian: Mmhm, mmhm.

[00:11:39] – Brainerd: it's... it's important, I think, to note those kinds of things.

[00:11:42] – Dian: Mmm!

[00:11:43] – Brainerd: And oftentimes, you know, people talk about, you know, the “Black community”, singular, in the singular, or the “Black” that, you know, the “African diaspora” in the singular, but the truth of the matter is, there are many Black communities, plural.

[00:11:58] – Dian: Absolutely. (sounds of agreement from Lydie)

[00:11:59] – Brainerd: And uh there's more than one diaspora and, you know, to speak to your point, a lot of those traditions were, were left behind. And so I think the kinds of things that, that the Nathaniel Dett Chorale is trying to do, the kinds of things that, that your organization is trying to do, is to give voice and give life to some of these stories. And when we share them with, with each other, and with the world, that too, is part of the Afrocentric worldview. You know, because, you know...

[00:12:35] – Dian: Yeah, I think one of the conversations I've been having recently with artists is the idea of, um, art and storytelling, and, um, how it's been broken down into its components in order to be marketable, right? So you have the, the dancers who are not speaking to the visual artists who are not speaking to the musicians, they might come together for one or two, um, you know, collaborations here, but it's called “multimedia” at that point. But then, then you have the idea of it all comes from the same place, it's all storytelling, it's all ritual, in a, in a way.

[00:13:15] – Brainerd: Absolutely.

[00:13:16] – Dian: Right? Um—

[00:13:17] – Brainerd: Absolutely. And I mean, you know, um... You know, people often ask me, and have asked me over the years within Nathaniel Dett Chorale, because, I mean, we've tried to do... um, we've tried to, to deliver a variety of musics in— over the 25 years. And actually the season that we're in right now, the 23-24 season is our 25th anniversary season.

[00:13:47] – Dian: Amazing

[00:13:47] – Lydie: Oh wow.

[00:13:49] – Brainerd: And, and we're— Thank you. We are, you know, trying in a limited fashion to give a Pan African, um, retrospective of some of the kinds of music we've done over the, over the last 25 years. Um, you know, and people say, “Is this a church choir?” I say, “No, it's not a church choir,” but you know, well, but there seems to be, you know, this real sense of “you guys seem to be really connected, um, you know, in that regard”, or um there seems to be a deep sense of spirituality within the choir and I say, “Well, you know, yes.” And in certain traditions, certainly, you know, in North America, and particularly, particularly in the southern part of the United States, where, you know, the, the spirituals kind of grew out of, to a large extent. A lot of that became part of the Black church, which becomes part of the community which, which does a lot of the things or endeavors to do a lot of the things that um, that, again, like we say, people left behind, you know, in their cultures, and we try to sort of bring those, um... So I see the Black church as being that kind of community focus, um, that helps to, you know, revive some of those traditions. But it can be done, like you say, through music and through three— theater. And, and as you also mentioned, a lot of people tend to divorce drumming and movement and storytelling and whatever, um, from each other, and bringing these back together, um, is important.

[00:15:36] – Dian: Absolutely. And I think, I think, um, just the idea of art and music being a full body experience, you know, is so essential to us?

[00:15:48] – Lydie: I—

[00:15:48] – Brainerd: Absolutely.

[00:15:49] – Lydie: I—I have a technical question, but before that, I've just like to say like how important your work is as to validating our own talents and our instinct, uh, with storytelling, because I find— Personally, I would not be in theater if it wasn't for music—

[00:16:05] – **Brainerd:** Yes.

[00:16:05] – **Lydie:** because my way towards storytelling was music.

[00:16:07] – **Brainerd:** Yes.

[00:16:07] – **Lydie:** It was choir singing at school, at church, and from choir sings church.

[00:16:11] – **Brainerd:** Yes.

[00:16:12] – **Lydie:** I remember the first time I auditioned for a musical and, and people were asking like, where... everybody was saying where they took their singing lessons. And I was like, “(mumbling) I don’t... singing lessons, lessons what?” (Dian laughing) Like, you don’t have lessons, you go to Sun—, you go to church every Sunday—

[00:16:27] – **Brainerd:** You just, you just do it!

[00:16:28] – **Lydie:** You just do it. You sit in the car with your sisters, you, you figure out harmonies because that’s my note, my sister usually takes that note, I take the higher one and I (mimicking sounds of confusion)

[00:16:39] – **Brainerd:** That’s right, that’s right.

[00:16:40] – **Lydie:** So, it, it was purely instinctive and because of that, I will all— I was often the only Black person in the room, so I would feel like an impostor. Because I was like, “I’m just the Black person in the room.” So that’s why I would be given— Um, they would ask me to them... Um, after Sister Act came out, I was the choir director at my school because like, everybody wanted to do Sister Act and I was the only Black girl in the school. But the worst part is I did! I did turn them into a choir (laughing), into a four part choir harmony.

[00:17:07] – **Brainerd:** Absolutely.

[00:17:08] – **Dian:** Absolutely.

[00:17:09] – **Lydie:** And from that—

[00:17:10] – **Brainerd:** and that is, that’s a very important— that’s a, you know, again, people have to understand not everyone... You know, music isn’t only created by composers, you know, who’ve been to university, who’ve done this kind of stuff. I mean, in our traditions, in a lot of the Indigenous traditions, it’s mouth to ear, it’s... (laughing)

[00:17:37] – **Lydie:** Exactly!

[00:17:39] – **Brainerd:** It’s, you know, and—

[00:17:39] – **Lydie:** And you feel like a fraud because you hear other people saying like big names and like “lessons for years”, and you’re like, “No. Sunday service that lasted seven hours.”

[00:17:50] – **Brainerd:** You got it! That’s how... that’s, that’s been my school. That’s been my— that’s where I’ve learned these things.

[00:17:57] – **Lydie:** But it also opened my eyes to storytelling, because when I started to teach musical theater, kids wanted to like... I was trying to make them understand that you’re telling a story. And to me, I would, I would relate to testifying.

[00:18:11] – **Brainerd:** Yes.

[00:18:12] – **Lydie:** Because at church didn’t matter if you have the notes or not, it’s “This is the song of the moment, this is the song you need to sing because this is your testimony.”

[00:18:18] – **Brainerd:** Absolutely, absolutely.

[00:18:19] – **Lydie:** And people didn’t sing for voice. So to me that was like... that’s why you have Nathan Lane that does not have a big voice, but has a big musical theater career, because the man understands how to use what he has to tell the story.

[00:18:31] – **Brainerd:** Absolutely.

[00:18:32] – **Lydie:** And I was trying to get kids to understand that, if you're Annie you don't need to sing that song exactly the— as it is recorded. You need to take that story, take the notes you understand, and notes you don't.

[00:18:43] – **Brainerd:** That's right.

[00:18:43] – **Lydie:** And I feel like this is an Afrocentric instinct, that we... carried—

[00:18:49] – **Brainerd:** I, I think it's you know, I think the instinct runs through many communities. And, it certainly is one that's, that's very firmly rooted in Afrocentricity!

[00:19:01] – **Lydie and Dian:** (sounds of agreement)

[00:19:01] – **Brainerd:** You know, and I mean, you know, all traditions are good. And I mean, I, I welcome singers who have been Euro-classically trained, because it does give them a skill set, to be able to, to grab a lot of different kinds of musics, and to grab it quickly. You know, having said that, if they only come to me, and they only want to sort of operate from, from that point of view, that cerebral point of view. Um, it doesn't, it doesn't quite work, you know. And I said to them, I said, you know, “We have a head memory and we have a heart memory and we have a body memory and we need... we need to engage all of them.” You know, and oftentimes, I'll find when I'm, you know, when I'm working, particularly with Afrocentric music, but not just that. I mean, I've done it with Mozart too and, and other composers that one would consider part of the European canon. But um, you know, oftentimes people will say to me, “Well, how do you, how do you engage the, you know, get a particular sound in a spiritual for instance?” You know, and they'll go, um you know, “Do you talk about the vernacular? How do you pronounce this word?” I say “No, stop. I mean, no.” Before we go all there, I'll get people to sing through something. And then I'll tell them a story, which is exactly what you're talking about. And through a story, I'll connect them to their emotions. It's like what you were saying about *Annie*, you don't have to sing it this particular way, make it your own. But how do you make it your own? And people don't know how to do that, they don't know how to access, I mean, to really access their emotions and how to really live in that way. Um, and then you begin to put yourself in, into the music. And I often find that after having told them a story, or made that connection, then we'll start singing again and the sound will have changed without me talking about how to shape the vowel, or how to do anything, because all of a sudden, they have embodied it. They're— and they've made a connection that they hadn't made before. And it's also one of the things that you were talking about the church. I mean, you know, I, I adjudicate a lot of festivals and this type of stuff. And I mean, I've seen people try to do arrangements of spirituals or arrangements of gospel pieces, and they have all these repeats or all these breakdowns, and choirs don't know what to do with them. Because as you said, when we have those moments, that's when the storytelling comes in. That's when the testifying comes into place. And people start talking experientially about what it is. And people go, “How do you do that?” Well... (laughing) you know, you gotta live a little, you got to live into it, you got to lean into it.

[00:22:22] – **Lydie:** And yeah, and... my new obsession, my new word is, “I'm looking for the ‘surrender’” into a lot and I find that there's beauty when you're—

[00:22:33] – **Brainerd:** Oh!

[00:22:33] – **Lydie:** When you, when you're part of that choir, like, then 15 years of People's Gospel Choir, I get to say that—

[00:22:36] – **Brainerd:** Oh!

[00:22:36] – **Lydie:** when you get into a moment when everybody's just like “we're letting go—

[00:22:42] – **Brainerd:** Yes.

[00:22:42] – **Lydie:** “We're surrendering to that song.”

[00:22:44] – **Brainerd:** Ohhh!

[00:22:44] – **Lydie:** This is, this is worship at its best! And that's how—

[00:22:47] – **Brainerd:** Hallelujah, hallelujah.

[00:22:47] – **Lydie:** I feel like this is something we often chase. We chase that a lot.

[00:22:51] – **Brainerd:** Hallelujah.

[00:22:51] – **Lydie:** Us artists that have touched that? You see it in the rest of their career chasing that, “Come on, let's just all let go and just...”

[00:22:58] – [“Livin’ Uptown” by Beau Dixon]

[00:24:30] – **Dian:** You know, I, I didn't go through that experience of being in a church choir. Um, I—I'm of the school that believes that if you have a voice you can sing. Regardless of whether or not you can blow the back door off of a, of a room—

[00:24:46] – **Brainerd:** Right.

[00:24:46] – **Dian:** I feel like if you have a voice you can sing. Um, and uh, it doesn't have to always sound pretty but it, it has to be connected to your, your spirit right?

[00:24:58] – **Brainerd:** Yes.

[00:24:58] – **Dian:** And this—, what you, both of you, were just speaking about sort of reminded me of the idea of, like synesthesia, or like, um, the idea of seeing colors through, through vibration or like, all of that stuff.

[00:25:09] – **Brainerd:** Yes, yes.

[00:25:10] – **Dian:** And just, and then that, that phrase from the, you know, the, the Psalms came up just like the idea of a secret chord—

[00:25:23] – **Brainerd:** Yes.

[00:25:23] – **Dian:** and that it is a spiritual thing. Yeah.

[00:25:27] – **Brainerd:** Yes.

[00:25:28] – **Dian:** Yeah, all of—hm.

[00:25:29] – **Brainerd:** I mean, you know, I mean, Leonard Cohen, um, you know, in his “Hallelujah” talks about that secret chord that David played before the Lord.

[00:25:38] – **Dian and Lydie:** (sounds of agreement)

[00:25:38] – **Brainerd:** Or, or James Weldon Johnson, who wrote this poem about the creators of the spirituals, um, he— it's called “‘O Black and Unknown Bards’ of long ago, how came your lips to touch the sacred fire.” You know, and he talks about that note in music heard not with the ears, you know, that, that “what stirs the soul and melts the heart to tears.” It's like that subtle undertone. That's what you're talking about.

[00:26:08] – **Dian:** Yeah. That's, that's an absolutely beautiful idea that you can... reach somebody on an unknown level with a vibration, with a sound.

[00:26:20] – **Lydie:** Absolutely.

[00:26:21] – **Brainerd:** Absolutely! You know, and the thing is, you know, I mean, you know, oftentimes we talk about church, and we talk about it, you know, or it seems to me that we talked about it specifically, you know, from a religious point of view, from a denominational point of view, from a dogmatic point of view, but what really is church, you know, (laughing) but, you know, community—

[00:26:51] – **Dian:** Absolutely.

[00:26:51] – **Lydie:** Yes.

[00:26:51] – **Brainerd:** and a coming together as people who you know, who, as you say, um, bring their souls and their spirits together in a place, and let go and surrender, you know, and when we do that, and

when we share on that level with each other, that— that is, that is a powerful and a sacred communion, and you can call it church or you can just... (laughing)

[00:27:21] – Dian: As you say that—

[00:27:22] – Brainerd: It is a magnificent way of being.

[00:27:25] – Lydie: It is.

[00:27:25] – Dian: Yes. As you say that I think of a, uh, a story that was told about the, oh, it was called the smallest sermon ever. Um, and it's, it's a story of a man who had not been to church in a very long time. And, um, his pastor came to see him, and he had built a fire. And the pastor sat beside him and took an ember out of the fire and left it just outside of the, the actual blaze. And the ember started to wane (Lydie softly gasping) and, and just dim. And then he left. And that was that that was the sermon. And that makes me think, yeah, it's about community, it's about, um—

[00:28:05] – Lydie: Absolutely.

[00:28:05] – Dian: being a body together, right?

[00:28:09] – Brainerd: We are all sparks, and we're all embers and we're connected to each other. And this, this world of ours has tried to make us individuals—

[00:28:20] – Dian: Mmhmm.

[00:28:20] – Brainerd: And alone for too very long. And again, for you know, an Afrocentric worldview would say no, communion and community and, and, and when we say “namaste”, or when we say “naja bwana” or when we say, you know, “I worship the God in you, I see that in you.” “Without you, I could not be,” that's really that whole spirit of Ubuntu. You know, “without you, I could not be,” (chuckling) you know?

[00:28:57] – Dian: Mmhm.

[00:28:57] – Brainerd: And this is what, like you say, the, you know, the power of theatre and music and the coming together the synergy of all those aspects of, of expression—

[00:29:10] – Dian: Mmhm.

[00:29:11] – Brainerd: are, you know, what, what makes this stuff so very powerful. I mean, you were talking about vibrations and, and, and how they heal and how they touch and how they connect. Um, you know, the head of the Boston Conservatory of Music, uh, several years ago, wrote this wonderful speech that he delivered, um, you know, at the opening ceremonies, at the beginning of the school year, and particularly, you know, I think parents and whatever were in the room, and they were talking about it and they said, “So many of you, you know, wish your daughters to be like, you know, lawyers or doctors or this kind of stuff. But, you know, here we train musicians, and we train people not just to play the notes. We train them to be musicians. And, being a musician, is one of the most sacred callings.” And they said— he said, “You know, think about it. You know, at 8 o'clock one night somebody gets rushed into the emergency department of a hospital, you would hope that that doctor and that nurse, whatever, you know, had the skill and the gift to reach into that person's physical body... and, and find what's wrong and (stammering) set it to rights again and heal them and stitch them up again. Do we not have the same power, at 8 o'clock, one on an evening when a soul walks into your theatre or walks into your concert hall, that's broken, and hurting (choking up) and you have the power to be a spiritual chiropractor or whatever, to reach in there and adjust them and set it to right again. That's an incredible gift and an incredible power. This is what your children are here to learn and to become if they're willing.” I went, “Wow, man...”

[00:31:11] – Dian: Yeah!

[00:31:12] – Lydie: Where's that school... (unintelligible)

[00:31:15] – Brainerd: I mean, but this (stammering) was the then dean of the Boston Conservatory of Music, but not everybody thinks and feels like that. But he made that point. And, and it moves me, it stirs me, every time I recall that speech that he gave. And that's what I endeavour to try and do with my ensemble. And I, I often say to them, you know, I mean... I, I try to withdraw myself before performance, and, because I just wanna be quiet and I want to meditate, and I think of it as, you know, as me putting my stake in the ground and saying to the universe, "Here I am. I'm, I'm a channel. Use me." And then I walk out and I invite the chorale to hold hands and we form a circle and we share that energy with each other, and I say to them, "You and I together are going to go out and we're going to invite the audience to be part of this performance. We're not just here as an entertainment to do something to them. We're here to do something with them and for them and together we want to experience something," you know? Um, and we try to then sort of create those sort of psychic and energetic ripples that go out and embrace the room, so that when, when a performance is finished, people ought to walk out of there changed... different than when they walked in and that to me is our calling. I'm not just here to just entertain and they go, "Oh wasn't that nice! How, how gifted, how—" No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. (laughing) It's, it's something higher and deeper and more profound.

[00:33:15] – Lydie: And that's why it's so hard for me to be in the audience when I'm watching a choir, 'cause I just wanna be with them. I just wanna get on the stage! 'Cause I feel like the privilege, is, and that's an amazing privilege that you have with your choir is, that moment, to me anyways, I (stammering), I prefer the process to performance most of the time, but I find that the beauty of the choir, of that coming together and knowing that you're going to make different notes but we're all going to sing the same song, or we're all moving that same message together?

[00:33:48] – Dian: Mmm.

[00:33:49] – Brainerd: Yes, yes!

[00:33:49] – Lydie: Like I don't have to practice, to still like – like I don't go to church anymore but that one place, one accord, that's where god is.

[00:33:57] – Brainerd: Yes.

[00:33:58] – Lydie: Choirs like—

[00:33:59] – Brainerd: Yes.

[00:34:00] – Lydie: It takes you closer to what you need to be god? Community. That, that one accord thing, it's—

[00:34:06] – Brainerd: That... yes. yes. And that transcends, you know any one building or any one place or any one, you know, it's, you know.

[00:34:19] – Lydie: It's powerful.

[00:34:19] – Brainerd: And together we share those things. Um, you know I have another colleague who's just you know, I've heard her do this on more than one occasion. I mean she'll be giving a keynote speech and whatever, and you know at some point, and I never know where it's going to happen, but just before it does I kind of get, I kind of get it, cause I can see her all of a sudden she'll just, she'll just go, you know, and she'll stop talking and she'll say "You know what? It's time to change to change the molecular structure of the room. (Dian and Lydie making sounds of amazement) And she'll start to sing! And she'll make everybody sing (laughs) and it's just like, again, people don't understand that when you run sound through your body or when you do that again it changes you. But I love her for that, she'll go "It's time to change the molecular structure of the room" and she'll start to sing.

[00:35:19] – Dian: You know, like, it's, it's such an interesting understanding of like what the idea of that there's a social contract in place. There's a contract between the people who are on stage performing

and also the people who come to witness? But that is a relatively new thing, that idea of you sit in the room quiet you don't talk you don't eat your candies you don't cough, you just watch, is something is um, I think, been put upon us and hoisted upon us? But we wanna sing, we wanna—

[00:35:52] – Lydie: Yes!

[00:35:52] – Dian: dance with you, we wanna, you know, centre the praise singer, we want to... we want to participate.

[00:35:59] – Brainerd: And sometimes I'll invite people to move or sometimes—

[00:36:01] – Dian: Yeah.

[00:36:01] – Brainerd: I invite people to do whatever, but you know I, I very often say to the— say from the stage, and you know, the permi—, you know it's not that I need to give people permission, but I just want them to know that you may not be up here with us, and we, you know, but we're in this together, you know. And I, and I, and I invite them to, to open themselves up and to enter into it, because... just because I may not be saying the words— You know, I'm a freemason among other things and I say this often times to, to the guys in my lodge, I go "When we come into this room and when we create the space and we open our lodge and particularly when we're going to do a degree, I say "Some of you have parts to actually play and say and speak things. The rest of you who are sitting around, you know, don't check out! Bring your full selves into the moment. Send your energy out, you are part of creating the space that is making, that is... dare I say, we're doing a working," if you get my meaning. And everybody is part of that whether they actually voice something or not. Our spirits can be opened and expanded and that's the invitation.

[00:37:47] – Dian: Yes. I used to train capoeira, which is a Brazilian martial art.

[00:37:52] – Brainerd: Yes, yes.

[00:37:52] – Dian: And one of the things is ,um, people look at it and think about the acrobatics and the physicality and you know the kicking and the spinning—

[00:38:02] – Brainerd: Yes.

[00:38:03] – Dian: um but a huge part of the actual play is the game at the end, playing in the "roda", which is the um the circle.

[00:38:09] – Brainerd: Yes.

[00:38:10] – Dian: Um, and if you are standing outside of the circle and clapping you're feeding energy into the people who are playing in the middle, um—

[00:38:19] – Brainerd: Yes.

[00:38:20] – Dian: and if you uh go and play the instruments in the "bateria"—

[00:38:23] – Brainerd: Yes.

[00:38:23] – Dian: you are feeding the energy in the middle but you—

[00:38:26] – Brainerd: Yes.

[00:38:26] – Dian: have to have to have to go into the middle at some point, because you will be drained. You are literally giving energy.

[00:38:32] – Brainerd: Yes!

[00:38:34] – Dian: And you have to go inside to receive it back.

[00:38:37] – Brainerd: That's right.

[00:38:38] – Dian: And there are days where I've gone and I haven't gone in the centre and I'm exhausted at the end of that!

[00:38:43] – Brainerd: Oh no kidding!

[00:38:44] – Dian: And you can feel that it, the exchange hasn't happened.

[00:38:47] – **Lydie:** Mm, get your share.

[00:38:48] – **Brainerd:** That’s right.

[00:38:48] – **Dian:** I didn’t get my share. Even if you don’t play well, you have to go in to receive, and then you give—

[00:38:54] – **Brainerd:** Yes.

[00:38:55] – **Dian:** and it is a circle, one of the things is always making sure the circle is whole, that there are no big gaps, um, and the idea of story which—

[00:39:04] – **Brainerd:** Yes.

[00:39:04] – **Dian:** is one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you about too is this idea of the story of each of the songs. So, the songs themselves have um you know meanings behind them or they’re instructions.

[00:39:15] – **Brainerd:** Mmhmm. Absolutely.

[00:39:16] – **Dian:** Some of them are like “play a good game”, “play a good game” or if, uh, if someone who is particularly large comes in and he’s a bit you know, uh, a bit of a braggart or moving people around, all of a sudden people will start to sing “A bananeira caiu” which is like “chop down the banana tree” (laughing).

[00:39:36] – **Brainerd:** Yes!

[00:39:36] – **Dian:** So it’s an instruction—

[00:39:36] – **Brainerd:** Yes, yes!

[00:39:38] – **Dian:** It’s an instruction to like-

[00:39:39] – **Brainerd:** Bring them down to size a little bit, just you know!

[00:39:39] – **Dian:** (overlapping) Bring them down to size—

[00:39:44] – **Brainerd:** You go out the door... (Brainerd and Dian laughing)

[00:39:45] – **Dian:** Yes.

[00:39:45] – **Lydie:** But it has power!

[00:39:46] – **Dian:** It has power.

[00:39:47] – **Lydie:** To have voices, like towards you.

[00:39:48] – **Brainerd:** (overlapping) Very powerful.

[00:39:49] – **Dian:** Absolutely and it supports you, and but if you’re the big guy and you hear that you, you take note as well, right?

[00:39:55] – **Brainerd:** Yes.

[00:39:56] – **Dian:** Um, or if you’re playing too close to somebody they’ll start to sing “Dona Maria, como vai você” and Dona Maria was one of the, um, Mestre Bimba’s mistresses who was very clingy, so like it’s almost teasing.

[00:40:08] – **Brainerd:** Yes.

[00:40:09] – **Dian:** You know, like you’re acting like Dona Maria.

[00:40:11] – **Lydie:** I’m not ready for that circle.

[00:40:11] – **Dian:** It’s, it’s a lot of fun right (Brainerd laughing)

[00:40:17] – **Lydie:** That’s pretty brutal!

[00:40:18] – **Dian:** But just that idea of storytelling and the common understanding of what those stories are and repeating them over and over and sharing that storytelling is something I think is so beautiful about music and musicality and theatre. You can see the same play over and over again, you can hear the same song over and over again.

[00:40:37] – **Brainerd:** Over and over again and it changes.

[00:40:39] – **Dian:** Sung by different people, played by different people, and it changes yeah, absolutely.

[00:40:44] – [“All My Friends (Rockstars)” by Beau Dixon]

[00:42:11] – **Brainerd:** We’ve, I’ve, I’ve had you know traditional themes for, for our three main concerts, uh our Christmas concert was always “An Indigo Christmas” dot dot dot, something else. Our Black History Month concert is “Voices of the Diaspora” dot dot dot, something else. Um our spring concert has been, “And still we sing” dot dot dot, something else. And you know there’s meaning behind those things, so you know our Christmas concert is being called, um “Nguzo Saba & The Black Madonna,” you know, and um so we’re doing a piece that’s called the “Nguzo Saba Suite” and we’re um singing about seven principles in Kwanzaa, uh that we celebrate in Kwanzaa. Those Kiswahili principles Umoja, Kujichagulia, Ujima, Ujamaa, you know—

[00:43:13] – **Dian:** Yes.

[00:43:14] – **Brainerd:** Nia, Kuumba, Imani... um, and um you know again it’s to remind people that yeah we just don’t speak of them in those seven days between from Boxing Day to New Years Day. I mean those principles are really to remind us of who we are and how we act towards each other and towards the world. Um, it’s part of that world view—

[00:43:39] – **Dian:** Mmm.

[00:43:40] – **Brainerd:** that unity and self-determination, that collective work and responsibility, and cooperative economics, purpose and creativity and faith. Um so we’re doing that suite and then (chuckling) you know, um, we’re doing um, I’m doing a lot of pieces by white European composers which people at first glance kind of go, “Hmm? Really?” but it’s all music that’s been written in praise of the Black Madonna—

[00:44:13] – **Dian and Lydie:** Oh!

[00:44:14] – **Brainerd:** and again you know different religious traditions, shall I say, particularly the Christian variety have tried to sort of pretend that you know the Black Virgin or the Black Madonna you know does not have power or does not... um but you know, these traditions are still, you know, kept alive, people still make pilgrimages to them around the world.

[00:44:41] – **Dian:** Absolutely!

[00:44:43] – **Brainerd:** Um, what a lot of people may not know is that the patron saint of Poland is the Black Madonna of Częstochowa—

[00:44:49] – **Dian:** Yes she is!

[00:44:50] – **Brainerd:** Who has made her way to a lot of other places (laughing), you know? So we’re doing three pieces by a Polish composer who lives in Częstochowa and has written them to the Black Virgin. We’re doing “Nigra Sum”: um, I am Black and Comely, O Ye Daughters of Jerusalem by Pablo Casals, a Spanish composer. We’re doing “Litanies à la Vierge noire”: Songs to the Black Virgin by Francis Poulenc, which is the Black Virgin of Rocamadour in France. Um, we’re doing “Mater ora filium” by Arnold Bax, who’s an English composer and then we’re bookending it with two spirituals, um two different arrangements of “Mary Had a Baby”.

[00:45:36] – **Dian:** Ohhh.

[00:45:36] – **Lydie:** Yes Lord!

[00:45:37] – **Brainerd:** That’s our Christmas concert.

[00:45:40] – **Dian:** That’s amazing.

[00:45:41] – **Brainerd:** We’re, um, we’re reprising a program that we did 12 years ago. Um, it’s an all Haitian program, so (Dian laughing) it’s music by, um, the Haitian-American composer Sydney Guillaume and we’re, we’re— we commissioned several pieces from him 12 years ago, so we’re going to re-do this program and we’re gonna actually record the music so we can share it—

[00:46:12] – **Dian:** Oh wow.

[00:46:15] – **Brainerd:** with the world—

[00:46:16] – **Dian:** Oh wow wow wow.

[00:46:17] – **Brainerd:** and we hope to bring some of it to Montreal in May.

[00:46:19] – **Lydie:** Yes!

[00:46:19] – **Dian:** That would be amazing!

[00:46:21] – **Lydie:** In May?

[00:46:21] – **Brainerd:** Yes, our national conference is going to be... Our national conference happens every two years, Choral Canada's national conference happens every two years, and it happens in a different city around the country. And it's going to be in Montreal in May, on the May long weekend.

[00:46:40] – **Dian:** There's so much stuff coming to Montreal this year!

[00:46:45] – **Brainerd:** So my ensemble and the Jireh Gospel Choir from Montreal—

[00:46:50] – **Lydie:** Oh Jireh!

[00:46:51] – **Brainerd:** will be, gonna be coming together to um, to give a concert that's gonna, again like I say, draw attention to the final year of the decade of International Decade of People of African Descent.

[00:47:06] – **Dian:** Amazing. Yes!

[00:47:09] – **Brainerd:** Um, and then our season closes on the 11th of June, we're going to be doing this co-presentation with uh the Luminato Festival—

[00:47:19] – **Dian:** Fantastic!

[00:47:19] – **Brainerd:** Missa Afro-Brasileira. (Dian gasps) This is an Brazilian mass that is about 50-55 minutes of, of acapella singing (Lydie squealing) and the person who wrote the mass, you know, I don't believe was, you know, initiated into Ifa or any of those things but um, spent a lot of time in the community and steeped himself in the tradition.

[00:47:48] – **Dian:** Mmm.

[00:47:49] – **Brainerd:** So this mass is based in Afro-Brazilian rhythms and lullabies—

[00:47:55] – **Dian:** Beautiful.

[00:47:55] – **Brainerd:** and is a syncretism of liturgical Latin and vernacular Portuguese. Um and what we're doing that's different this time around is that I'm commissioning this uh Trinidadian born choreographer, uh, BaKari, uh, Lindsay—

[00:48:13] – **Dian:** Yes, BaKari, yes!

[00:48:14] – **Brainerd:** to um, to create original choreography for this. So 6 dancers and the choir are going to do Missa Afro-Brasileira on the 11th of June—

[00:48:27] – **Dian:** That's amazing.

[00:48:27] – **Brainerd:** at Koerner Hall.

[00:48:29] – **Dian:** That sounds amazing!

[00:48:30] – **Brainerd:** So that's our season.

[00:48:35] – **Dian:** Lydie has to move to Toronto now (all laughing).

[00:48:39] – **Lydie:** I, like I'm, I just wrote down February 17, May, June 11, okay, I can do this.

[00:48:46] – **Brainerd:** December 15, February 17.

[00:48:48] – **Lydie:** I have December 15 too, yes, Toronto, I got, I got all the dates! (Brainerd laughing) Ah yes amazing, and it all sounds so—

[00:48:57] – **Brainerd:** I've been working, I've been working with some singers from Montreal. I've been bringing a couple of them into Toronto to perform with us.

[00:49:04] – **Lydie:** Oh! Are you trying to take away what we got? (Dian laughing) Like you can come here all the time, every day, all day but—

[00:49:10] – **Brainerd:** No! I'm not trying to take away what you got

[00:49:12] – **Lydie:** Mmm? Mmm?

[00:49:13] – **Brainerd:** I just, it's just, it's about working with (Lydie gasping) and we're coming, we're coming there and working with them too.

[00:49:21] – **Lydie:** Ooo! I didn't get to ask my technical— Do I get to ask my technical question, Becks? I wanted to know why "chorale" instead of "choir"?

[00:49:30] – **Brainerd:** Oh dear. (Dian and Lydie laughing)

[00:49:33] – **Dian:** We have 5 minutes left!

[00:49:36] – **Brainerd:** Somebody asked me that the other day too.

[00:49:38] – **Lydie:** It's important!

[00:49:40] – **Brainerd:** Well, it's um, uh you know I may, I may stand corrected but um it was just um... it's not always the case, but often I think for a number of people who use the term, and I am certainly one of those people who use the term, I think of chorale as being slightly smaller than a choir—

[00:50:10] – **Dian:** Mmm.

[00:50:11] – **Brainerd:** or like a concert choir or a symphonic choir.

[00:50:14] – **Lydie:** Mmm.

[00:50:17] – **Brainerd:** Um, so, I mean we say, we say the Nathaniel Dett Chorale, but then we, we add that we're a professional chamber choir and chamber itself means, you know, tends to be smaller as opposed to concerts or symphonic—

[00:50:33] – **Dian:** Yeah.

[00:50:34] – **Brainerd:** But um it's, it's just, it sounded better to say the "Nathaniel Dett Chorale" as opposed to the "Nathaniel Dett Choir" or the "Nathaniel Dett Chorus" or, or... (chuckling) the "Nathaniel Dett Concert Choir".

[00:50:48] – **Lydie:** (overlapping) I appreciate the word though, I love it.

[00:50:50] – **Dian:** No, no I think it's, I think that's absolutely fitting and beautiful.

[00:50:54] – **Brainerd:** But for me when I say chorale I'm thinking something that's a bit smaller and more intimate. And we're based on a 20 voice model, so—

[00:51:04] – **Dian:** Mmm!

[00:51:05] – **Brainerd:** Um, like five in each voice part and then we sort of kind of flip a little bit, so there's first and second sopranos, first and second altos, and sometimes they kind of switch because a lot of the music we do um has what we call "divisi", is divided, it's for more than one voice.

[00:51:25] – **Dian:** Mmm. I've known a few singers who've sung with you and uh they yeah— it's pretty beautiful, yeah.

[00:51:34] – **Lydie:** Well, it sounds— I love the name, I think chorale sounds beautiful. It does bring some sort of a feeling of calm and, and intimacy into it, so I love that that's the title for it.

[00:51:47] – **Brainerd:** Well you know the other things is you know, I knew that when I started it I didn't want to name it after myself.

[00:51:58] – **Dian:** Mmm.

[00:51:58] – **Brainerd:** I wanted to name it after, um, you know a Canadian, if possible, and so started to do a bit of research and was pointed to Nathaniel Dett and I had not known about him until a colleague from U of T had mentioned that they had seen a you know a small, small entry about him in the first Encyclopedia of Music in Canada. And so I started to do some research about this wonderful man, who

was born in Ontario, went to high school (Lydie coughing), graduated from high school in Ontario um spent most of his adult life living and uh teaching in the United States but kept his relationship with Canada and you know in 1930 took 40 plus singers from the Hampton University in Virginia on a 6-week tour of Europe and just blew their minds. And he was a, you know, truly a renaissance man. He was, you know, he could have been a concert pianist or organist because he was certainly trained that way and that's where his early beginnings were. Um, but a phenomenal composer, um, a published poet, um, I mean he published some of his own poetry and set some of his own poetry to music. Um, and there's actually a long poem which he wrote called the "Song of Seven" which was never published and one of these days I want to set at least some of it, um, have it set to music. Um, but a wonderful mentor and educator and um—

[00:53:44] – Dian: Mmm.

[00:53:44] – Brainerd: Just was kind of way ahead of his time, you know?

[00:53:48] – Dian: Yeah.

[00:53:49] – Brainerd: And so I wanted to, I wanted to draw attention to him, I wanted Canadians in particular to ask "Who the heck is Nathaniel Dett?"

[00:53:59] – Dian: Yup.

[00:53:59] – Brainerd: Because, you know, while my American brothers and sisters and well my American folks, let me put it that way to be more inclusive, claim him, and with good reason, um Canadians just needed to know who he was. And when he died in 1943 his uh his body was returned to Ontario to be buried in the family plot alongside his mother and his, uh, and his brothers and um yeah. He's just, he's one of our treasures, Nathaniel Dett—

[00:54:36] – Dian: Absolutely.

[00:54:36] – Brainerd: is one of our national treasures and people ought to know about him. So, I mean my hope is that the ensemble will live past me. I, I really want, um, him to be known and—

[00:54:33] – Dian: I think the choral is an absolutely amazing way to honour him and, uh, congratulations on 25 seasons—

[00:55:03] – Lydie: 25!

[00:55:03] – Dian: um, I think uh yeah, that's an amazing feat in itself, to have an organization, um, last that long in Canada (laughs) to be honest—

[00:55:15] – Lydie: The institution's grown now!

[00:15:16] – Brainerd: The mission to survive for 25 years.

[00:55:17] – Dian: (overlapping) Yeah 25 years, and to do such beautiful and influential work as well. We didn't get a chance to talk about it today but um, I wanted to bring up *Treemonisha* especially, um, with the production last year at Luminato but that it started with the choral and, and then just kind of exploded from there uh—

[00:55:40] – Brainerd: Yes! Well, I mean what I'll say you know briefly about that is I mean that is one of the things that we you know as you read at the opening I mean just um the, the preservation and the creation and the you know the honouring of these musics from around the world and you know um I, I mean it's hard to believe it, it from all the research that we've done it would seem that we gave the Canadian premiere of the original score of Scott Joplin's opera—

[00:56:15] – Dian: Yup.

[00:56:15] – Brainerd: And um that's what I think sort of brought it to the attention of the creators of the more contemporary version that just happened last year, or this past year sorry I should say. Um, it you

know— and I think they did a very worthy and honourable way of retelling the story, modernizing it, telling it particularly through the eyes of women, um that's, that's really powerful and important!

[00:56:50] – Dian: Mhmm.

[00:56:51] – Brainerd: And, and to know note that Scott Joplin (chuckling) was doing this work when people, when—

[00:57:00] – Dian: 100 years ago!

[00:57:01] – Lydie: Cannot believe that...

[00:57:02] – Dian: Yeah 100 years ago and at that time—

[00:57:03] – Brainerd: And Treemonisha wasn't the only one. There were other things that kind of have been lost along the way, um but certainly that was, that was unique, and um... So digging out some of these things and, um, you know giving them— airing them in Canada for the first time, um is important to us as well as commissioning new works and uh yeah.

[00:57:28] – Dian: Yes, amazing. Well sir I wanted to thank you for being with us this afternoon

[00:57:34] – Brainerd: (overlapping) You're welcome.

[00:57:34] – Dian: It's been an absolute pleasure. Absolute pleasure to talk to you

[00:57:37] – Brainerd: Thank you

[00:57:38] – Dian: As we, as we sign out, Lydie?

[00:57:41] – Lydie: Um I, I, I just love the sort of work that we do. Thank you so much for your time. I do want to ask if people do people call you Nath— Nathaniel Dett every now and then (laughs)

[00:57:51] – Brainerd: You'd be surprised how many times people have called me Nathaniel—

[00:57:54] – Lydie: (chuckling) Of course!

[00:57:56] – Brainerd: and I go "No? My name is Brainerd, my name is Brainerd."

[00:57:58] – Lydie: (laughing) So we're discovering someone but one day we need to make sure that "Blyden-Taylor" also is known and that it's remembered—

[00:58:05] – Brainerd: Thank you.

[00:58:05] – Lydie: because you're doing great work.

[00:58:06] – Brainerd: Thank you.