

[Music by Molly Joyce 00:00 - 00:15]

Bonnie: Welcome to *Included: The Disability Equity Podcast*, brought to you by the Johns Hopkins University Disability Health Research Center. This podcast challenges stereotypes of disability by sharing stories, data, and news. Each season digs deep into topics, offering multiple perspectives, and will expand your view of disability. We are your hosts. I am Bonnielin Swenor, director of the Johns Hopkins Disability Health Research Center.

Nick: I'm Nick Reed, assistant professor at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health. On this episode of *Included*, we have a chance to sit down with Molly Joyce and talk about her career and get her thoughts about the intersection of disability and the arts. Miss Joyce is a graduate of the Juilliard School Royal Conservatory in The Hague and Yale School of Music. In addition, she holds an advanced certificate in disability studies from CUNY School of Professional Studies. Miss Joyce's work has been praised by national outlets, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

Her works have been commissioned and performed by ensembles, including the New World, New York Youth, Pittsburgh, and Milwaukee symphony orchestras and the New Juilliard, Dakota, and Contemporaneous ensembles. Importantly, for us at the *Included* podcast, we enjoy Miss Joyce's music every episode with our intro and our outro.

[Music by Molly Joyce 01:45 - 01:51]

Nick: Molly, thank you so much for joining us today.

Molly Joyce: Thank you so much for having me.

Bonnie: Molly, we really are grateful for you taking the time to be our guest. We're gonna start by just asking you a little bit more about your music. On your website, you describe your work as being concerned with disability as a creative source. Can you tell our audience a little bit more about your work within the context of disability?

Molly Joyce: Sure. I'd say that interest in disability as creativity sends back to when I first was looking into disabled musicians and artists in graduate school, looking into disability more. This was all before I was more publicly identifying as disabled, but I think just had intuition. Of course, I had my impairment. My left hand was

impaired about 20 years ago in a car accident. Started looking into, especially, disabled musicians within the context of classical music and found that even if they're still able to perform normative insurance, if you will, they're still compared back to this—what I consider a false social construction [*laughter*] of whatever standard or ability or even performativity and virtuosity is. Then I started getting really interested in just the creativity of disability or really new works created that are really grounded in the disabled experience.

Of course, came across a lot of other disabled artists from there, across disciplines, and just encouraged me evermore to just seek the creativity of my disability, which, for me, is never-ending in the best way possible [*laughter*] and so fulfilling and also challenging. Especially when you consider accessibility, there's just so much to go into and permeate myself sometimes. Just focuses on my own body, especially with acquired disability. I love asking where—I lost two out of the three nerves in my left hand. I love asking where those nerves are now and what came in their place. Also, interfacing and collaborating with other disabled artists and especially pursuing access as aesthetics. Thinking about creative and very organic, natural ways to incorporate accessibility elements, such as sign language, interpretation, open captions, many viewing options, relaxed viewing from websites to live concerts. Again, for me, it's this endless well of motivation and creativity.

Bonnie: In your full-length album, *Breaking and Entering*, it seems that that is just a very deeply personal compilation. Can you talk to us a little bit more about that?

Molly Joyce: Sure. It was created in [*laughter*] the wake of my graduate studies. I think I was so happy to be out of school, out of academia. Approaching my graduation, I was starting to perform more and more on the organ but not singing yet or anything. I always knew I wanted to do—or I guess just to back up a little bit too. This organ instrument, it's this electric vintage toy organ in which I initially found—or I found all of them on eBay. [*Laughter*] They're not manufactured anymore, and they're about \$100 each, usually. I have three of them now in my collection.

At the peak of my collection, I had five. [*Laughter*] I'm always afraid, 'cause they're not made anymore, that I'll need an extra part. Which, actually, one time, I had to do that, replace a fan or something. Anyway, but I love this instrument. When I initially bought it, I just thought it looked very cute and stylish and just an

odd instrument. Its sound is amazing in my view. It's slightly out of tune. It just has a very unique sound.

Then when I started performing on it more, I realized that, really, it felt like it was made for my body. It has these chord buttons on the left-hand side and keyboard part on the right-hand side. It feels very natural for me to perform on, especially 'cause my left hand doesn't have much dexterity. It feels great to just do these chord buttons or not worry about, again, too much dexterity with the left hand. Again, I think it even encouraged me even more to seek the creativity of my disability.

Fast forward to the album, I think when I knew I wanted to create an album on the organ, but then it was around this time, post-graduate school, when I started singing more and writing my own lyrics. It just turned into this personal investigation, I think, especially of acquiring a disability and especially—again, you're formed in one body, *[laughter]* if you will, and then part of it leaves you, fleeing you almost. Just all those questions around that and the juxtapositions. Which I don't feel like the album is supposed to be, say, an answer to that, if you will. It's just supposed to almost bring up more questions, *[laughter]* I think. I feel like I always gravitate towards art that just brings up more questions, doesn't provide the answers, in a way, but just provokes you more.

Nick: Thank you for sharing that. This might not be the right word. I'm not very artistic, but I feel like you're being very vulnerable with your music by creating that exploration. I appreciate you sharing that with the world.

Molly Joyce: Yeah, thank you.

Nick: I've seen you talk a lot in interviews before about disability's potential and role in the arts. I was wondering if you could speak broadly about that. How do you view disability within art?

Molly Joyce: Sure. I feel like I can answer *[laughter]*—I feel like I wanna come back in a week or something or phone a friend too. *[Laughter]* I think one of the most important roles, at least for me, in strictly musical context too, is just questioning assumptions we have about performance or how artistic events should go, in general. Anything from crip 07:33 time, slower time, not like, "Oh, we had to do this in all this order right away." Just from questioning what a performer can be on stage and move and look like. I just love that

so much 'cause I think assumptions drive me crazy, either about my own body or others.

I love just questioning that and throwing out all the traditions, if you will. *[Laughter]* Also, I think, of course, disability brings in really important discussions around accessibility and exploring that, again, as aesthetic, but just really as a necessary artistic element. It drives me crazy, again, thinking of assumptions and control to that—with my disabled peers, in a way, either deaf or hard of hearing or blind, low vision, can't perceive certain artworks out there 'cause they're not accessible. I feel like that's not their fault, *[laughter]* in a way.

This might be slightly controversial. I feel like most of us don't actively choose to be disabled or to put ourselves—but then it's all the more important to make things accessible. Again, it drives me crazy when something is just not accessible. I know this is something I'm always working on in my own work. I think disability brings up really important conversations on why they should be accessible and to be more open and inclusive. Just I think my view created a greater experience for all, disabled or non-disabled.

Nick: This is such a fascinating thing. When we first met you, you mentioned this same concept that I heard you just say again. How do we make music more inclusive and accessible for people with disabilities?

Molly Joyce: Sure. I think this is—in my view, I feel like *[laughter]* the music is one of the disciplines a little behind some of the other ones in disability arts. For example, I feel like disability is so developed in dance and visual art or so present, in a way, as an identity and experience that's cultivated. Part of me feels like, in music, it's a little behind because of all the instruments, in a way, which require very specific abilities. It's even reiterated through—even if you create new compositions today, you're writin' for these instruments that have been around for hundreds of years. Everyone's focusing on these abilities in a way. I'm not saying to throw out all the instruments, *[laughter]* but I think a start would be to be more open to adaptive instruments that are more adaptive to specific physicalities, but also just looking at, again, basic facets of accessibility.

I feel like I go to so many music events. There's no captioning, no sign language interpretation. I know accessibility, there's always a tricky balance when you start talking about it. I feel like your mind

goes to the funding or the expenses involved, but even simple things as captioning. Just even having that open mindset can be, I feel like, a great advance. I think, I guess, that's for more events related. I think it's a constant challenge for me, personally, too. How to make my music more accessible in a way. I guess a lot of my answer now is videos and open captions of the lyrics I'm singing. I think there's always more to be improved, I would say. Probably my dream presentations would be with tactile or tactile facets to feel the vibrations of the music.

Also, I've been opening up my work, more recently, too. I feel like my training as a composer was so much like, "Oh, my gosh. I want the audience to hear the work from start to finish and all these developments that I put into the work, that I tirelessly worked on." Now I'm opening up more to exploring website versions of works or installations where it's not necessary to hear the work from start to finish. Just opening up that mindset, at least personally, for me, has been incredibly liberating and, hopefully, moving towards more accessible forms.

Nick:

I love that so much. Something you said really resonated with me, too, about the captioning idea that I was wondering if you could just elaborate a little bit on that. There's this difference between captioning to just capture spoken word but also to describe the music a little bit further. I get very frustrated when I watch TV. I'm a caption person. It will literally just say, "Music." You're telling us about art, and you're telling us how art drives things. It's more than just music. There's something else going on. Do you have any comment on that topic? I know I'm putting you on the spot with this one.

Molly Joyce:

[Laughter] It actually brings up a more recent thing I've been working on with the amazing blind media artist, Andy Slater. He's based in Chicago. I was so lucky and fortunate to work with him a couple weeks ago with—I did a solo performance with Eighth Blackbird Ensemble, or they presented me in their studio. He wrote sound descriptions for each piece. The videos I performed with, I already had open captions to the lyrics, but then he did sound descriptions that were read beforehand. Which was just an amazing experience to hear your work described that way, and it's so nice to not do it myself. *[Laughter]* I think I'd rather have someone else do it or respond to it. He also played them back in a screen reader voice, which I really loved, too, bringing in that facet of accessibility.

I'm just going on a tangent here. *[Laughter]* So many people are so conditioned to view access as, I'll say, ugly or not pleasing. I've had so many people tell me to remove the caption. We're so conditioned to that. Even myself, too, I feel like I've evolved, personally. That's always fascinating for me too. You think that it's this pack on, but what if it is necessary to the artwork? That's what I'm always pursuing, I feel like. Just to go back to Andy. We did that, and then we're also pursuing a more—I wrote a piece for Carnegie Hall's NY02. It's their second youth orchestra. Then we're doing a video version, and I'm commissioning Andy to do synchronous sound descriptions which will occur throughout. That's, I guess, my most recent developments. *[Laughter]* I love exploring that as well. Like you're saying, adding more than—or not just feeling like if there's lyrics, I have to caption it, but really captioning the music.

Bonnie:

I'm enjoying this conversation so much because our work is so focused on changing societal perspectives of disability through science, through data. Just listening and engaging in this conversation, it strikes me how important the overlap is with what you're doing in art and music to do that as well. I just think this is so interesting. I'd love to just know more about what you think the—has there been a shift in your tenure, in your career in the inclusion of people with disabilities in music and in art? Do you feel that there's been some kind of an impact of the work?

Molly Joyce:

With the inclusion part, I certainly—I guess I've been more out as disabled in the past four years or so. That's also post-school in a way. I felt like some of my experiences with school, and I think specifically music, identity is not often—I'm sure it's changed now for schools, but recognized or even discussed, I think, are *[laughter]*—or the comparison to when I was in grad school. I'd go to these art critiques in the art school or with visual art. I felt like the first thing they'd talk about was, "Oh, this is about race or gender or something." Those discussions, I know some of my friends complained about them too. They might've been just as problematic. *[Laughter]*

I just found it fascinating in musical context when I'd present a work clearly about disability that just wasn't the language to discuss about it. Maybe that's on me as well for not having the language or impetus at the time to discuss it more. I think, at least for my background, I didn't see it as much recognized or talked about. It was almost feared, in a way, 'cause you couldn't play your instrument anymore or something like that. I'm just trying to think. I definitely it's evolved in all context or all disciplines, even

in music a little more. I feel like sometimes I'm seeing even in, whatever, calls for scores or something encouraging disabled composers. I think everything is evolving, but I always think there's more work to be done. I feel like if you stop pushing, people are gonna *[laughter]* get comfortable. I think you always need to encourage it more but in a positive way, hopefully, too, not just an accusatory way.

Nick: It's really good to hear that you perceive the needle moving in the right direction. Just out of curiosity, are there any things that you think need to be done or any specific programs you wanna see to improve inclusivity in this context?

Molly Joyce: Sure. Actually, just on a practical level, 'cause my mind's already always around practicality or funding, it'd be amazing if disabled artists had an accessibility fund to turn to when they wanna add accessibility to their works. Which is an interesting thing 'cause sometimes I feel like accessibility is so woven into the artistic production and, therefore, artist fee and the collaborator fees. It's not just a totally separate budget item sometimes. That would just be so, so amazing. *[Laughter]*

I feel like I'm always applying to extra grants for that or just taking it out of my personal artist fee, which is not the end of the world but just always—just thinking other artists don't usually have to *[laughter]* think about that. Although it is so, so important for me. I can't go back once I start including sign language interpretation. I don't wanna do it any other way. That, I think, would be such a helpful turning place for disabled artists, really, across disciplines. It really helps the artist retain their full fee, but also, it makes it more accessible for any audience, hopefully.

Bonnie: That was a really important discussion. I must admit, these are things I haven't thought enough about. *[Laughter]* Now, hopefully, those in our audience, and me included, will work to always think about inclusion and disability in art in a different way. I'm really grateful to you and to your work and to our collaboration with this podcast. I'm hoping, though, that you can share with our audience about where they can find more about your music, and if you have any upcoming shows or events that they could know more about.

Molly Joyce: Sure. Of course, thank you, guys, so much for having me. It's such an honor to have my music on the *[laughter]* podcast, such as a podcast lover. My website is mollyjoyce.com, and there's all upcoming events there. Things are, whatever, virtual and in person

now. *[Laughter]* There's also a lot of videos up there as well with past performances and works.

Nick: Molly's being very humble. Her website is amazing. *[Laughter]* It's full of these amazing videos and information. You do have some upcoming events, right?

Molly Joyce: Yeah. I'll be in Boise, Idaho. I guess I can add—I'll be speaking on a panel of disabled musicians with the organization Half Access on July 31st. I know it's at 11:00 a.m. Pacific time. I believe the guitarist from Portugal. The Man is involved, *[laughter]* which I'm really excited about. I've followed his work for a long time. Then, actually looking forward, I guess, in January, February of next year, I'll be pursuing another iteration of this project I have titled Perspectives, which I ask questions to disabled interviewees. The initial iteration focused on questions of access, care, interdependence, and more. This one was commissioned by the Great Northern Festival and focuses on questions related to winter and darkness. I actually just did the first interview today, so I'm really excited to be pursuing another iteration of the project.

Nick: That is awesome. I highly encourage our audience to check out the project. I saw an interview, Molly, where you were describing the project in more detail and the questions and the simplicity of the questions, but the responses you get. It's pretty amazing stuff. I really hope people take a chance to dig in there. Thank you so much for joining us. This has been amazing. I'm going to echo what Bonnie said. You're bringing up points that I feel bad I've never thought—there's things you're bringing up that I don't think people think about regularly, specifically in the context of arts. I think what you're doing is amazing. I think the idea you posed about creating a fund is actually really novel and necessary. It hits on a topic that we talk about a lot here. That you're being expected to make things accessible with your own funds and your own artist fee, but accessibility is a right, and it should be just a part of the process.

Molly Joyce: Yeah, exactly. To be honest, I don't feel like I'm always expected, in a way, but it's a necessity for me now. I can't view the work *[laughter]* any way—to be honest, I feel like when I see a video without captions, it just looks so naked to me. I don't know a better word. It just doesn't look complete to me, or at least one of my own videos, in a way. It's just really necessary.

Bonnie: It just strikes me. We think so much about equity in the Center and on this podcast, and it certainly seems to apply to music and art and the work that you're doing. Thank you so much.

Molly Joyce: Thank you. *[Laughter]*

Bonnie: You have been listening to *Included: The Disability Equity Podcast* brought to you by the Johns Hopkins Disability Health Research Center.

Nick: Thank you to our *Included Podcast* team and everyone that made this podcast possible, especially Sabrina Epstein, Prateek Gajwani, Curtis Nishimoto, and our guests. Music is by Molly Joyce. This podcast is supported by a Johns Hopkins Ten by Twenty Challenge Grant.

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