

Interview Laritza La Bouche

‘O O‘ahu ku‘u mokupuni.

‘O Nu‘uanu ku‘u ‘moku.

‘O Ko‘olaupoko ku‘u mauna

‘O Kahuailana ku‘u wai.

‘O ‘O Pi‘ilani ku‘u kupuna is my ancestor, who I want to bring into this space.

‘O wau ‘O T.J. Keanu "Laritza" Tario

Summary

Laritza shared her experiences with classical music and performance, emphasizing the importance of putting her family and community in her work, and the desire to push this narrative forward for māhū. We discussed her childhood, her time at Julliard, and her unique experience of finding belonging, as a kanaka maoli pianist, a māhū, and as an eclectic drag performer. She speaks to the complexities of these identities, and her way of connecting to her ancestors as someone who is always deeply listening to the world around her.

Intermezzo 3:00

Duration of audio: 5:28

Outline

- Laritza shares her childhood experiences and family background.
- Expresses her role and kuleana (responsibility) in her community, feeling a sense of duty to push forward the narrative of marginalized Hawaiian communities in classical music and film.

- Discusses their identity as a transgender person and how it relates to their drag performances.
- Shares experiences as a Hawaiian classical musician at Juilliard and in predominantly white and Asian spaces.
- Speaker reflects on finding belonging through listening to nature.

Interview

Kanani: *Did you grow up with any spiritual practices or protocols or even religion? And you can explain that however you would define it for you now.*

Laritza: *Yeah. I was raised in the church at Kawaiahaeo. So there was always that element of, you know, everybody gets dressed up, goes to church on Sundays. And that's, that's also where I was, you know, performing as a child. Performing piano all the time at church.*

Kanani: *Ah, so the music, and piano, all started for you at church.*

Laritza: *We were always brought to church on Sundays. I was like five...I think they took us to a concert somewhere at the Blaisdell, where someone was playing [classical music]. I'm like, I'm gonna try that. For a good time, you know, I thought that having a solo career in piano would have been great. My time at Juilliard, it kind of changed. My mentors weren't the best at you know, trying to foster a healthy kind of feeling of me having a career but I guess that's where drag stepped in. Kind of you know, painting on, like I said, armor you know, a different persona but you're at the core of it, you're yourself.*

Kanani: *Do you see any distinctions between LGBTQ+ and māhū?*

Laritza: *Yeah, well, I'm also still trying to figure that out. I've been doing drag since 2017. And I felt like it's, you know, it's not just a performance at this point. I feel like it's my identity, which is also you know, what mahu is. It's how we live and breathe. It's not just, oh, yeah, I'm gonna put on my makeup and put on my armor, you know?*

Kanani: *How have you experienced people responding when they realize that you're also an amazing pianist? I feel like many kanaka, they have so many talents, and we're not just that, or just this. We only play Hawaiian music, or we all should look the same way...the expectations of us behaving a certain way, I guess, is what I'm referring to. You, you show such diversity, and I feel like kanaka should be more represented as diverse, as many of us are.*

Laritza: *Yeah, I absolutely agree. With all that you have said, being kind of, you know, the token brown person in an art form that's predominately White and*

Asian in classical music. There was nobody for me to go and talk to or see because everybody was different than me, especially moving to New York. It was a culture shock. Ironically, though, there was a few other Hawaiians there at the same time, but they were in the dance program. But I was the only musician that was there at the time. I was the first Hawaiian classical pianist that was accepted in the pre-college, and then eventually it just stayed for my four years there, so in total I was there six years.

Kanani: As a musician and mahu, what do you see as your kulana and kuleana in your community now?

Lariza: I feel like, as far as kuleana, in every project that I kind of, start or throw myself at, I try to put my family and community before my own kind of, you know, personal feelings of it. I'm always putting myself within the work, but also just, what is the bigger picture of how is my music going to push forward? The narrative of, you know, us as māhū, you know, us as a marginalized kind of community, us as Hawaiians. You know, not a lot of us are in classical music and not a lot of us are in film.

Kanani: Do you think we'll see that more and more in the future?

Lariza: Oh, I hope so, yeah, to inspire the next generation of artists.

Kanani: The work that I've been in, can seem on the surface, as it's [art gallery] curating. But it's really not, for me, it's about this idea of experiencing and questioning belonging. I feel that it's very significant to every human being, but especially to the cultures who historically have had to change from changes in their environment. When your environment changes, you know, your habits and your access and approach to resources change. And so, the way we think and relate, changes, so I wonder how this is being experienced by indigenous and native Hawaiians today? So my question is, what does belonging mean to you?

Lariza: I think I'm still trying to find belonging you know, as a kid I was always that different person, boy, strange and quiet, learning classical piano, while everybody else was playing and having a regular normal childhood. It felt that like going to New York and being surrounded by child prodigies themselves, I felt different still. And then also, you know, finding drag, I like eclectic things

that you know, regular drag queens don't really do. I try to mesh my given talents, which is music and piano playing with drag. So, to answer that, I'm just still trying to find belonging, and even as a Kanaka Maoli away from the islands for so long, in moving back and being connected to the land and my culture more, it's not going to come overnight. I know. That's for sure. But it's whenever I'm out in nature, whenever I'm out, like at the beach, and not as somebody that's enjoying, but somebody that's listening, I'm always listening. That's where I'll find the answers of my belonging, I feel, and my connection back to my culture and my ancestors, for sure.