

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome back to Sound Thoughts on Art, an audio series from the National Gallery of Art. I'm Celeste Headlee.

When we engage with art, it kick-starts our five senses. We hear music or feel the beat of a drum in our chests. We see the vivid colors of a photo. We take in the three dimensions of a sculpture. We savor the taste of fine food. Sometimes, you can smell the carved wood or the smeared oil paint.

But when there's crossover, when a piece of art activates multiple senses and they begin to interact and intertwine, that's when things really get interesting. When we listen to melody, what images flash through our minds? When we study the brush work in a painting, what do we hear? This podcast lives in that crossover, in the space at the center of our five senses' Venn diagram.

[AMBIENT INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC]

In each episode, you'll learn about a work at the National Gallery and you'll hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. Sound Thoughts on Art delves into our personal relationship with art and the unique response we have to beautifully made things.

[JAZZ MUSIC]

Even though George Bellows's *The Lone Tenement* was painted in 1909, it really looks like any city you might wander through today. And that's true in a number of different ways. For one, the colors balance light and dark, natural and manmade, new and old, blues and yellows mixed with browns and grays.

The New York of the early 20th century where Bellows lived and worked was also a study in contradictions. In *The Lone Tenement*, a brand- new bridge, one we know now as the Koch Queensboro Bridge or the 50th Street Bridge, in Queens, stands so far in the foreground it's almost like we're standing right beneath it. And underneath that marvel of engineering and public works there are clusters of people in this painting warming themselves around a fire, standing near puddles in dark clothing, and a single tenement, looking decades older than its surroundings and a great deal smaller, is front and center, its top floors beginning to be warmed by the sun.

George Bellows would certainly have known the social connotations of such a tenement, a dirty eyesore crowded with impoverished people, but he's made it look beautiful. For jazz musician Maria Schneider, that juxtaposition of the ugliness and beauty, dark and light, was resonant with a similarly complicated period of her life.

So you were asked to pick a work out of the gallery. How did you land on this one?

MARIA SCHNEIDER: Well, I came to this a little bit through a back door. In my own composition, I've been really inspired by a book by Robert Henri called *The Art Spirit*. And he led the Ashcan school of art. And so I really wanted to find an artist that was deeply inspired and affected by the teachings of Robert Henri. And so I landed on George Bellows, *The Lone Tenement*.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What is it about Henri that captured you?

MARIA SCHNEIDER: Oh, my book, my *Art Spirit* book, has so many little bookmarks in it. I ripped up pieces of paper, flipping pages over, highlighting things. It's three times as thick as the actual book. There are so many things that are analogous to music. For instance, in the world of jazz, people can become so caught up in technique that they forget what the end to technique is.

And so Robert Henri says things like, "Your eye does not follow the muscle and the bone making the arm, but it follows the spirit of the arm— and so things like that."

Music, it's exactly the same. He talks about background and foreground, that the background is what the viewer sees of the background while focused on the foreground. In music, it's the same thing. If you want something, a melody or a soloist or something, to be in the foreground, you really have to think carefully about the images that are behind that— or the sounds. Even I'm talking in terms of visual— the sounds that are behind it so that it enhances and doesn't distract unless you want it to distract in a way that it creates a relationship with the background that has its own kind of intensity to it. There are a thousand quotes in this book that are just extraordinary for understanding musical concepts.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So when you first saw this painting, what were the first things that you saw?

MARIA SCHNEIDER: Well, the color, just the beautiful brightness of the color, but then the other tones in the front that are darker and less vivid. And the shapes— the shapes of— the intensity of the structures in it. And then just that there's obviously a story going on, emotionally, for these people in relationship to what's going on here.

And also this bridge, by the way— this was the building of the Queensboro Bridge— I went over that bridge every day for many years when I lived in Astoria. So there was a little connection there too.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Before we get to the piece of music that is associated with this piece for you, what kind of sounds do you think are in this picture?

MARIA SCHNEIDER: Oh, gosh, I don't know that I would look at this picture and say it equates to specific sounds, although I'm sure, if you imagine this picture, you've got the boat going by, and in a very literal sense, there are all sorts of things that signs of life that create kind of a background and a foreground, whatever is going on amongst these immigrants in the front against the landscape of the city. But I don't see it so literal as that. For me, it's more about the

sense of structure and then emotion and the fact that it's art that isn't just for the art's sake, but it's also telling a story of people. It's relating to something with these people, not that I necessarily know what those things are but I can feel that and see that.

CELESTE HEADLEE: For more on George Bellows and the Ashcan school of painters, we turn to Charlie Brock, associate curator of American and British paintings at the National Gallery of Art.

[JAZZ MUSIC]

CHARLES BROCK: Bellows would walk the city from top to bottom, Manhattan. And he would not sketch. There are very few sketches of his paintings, especially these early paintings. He apparently worked from memory. So he would go out and survey these areas, and then come back to the studio and recreate them out of his memory.

And this curious tenement, there's no photographs that would tell us that tenement is there. There are tenements in the area. So in my mind, he's kind of invented this scene. The area under the bridge, in reality, was probably totally desolate. But he's almost taken something from another part of his trips to look at the site and he's brought it into it and made it central to the site. And again, it's kind of a ghost of a building. It's isolated. And you get the sense that's the mystery of the painting, is what is it doing there? Is it a vestige? Does it exist at all?

And so he kind of summons up the whole spirit of the bridge and what was there before and what is disappearing. And the way he depicts the people who have apparently been displaced by this bridge, they're kind of almost ghostlike. It goes from a very active group sitting around a fire, at the left, to keep themselves warm, to these kind of little, more sketchier figures just below the tenement, to the far right, just these little almost dots and dashes. And so they're almost like wraithlike figures on the right.

So you get a sense of a very transient, tenuous community, but nonetheless a fascinating community. Especially, again, again on the left, we have all the warmth of the fire and the camaraderie or people gathered around the fire. In the middle, it looks to me like you might have kids throwing a baseball back and forth. It's hard to exactly read that.

But at the end, you're left with the sense of, here's a boarded-up tenement and here are these displaced people. And so it creates a very intense mood of both presence and absence that come into play because of this new incredible bridge that crosses the East River. So it's very contemporary. He's painting the life of the city as it's changing. Almost all of Bellows's paintings speak to the current state of the city. And that includes its tenement communities. The tenement houses themselves were seen as needing to be— they were crowded, they were dangerous, they were places where disease ran rampant. And there were a lot of reform movements, at that time, to of course create better conditions for the immigrant communities.

So he's diving into, really, the most current types of issues and topics and subjects of the day, but he's coming at it from this very unique and oblique and fascinating angle.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So what do you hear when you look at this painting?

CHARLES BROCK: I hear the kind of maybe conversations? Again, if you step into the picture, and all of a sudden, you're on the same ground as the figures in the foreground, there's a couple. There's a pair that are kind of set apart that are clearly conversing. And then, of course, gathered around the fire, the fire, of course, is kind of crackling. So you get a sense of that. And so yeah, I think you're hearing the life of the city from a very curious point. You're not in the midst of a crowd, but you're hearing maybe boats on the river. There's a steamboat. Sounds across the river, maybe filtering across to Manhattan, across the East River.

And so yeah, because it is a rather big, open space, I think you're kind of getting a really interesting auditory landscape. And I think it grabs your imagination and evokes— I think works on many different sensory levels. I think this idea of art for life's sake was, essentially, I think, creating paintings that were literally as alive as life itself.

And so I think these paintings are meant to have these strong sensory— to convey these strong sensory experiences of sight and sound and touch and taste and even smell. So it's really, again, fulfilling that dream or lesson of Henri to make art that really is as vital and lively as life itself, not something apart from life, but just something that is part and parcel of life.

[JAZZ MUSIC]

CELESTE HEADLEE: How do we arrive, then, at the piece that you chose to accompany this painting?

MARIA SCHNEIDER: Well, this piece was a piece that I had been commissioned by Jazz at Lincoln Center to write something. And I was really struggling. And when I do commissions, generally, I'm just dreading it. [LAUGHS] Most composers love commissions. I can't stand—

CELESTE HEADLEE: Yeah, wait, let's stay there for just one second, real quick. Why were you dreading it?

MARIA SCHNEIDER: Oh, the pressure. I put such a pressure on myself that there's an expectation and that it has to be good, and it has to be something different, and people are wanting to know what I'm going to do. And I don't yet know what that thing is. And I put so much pressure on myself that I just implode.

And it's amazing the negative self-talk that artists give to themselves when they're— or at least me— when I'm in that state. And this particular piece was just kind of really putting me through a rough time. And I had wanted to do a piece— I'd been listening to flamenco music like crazy, and I was just so enamored with it.

And I had been really wanting to sort of funnel my musical voice through this thing. I had been feeling the wish to do that. But I was struggling with it. And as the deadline was looming, I was suddenly diagnosed with breast cancer. And it was just an incredibly scary and difficult time. My best friend was dying of breast cancer, as was her sister. So I had been around just that and seeing that, and I was just— the level of fear and angst within me was just unfathomable. I was just so completely freaked out.

And this deadline and the rehearsal that I was supposed to be having was all coming up it was going to be like three weeks away or something like that. And I was panicking.

And so there was a particular night where I had had some notes written down but not a lot. And I was really struggling. And I was sitting here at night, and it was in the dark, and I was just feeling like an electricity going through my hands. The stress was so much.

And I said to myself, OK, I'm going to I'm going to call up Lincoln Center tomorrow, tell them I'll do the concert. They can keep the commission money. I can't possibly deliver this commission. I'm feeling too much stress. For sure they will understand. I've got to go through a surgery and everything before this thing happens.

And I think I was going to have 10 days before that was going to happen. And so I sat down, and when I decided I would take that pressure off of myself, there was just such a tremendous relief. It was just like, oh my god, OK. OK. But then there was still the fear there.

And I looked over at the piano and the music was on the piano. And I had no place to go. There was just no place to go within myself. And so I went over to the piano, and I just started looking at what was there, and started playing it.

And all of a sudden, the relationship to the notes changed. It was like I was being tossed around the surface of a stormy sea, and all of a sudden, when I started playing the music, it was like a submarine going down underneath. And I could see the horrible outcome. I could see everything that could possibly happen— death, any of it. But somehow, I was submerged underneath.

And when I got in the music, I realized it was like this lifeline, a lifeline to something that felt more eternal for me, something that felt like it truly mattered. And it just felt like I had to do that music for me. It was a different thing. It had always been for everyone else, worrying about what they're going to think.

And suddenly, I didn't care what anybody thought. It was purely about what I needed to do to get through this moment. And so, of course, I didn't cancel the commission. I hung on to it. And I worked like crazy, practically morning, noon, and night, for those days, because it was the only thing that kept me sane. CELESTE HEADLEE: What do you think it was? Was it the act of creating new music that was healing for you? Or was it the music itself?

MARIA SCHNEIDER: I think it was that the music helped draw me into that state that Henri talks about, where it felt like the most meaningful thing in the world. Because what I was struggling with up until that moment was what I see in this Bellows painting.

I was walking around and everybody else seemed oblivious. Every day felt— it was sunny, people were laughing, talking about the things they were doing. And I just wanted to scream, don't you realize we're all going to die? You know, it was like this feeling of everybody being completely oblivious to this gravity that's going on, which is what I see in that painting. There's this gravity in front with everybody just going on about their day, and the sun, and the beautiful day. And that's the way I felt.

When I went into that space, suddenly it wasn't lonely. It felt like it was a space that connects all of us. It felt like sort of an eternal place. I think it's a very kind of— I think everybody can relate to when you get into a zone, whether it's meditative— you're doing work, and suddenly the hours peel away, and you feel that deep joy.

And when you encounter that moment and you create out of that moment, out of that place within yourself, there is a magic there. I believe that that's when music most connects with people. Because I believe that when you pull something artistic out of that place and other people hear it, they recognize it because that place is some sort of place where we connect. And I can't explain it any more than that, but that's how it feels to me.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here's Maria Schneider's "Bulería, Soleá, y Rumba" uninterrupted.

[MUSIC - MARIA SCHNEIDER, "BULERÍA, SOLEÁ, Y RUMBA"]

So tell me about this piece of music itself. This is a rumba?

MARIA SCHNEIDER: It's called "Bulería, Soleá, y Rumba," which is there were three flamenco forms. The first, which has a kind of a rhythmic feel to it that they call hemiola. It's sort of the (SINGING TO DENOTE RHYTHM) I want to be in America, (SPEAKING) where the (EMPHASIZING 4) 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, (EMPHASIZING 3) 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. It's like playing with the accents of groupings of six that create all sorts of syncopation. And the flamenco aspect of it has scales that have sort of a little bit of a darkness tinge to them.

The soleá, the middle movement, which is the movement that has this long, drawn-out solo by Donny McCaslin— and he was actually nominated for a Grammy Award for his solo, and it is extraordinary— the soleá is a slow, slow, kind of brooding, dark form in flamenco. But that speeds up towards the end. And so underneath Donny, I created this background that just slowly builds and builds and builds, and then just swallows him up.

And then the last part, the rumba, is more hopeful. And I ended up bringing in the voice of Luciana Souza to sing wordless vocals. And there's a soloist, Greg Gisbert, on flugelhorn. And it

has a much more positive, hopeful theme. And it modulates to different keys, meaning it changes keys that keep lifting. So it kind of— it lifts out of that darkness.

And I guess the whole piece was just sort of processing, for me, everything I was going through.

CELESTE HEADLEE: I was interested— I found it really fitting that you chose to have your vocalist do a wordless solo because, when I look at the painting, you can't see any faces.

MARIA SCHNEIDER: Yeah, that's true.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Like to a certain extent, the wordless solo goes right along with this painting where you're so far from the human figures you can probably hear conversation going on but you can't hear the words themselves.

MARIA SCHNEIDER: That's interesting. I think you're right about that. Yes.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So I wondered— you described the painting as telling a story. And I felt like your piece told a story in three acts. And I wonder if you had meant for the music to be, in a way, narrative.

MARIA SCHNEIDER: No, I don't think I did, but it sort of came out that way. And I think that's the thing that happens sometimes is that what comes out sometimes when your intention isn't so much to make the narrative, if you're coming from that place that I describe, you can't help it because it's coming from your deepest place.

And so many times, in my music, I feel that, later, when I look back, I say, oh, I see now what that was about. That was— you don't know those things when you're going through it, and the music teaches you. It's sort of— sometimes I think about when the child psychologist has the child paint a drawing of their home, and it has the mother with teeth and the father with a suitcase or something. And then the psychologist says, Well, there's a lot going on here, clearly. And I think, with music, it's the same way for a musician, that sometimes you look back and then you learn about yourself through your music. It's sort of like teaching you about yourself, things you don't know. I think we work out a lot through our art.

I think, also, one of the reasons that art and music, in this country, it would be so important to have those things be so central in our educational systems, because they teach so much. I mean, forgetting, in music, math and all these things, but also just processing emotion, and learning about yourself, and connecting with others in the case of music. In the case of jazz, it really teaches about democracy in a way. It's the art of listening and not coming in with an agenda, but listening and being changed by what somebody else says. And so art is important. It's powerful.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What makes flamenco the right music for this painting?

MARIA SCHNEIDER: Well, I'm not sure about that. I'm not sure it's the right music for this

painting. It was the right music for me at the time. And it was fitting for me, I guess, at the time that I had done such a deep dive into flamenco, which is largely expressing pain and everything. Which, by the way, if you think about immigrants, it's a story, this sort of displaced, not being accepted, and there's this pain and suffering.

And so it was sort of the perfect music for me to process what I was going through. But if I think about it, actually it makes sense here. It's just that flamenco has such a strong connection to Spain. And this is very American, but still there's this something similar there.

CELESTE HEADLEE: I mean, I may be reading too much into it, but my thought was that flamenco is a music of the people. It's a more popular form. And this painting is the same. It's showing the people themselves, average people, who would listen to their own folk music, possibly, framed within this incredibly expensive and advanced bridge. I mean, I felt like it was actually a relatively inspired choice. MARIA SCHNEIDER: Yeah, it's beautiful. I love it. I'm just looking at it right now, the man in the front, whispering something in the other man's ear, you know, and the face, and then the others huddled around a fire there. It's really amazing. I mean, you can really dive into it and see so much story and personal story inside of that little moment in the bigger city.

[JAZZ MUSIC]

CELESTE HEADLEE: It's difficult not to draw parallels between the cost of this bridge, which, at the time, was an extremely expensive undertaking, and the poverty of the people in this picture, and also the reputation of tenements themselves. They were known as a place where, as you say, they were full of, often, immigrants, they were full of people who were disempowered, both politically and financially, and people who were sort of on the edge of crisis and catastrophe all the time. Was he a political artist?

CHARLES BROCK: This is a very difficult question to answer with Bellows. I think that he was political in the sense that he was picturing these communities and representing them in a way that they hadn't been represented. He's not pointing to the heroic view of this bridge, he's pointing you to the life of the city. And the life of the city is, of course— you might almost say, primarily, it's immigrant communities in terms of numbers.

So he's always gravitating towards the places that are teeming with life. He's a great painter of crowds. But there is a kind of detachment. It's a bird's-eye view.

And I think that's where this whole notion of the relationship of art and politics is something that's hard to gauge in Bellows's work. I think it's one of the things that makes his work fantastic, but also— and he was involved with progressive movements in New York. But I think, like many artists, I don't think he wanted his art— or really just being an artist, of course, it was the art that drove everything. And he did not want his art to be simply beholden to a political agenda. And that gets you into difficult territory because the problems were very serious. He was from a solid, middle-class, conservative background in Ohio. So the degree of his



involvement and concern is something that's always in question with Bellows. But I think it's a question that we can explore and come to our own conclusions about as we look at a painting like this. So it sets the stage for, really, American modernism across the century, just by breaking opening up new possibilities [INAUDIBLE]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks once again to Maria Schneider for joining us and sharing her music. You can learn more about her and George Bellows at the National Gallery of Art's website, [nga.gov/podcast](https://nga.gov/podcast). Sound Thoughts on Art is a production of the National Gallery of Art's music department. The show was created by Danielle Hahn, the National Gallery of Art's head of music programs, and it was mixed and produced by Maura Currie.

To support the show, share Sound Thoughts on Art and subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, or wherever you listen. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until we meet again, be well.