

FUSE

A BOMB PODCAST

AUTHOR & COMPOSER

Nick Hornby & Maria Schneider

SEASON 1 | EPISODE #2

Nick Hornby is a novelist, screenwriter, lyricist, and producer. His novel High Fidelity was recently adapted into a show that premiered in February (2020) on Hulu, starring Zoe Kravitz and Jake Lacy. Nick is also a longstanding contributor to the Believer's monthly column, "Stuff I've Been Reading."

Since 2005, the Maria Schneider Jazz Orchestra has performed at festivals and concert halls with over eighty groups in more than thirty countries. Schneider collaborated with David Bowie on his single "Sue (Or In A Season of Crime)" and received a 2016 Grammy.

Chantal McStay Welcome to FUSE: A BOMB Podcast. In each episode, we bring together artists across disciplines to discuss their work and creative practice. We've been taking this approach since 1981, delivering the artist's voice. Here's how it works. We invite a distinguished voice in visual art, literature, film, music, or performance for a conversation with whomever they'd most like to speak with. No host, no moderator, no interruptions, just two artists in conversation. For this episode, we asked Nick Hornby, author of *Fever Pitch*, *High Fidelity*, and *About a Boy* who he'd most like to speak with. Without hesitation he named music composer and performer Maria Schneider.

Nick Hornby When BOMB asked me if there was an artist I'd like

to interview for their podcast, I said that not only did I know who I wanted to interview, but I'd fly anywhere to speak to her and pay for it. Luckily, I didn't have to do that. But the artist is Maria Schneider, the composer. I'm an enormous fan of hers.

CM Maria Schneider is a Grammy-winning composer and Jazz Orchestra leader. Since 2005, The Maria Schneider Jazz Orchestra has performed at festivals and concert halls with over eighty groups in more than thirty countries. The pair discuss textual and musical narratives, childhood artistic fantasies, how structure changes creativity, and the path to finding one's voice.

NH Hello.

Maria Schneider Hello, Nick. it's Maria.

NH Maria! Hello, how are you?

MS I'm great. How are you doing there?

NH Very good. Thank you for doing this.

MS Well, thank you for having me.

NH It's such a pleasure to get to talk to you. I don't know if you remember I...I introduced myself at Birdland.

MS Oh! Oh my god. Now it's coming back to me. Yes, I didn't put that together. But yes. Oh my god. Yes. Okay.

NH I came on a Tuesday night and a Thursday night, and I went to see Bruce Springsteen in between...

MS Oh, my goodness.

NH And between you and me, I rather regretted that I hadn't for three nights. *(laughter)* So Maria, I'd like to go back to the beginning and Minnesota, and I know that you grew up in a really tiny town.

MS Yes, Windom, Minnesota. It had 3,666 people listed on the population sign, and it was in the bible belt. So that 666 was always a little creepy for the Bible-oriented, you know, Revelations people.

NH And that's where your parents grew up?

MS No, my parents were both from bigger cities, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and my father came out to Windom at that time... there's something called flax that they make linen from but also very fine paper—Bible paper, cigarette paper, various things. The paper around a straw, that's flax paper. At that time, that area they called Windom, the flax capital of the world. Flax was grown. Now it's all corn and beans, but back then it was all flax, and there was a flax plant there that was failing. and the man who ran it, his office actually was part of a company called Kimberly Clark, and their office was in the top of the Chrysler Building in New York, which I always, when I see that in New York I always think of this man Lou Schweitzer that my dad just revered. Anyway, my dad met him on a ham radio, if you can imagine, and was brought to Windom to run the flax plant, because he was an engineer and a very good inventor. And so he brought this plant from a very non-functional thing to a very highly productive plant. And so it was great. And so what was fun is it was this big machine shop next door, and my dad even built a fire engine for Windom. So when we wanted to do projects, like making bird houses and things, we would go down to the plant and build things together and make things. Dad was very creative that way, and it was...I think it had a good influence on my life.

NH So when did you become aware of having, as it were, an unusual interest in music?

MS It's funny. When I was five years old there was a birthday party for my father. I recently got pictures of the evening. So my mom always had these very extravagant birthday parties for my dad where people would bring animals, like a goat, and it would have written on it "from one old goat to another" or something for my dad. And they were these huge parties, and there was a couple

that said, “Our mother just moved here from Chicago”—it was the woman’s mother—“Can we bring her?” And what had happened is this woman’s husband and son both died of cancer in one month, and her only living family...Yeah, it’s devastating. And this was her second husband, and he was a jazz pianist. And she was a jazz pianist, a stride-style pianist. And she was so devastated that she left Chicago, which was a great city for jazz back then. You know, I don’t know what year she was born because nobody knew her age, but it was definitely the very early 1900s. And so she came to Windom and came to our house. And we had this horrible little... it was called a Baldwin Acrosonic piano. It’s somewhere between a toy and a real piano. And she sat down and played that. And I heard her, and I still remember it. I remember because she played classical music and just very dramatically, and then she played stride jazz, and she’d laugh and do runs and kind of make herself fall off the end of the piano and laugh and then... you know, it was just so alive. It was so animated. And I just said, I want that. I want to be that. I want to do that. And she had red hair. My hair was red. She was wild. She was kind of older. She sort of looked like Dizzy Gillespie if he was a woman with—white with red hair, if that’s possible to imagine. but she had that kind of bigger-than-life personality and wore these big bright-colored muumuus. And oh my god, I was crazy about her. And so she became my teacher. And she was extraordinary. The very first lesson, she played a major triad and then she sang, “bright the day.” and then she played a minor triad and she sang, “dark the night, dark the night.” and she said everything in music has a feeling, and behind it, there’s something called music theory. And I want you to understand why the music you play feels the way it feels, and we’re going to learn music theory. And so I got this blank notebook, and half of every lesson was about the mechanics of music.

NH Even when you were five, six, seven years old?

MS When I started, yes! From the very, very beginning in music there’s something; there’s a structure. I mean, I guess for a novel, it’s kind of like: the beginning, the introduction of things; the conflict, that happens; And then something that wraps it up and brings it back to a conclusion, if you’re doing something in kind of the normal way. and

in music, that's the 1 4 5 chord. And the way she portrayed that was, "Here we go, up the hill, back again home" to show that the tonic home is, you know, and that going away up the hill and then coming back again, home, and just showing me the structure of music for the 1 4 5 chord in that kind of, almost story-like way. And to this day, my music is actually pretty what they call programmatic, almost storytelling, a lot of it anyway.

NH So she awakened this excitement in you, and this connection in you. And what were you consuming? I mean, what did you listen to?

MS Well, I was a little kid, so Snoopy and the Red Baron. You know, this is the early '60s. But then I loved The Fifth Dimension. So, you know, "Up Up and Away" by Jimmy Webb. [CLIP]

I love the orchestration. "Up Up and Away" goes through so many different places. It's just, oh, it's incredible. And then you have all those horns and strings and the voices. I love that maximalist kind of world. and then I really fell in love with Carole King and Simon and Garfunkel. but then I loved Aaron Copeland. [CLIP]

Classical music. I love Chopin. And I love Bach. And my sister was really into Stravinsky. So then I got into Stravinsky. [CLIP]

The other half was that my mom really loved the Great American Songbook too. [Music: "Summertime"]

And so every year for Christmas she would give me Songs of Broadway or Rodgers and Hammerstein or, you know, Harold Arlen, or a book of all those songs. And so I learned those songs. And then Mrs. Butler and I would come up with ways to arrange it for stride piano. And the thing that was great about her was she was into classical, and she was into jazz. So there was no judgment or delineation between the two. It wasn't like, oh, jazz is bad, or jazz is better than classical—for her it was all just great music.

NH That's extraordinary given how your music sounds, because when I proselytize about you, which I frequently do, and someone

says, “Well, I don’t know her work. What is it?” And I said, “I don’t know whether you’d call it classical or jazz, but I love it.”

MS Thank you. Well, it’s somewhere in between, and it’s just kind of a mix. and sometimes I think it was good that I grew up in a small town that didn’t even have a record store, or records were sold in what was called “the wolf store.” It was a clothing store or—no, no, no, it was Austinson’s. There were two stores that had clothing in Windom, And the records were sold there. But I think in some ways, it was really good to grow up imagining sort of being—I don’t know, creating music or something without somebody saying, This is jazz. This is classical. or this is step one-two-three how you do things. I was sort of just trying things in my own unorthodox way without somebody giving me step one-two-three before I experimented on my own.

NH Well, you’re very lucky, I guess, to have found someone like that, because...

MS I think so. I mean, Do you have some equivalent growing up and reading books and things that you loved and influences? Is there some kind of thing of what I’m saying that would resonate for you?

NH Um, not so much when I was a kid. I started writing quite late, really. So now when I look back on it, I can see that a lot of the things I’ve written about and the kind of voice that I developed came from what I was consuming as a teenager. But I didn’t really have a person. I think writing is different because there’s way much more, I guess, snobbery attached to it. And of course what you’re reading at school—everyone who wrote that stuff is dead. So I was a very long way away from meeting anyone who was a living writer, as it were. I think, in my twenties—then I started to read people who influenced me very profoundly, but I hadn’t discovered them really before that.

MS Okay, so your influences in your writing and my influences in my music are largely not about music; they’re about life. And a lot of the things that I think influenced my music is the landscape of my childhood: the times, just the feeling, the colors of the era, in the air,

the things that we worried about, the Cold War. I was around a lot of nature. Do you feel that the thing that most influences your work are those early encounters in life, encountering things for the first time, or that those influences came later for you?

NH Now, I think a lot of it came early on. I think there's nothing as intense as one's first encounters with things, because you are a blank sheet of paper when you're a kid, so the first people to write on that paper, they're the ones who write boldest and biggest. And if you're lucky, you continue adding to that sheet of paper throughout your whole life. but there's less room for them than there was. maybe they're going up in the margins somewhere, if you see what I mean.

MS Absolutely.

NH But my first two books were about things that were very important to me in my childhood: one was soccer and my relationship with the football team that I went to watch—that was a memoir for my first book—and my second book was High Fidelity, which was really about having loved rock and roll music since I was a boy. You know, it is difficult with writing, or different with writing, because you have the opportunity to write about these things directly. there's a famous quote, I think, by the critic Walter Pater, who said that all art aspires to the condition of music, because we're all going for musicality in whatever it is we do, but it's only you guys that get to throw away all the stuff that makes it earthbound. So yours is most purely open to interpretation I think in a way that mine isn't.

MS Really? I don't know. it's hard for me to say. Sometimes I wish I had something direct like words. *(laughter)*

NH I think your music is extremely articulate, but maybe if I talked to somebody else who really connected with it in the same way, we'd be telling different stories about it.

MS Yeah.

NH Going back to The Fifth Dimension and that huge, big orchestral sound... [CLIP]

When did it occur to you that somebody arranged those instruments?

MS Pretty early on, and I thought that that would just be my dream come true, if I could write big stuff, you know, just big things.

NH But how old were you then, when you were thinking about writing big stuff?

MS Oh gosh, maybe in my early teens or something like that.

NH Wow.

MS But just imagining it. I... we're talking a very naive person. I also used to do this thing where I would practice piano, and as I described, we had picture windows on our house, and looking out the window, it was a very bleak scene. You know, it was just a flat field. There was kind of a chemical plant nearby, the scale house for the trucks. Down the road was a highway that went by. It was just very bleak. You know, the airplane hangar in the field behind our house and the big factory next door. So it was kind of warehousey and then nothingness. And I used to sit there and play piano, and when cars would drive by, I would fantasize that they were talent scouts, and that they could hear me through a radio. And so when I would play I would try every time a car went by. I tried to be like Horowitz—imagine. So I had this incredible fantasy life that was completely not in the realm of reality. I didn't care. I knew it wasn't, but I love that, just imagining. So along with that, in that same category, I would put imagining that I could write orchestral music. But in college, a fellow student that was in grad school heard one of my theory exercises played in class, and she said, "You know, you really have talent as a composer. You should add composing to your major." So it just took a girl who was like twenty-three years old giving me permission to unleash this dream. It's amazing the power that people around us have, with just a few words, you know...

NH Words of encouragement and belief, absolutely.

MS It's so true. Just that we can have those dreams and actually not be ashamed to have them.

I want to ask you a question. Because for me, it's the most difficult thing in music to tackle. And that is the sense of time, the sense of how long is long enough. How long do you have to wait? How do you make surprise inevitable? How much do you have to set it up? The whole thing of time in music is really difficult. And I would think in writing a novel, certainly for a film, it's really evident, because people are sitting there, they can't step away from it. But even in writing a novel, is the timing challenging?

NH Yes, it is. And I do some very basic things like think, well, I don't want this book to be any longer than this amount. And so if it's going to be that long, then something interesting needs to happen here, and something else interesting needs to happen here. And I just feel moored by a kind of putative length of the book. Whereas if I was setting off thinking, well, this could be any length, this could be 80,000 words or 300,000 words, I think I'd feel completely marooned. So I have to introduce some kind of artificial—I don't know what you call them—life buoys along the way.

MS Yeah. Well, Stravinsky said that—that music needs limitations. And the first... I think he talked about the first limitation is just knowing how long the piece is. So...

NH Even if that means making a random guess at how long it's going to be, I think it's incredibly helpful. I wanted to ask you about I think maybe another difference between you and me, which is, I write books, and I write movies. And as a consequence, I usually have four or five things going at the same time which are at various stages of completion. And I don't work on them in the same day or in the same week, but I often find myself thinking about the one I'm not working on at the time. And that must be impossible for you, right? Can you have three, four pieces of music in your head at one time?

MS Maybe not three or four, but it's funny you just bring that up, because I just started something last week, and then all of a sudden I said, I need a break from it. I'm going to work on this kind of contrasting piece. And I thought, wow, this is kind of nice to have these two things that I can work on, because they're a little bit yin and yang...

NH Right.

MS ...to kind of step away and get some perspective on it while I work on the other.

NH And how do you keep those pieces discrete in your mind? How do you keep musical phrases discrete?

MS These two ideas are so different, it's no problem. But I have to say, it's unusual. More often I'm just working on one piece obsessively. But if I'm working on something that has a lot of, you know, several movements, like a song cycle that I did for Dawn Upshaw—I was definitely working on those songs—I would work on one and then go away from it and work on another, and that was kind of beneficial just to be able to get a break, because working obsessively on one thing—oof, it's so hard to get perspective then. And I think that's what I was talking about with the timing. To understand if a musical event is ready to happen, you have to play the whole thing in your head from the beginning, again and again and again!

NH Do you have narrative stories in your head, as if they were short stories or movies or something?

MS Sometimes I do. More often what happens is, I sit down to write, and I'm always just looking for a personality in sound, some fragment of sound, whether it's a chord or a little rhythmic thing or melodic fragment, something that has a little spark to it, and I just say, Ooh, I like that. I want to get to know that thing. Then what happens a lot of times is, as I'm working on that idea, all of a sudden, while I'm concentrating on that idea, there's a simultaneous

daydream going on in the back of my head. And all of a sudden, before I know it, it's almost like the music is calling up a memory or an experience, something from childhood. It's like it pulls up a file. And when that happens a lot of times, then, all of a sudden, it's like I'm film scoring something that happened in my life, or that I experienced. For instance, a piece I wrote called "Hang Gliding."

NH Yes, I know "Hang Gliding." [CLIP]

MS So then I was like, Wow, this just feels like hang gliding, and then all of a sudden, I thought, oh my gosh, I'm going to put that whole experience into this piece. And so then I use the whole experience of the hang gliding experience: from taking the anticipation, to taking off, the just hanging on a thermal, to the diving along the cliffs, to landing on the beach. That was a narrative. More often, they're just kind of descriptive of a feeling and not an out-and-out narrative that a few are.

NH Okay. That's very beautiful, though, your way of talking about that. I envy what you're able to do with music, because, like I say, we're a stage short of that, because if we're going to dredge that thing up, then that's usually what we're writing about, I guess. I mean, directly...

MS But you can go into such detail, you know, you can...

NH Oh yes.

MS You can do so, so much. And, for me, the hardest part is just coming up with the idea that I feel thrilled about enough to make the journey with, because the journey to write a piece of music, as I'm sure a book,—oh my god, it's just so, so arduous. It's just so hard. And just to come up with that first idea where I say, Wow, that feels fresh. I love that. I want to do something. I feel like useless, that I have not an idea in the world. I mean, do you just have days or weeks on end where you just feel like you'll never come up with another good idea?

NH Yeah. I mean, I'm lucky because I have other things to get on with. Like, I write for a magazine called *The Believer*, and I write a book column every couple of months. And it's just literally about the books that I've read, and it's sort of impossible not to have ideas about that. So that's something that I can accomplish in a couple of days, and it makes me feel better about myself because it's achieved and done. And then adaptation. You know I've adapted several books for movies, and they've had the ideas, and my job is, I guess, more technical in some way. So I've got crutches to lean on.

MS That's good.

NH But when I'm writing original screenplay or fiction, then, of course, that's the scary time where things might just dry up.

MS Yeah. *(laughter)*

NH I think when you're saying that you get excited about the fragments of music, and I feel the same way with an idea, I wonder if the thing that is exciting me is that it offers me the greatest opportunity for self expression that I've come across at that particular time. That something about the idea or the people or the landscape feels more like me than anything else.

MS Yes.

NH And then I can see what I can bring to it. Does that feel like that with music?

MS Absolutely. Absolutely. And yeah, I feel excited, almost like I did when I was a kid, where you just play in the dirt and find things and make something out of nothing. You know, it's just like, all of a sudden, you're not worried about how it's gonna be judged. It's all about you just making this thing. It's yours. It's your world. And it's expansive. and everything else melts away. And it's just the best feeling in the world. I love that. It's such a high.

NH And it doesn't happen often enough. *(laughter)*

MS It doesn't happen often enough. And part of it is, too, that maybe in that moment that I can actually feel good about myself. Maybe part of it is, as a human-creator-person who—I think we're all creators in different ways—but somebody whose livelihood and—the worst part—sense of self worth is wrapped up in coming up with the next great idea. It's such a relief...

NH And when you're having the idea, you no longer feel like a fraud.

MS Yes, yes! Exactly. So you're like, Oh, you feel so happy. You can forget that this is... and for a moment you forget that it's... I have a friend, and he called it the "I'm an asshole. I'm a genius." The pendulum is swinging back and forth. It's like, then you can say, I'm a genius! But you know the other...

NH Yeah, I have an artist friend who says exactly the same thing, and if I say how was your day, he says, "Oh, you know, wanker, genius." That's the English version. *(laughter)*

MS Exactly.

NH Thank you so much, Maria.

MS Thank you.

CM This episode was recorded at Pioneer Works, a nonprofit Cultural Center dedicated to experimentation, education, and production across disciplines. FUSE is produced by Libby Flores, Director of Audience Development and Digital Production at BOMB. It is co-produced and edited by Myra Al-Rahim and Sophie Kazis with production assistance by Ethan Premison. I'm Chantal McStay, Associate Editor at BOMB magazine. Our theme music is "Black Origami" by Jlin. Additional music by Ray Suen. Be sure to subscribe to FUSE wherever you listen.

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