

[music]

Nadia: You have expressed to me many times extensive frustration about various journalists asking you, "How do you think you became so successful?" Or something like that? Can you just talk about why that's frustrating to you?

Nico: I never felt successful. I felt gloomy.

[music]

Nico: [laughs] Because successful, the implication is weird about what it means to be a successful composer. One thing that it's always baffled me about composers is, if you say, "I got this commission," people are like, "Oh, congratulations." I'm like, "I don't know if it's congratulations because the commission is scary." A commission is like a challenge. It's like, "Here's this big mountain, you have to climb." You say congratulations when you get to the other side. Then the measure of success isn't just that you wrote the thing. The thing is, okay, is that people want to listen to the thing on purpose.

For me, it's also the question of like, "Does it have legs? Does it exist past this closed economy of commission first performance? Okay, bye." Right, so there's that. Then I think, also the reason I bristle sometimes when people say, "How did you get so successful?" is that implies that there's some other thing that I'm doing besides just writing music. I don't think that there is. I think I'm basically-- I was writing music until I came here, and I'm going to run back up and write more music the minute it's over. There's basically music on the stove upstairs right now. The implicit, undertone of a question like that is that there's some secret to it.

[music]

Nico: The way that I want to answer this, write for people you know. If you write for people you know, it'll have legs because they'll know you and they'll play it more than one time, basically. [laughs] You write for people you know, and then you get good at writing that and then people you don't know will hear that and then ask you to write things for them and then you know them and then you do it again. [chuckles]

[music]

Nadia: Nico Muhly may well be the most successful composer of his generation. At age 34, he's released half a dozen CDs, written for major orchestras around the world, composed choral and sacred music for the world's top choirs, collaborated with pop musicians from Diplo to Bjork to Grizzly Bear, written scores for several films including *The Reader* and *Joshua*.

He's not only the youngest ever composer to be commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera, he's been commissioned a second time to adapt Winston Graham's 1961 novel *Marney*, the one that was made into a *Hitchcock* film for the Met's 2019-2020 season. Journalists can be forgiven for asking him to pontificate on his success. For Nico though, these types of questions almost feel like accusations. To ask him, he's asked to write so much stuff because for a very long time, Nico just wrote for his friends. Nico is a fiercely loyal communicator, a connector, someone who builds and

File name: meetthecomposer121115nico.mp3

feeds community all over the world. For years, he'd write stuff for free whenever anyone asked for it.

[music]

Nadia: In college, where I met him, it was well known that if your recital program was coming up short, this kid, Nico, would totally write you a piece to hit your desired runtime. Nico is the hardest working person I've ever met, a furious producer. Writing for and working with his colleagues, he has built a generation of fierce Nico, loyalist, musicians who lie in traffic for him. I'm definitely one of them by the way.

[music]

[background noise]

[music]

Nadia: Hey, it's Nadia Sirota. I want to get something off my chest straight off the bat here. Today's composer, Nico Muhly, he's one of my best friends. We met in college around 2003 and we've been collaborating making music together ever since. Nico is one of my favourite people writing music these days and so it's natural to want to have him on the show. I really feel compelled to disclose the fact that we're just very close aside from professional collaborative people. It's the putting the show together, feels a little weird. Honestly, it feels like some combination of writing a term paper on your favourite 19th-century painter and assembling a short documentary film about your house cat.

I'm going to do my best to stay professional and all that but know that I'm just completely in the tank for Nico. By the time I met Nico at Juilliard, he was already a mythical figure. A Columbian Juilliard, double degree student studying English and composition and Arabic, who worked for Philip Glass afternoons and weekends wore a colorful assortment of gardening clogs, and had an affinity for dim sum. How he got to that point? Nico's upbringing was similarly unconventional.

Nico: Travel has always been a really important part of who I am and how I think about where I live. I think because I traveled a lot as a kid-- my father was always going off into interesting places, including Egypt and--

Nadia: Nico's dad, Frank Muhly, makes documentary films.

Nico: My mother has a long relationship with Rome--

Nadia: Nico's mom, Bunny Harvey, is a painter.

Nico: Having been a fellow of the American Academy in the '70s, and then returning at various intervals for the rest of her life. She and I lived there for a year when I was 13, which is exactly the time in one's life when that something seismic-- Again, when you're 13, it's awkward enough being in school anywhere, but then going into a place we don't speak the language, it radically reconfigures how your brain functions.

[music]

File name: meetthecomposer121115nico.mp3

Nadia: Language is a big deal for Nico, a lot of his humour stems from playing with diacritical marks and usage and weird conjugations. He can speak a fistful of languages, including Icelandic and Arabic. While he grew up with some French inherited from some grandparents, he wasn't really raised bilingual. Going to school in Italy was the first time he really had to communicate in a language other than English.

Nico: I went Italian real quick because there was no other option. It was in-state school. The sense of it was-- trying to function in English was pure misery whereas learning Italian and getting better every day started to become a ecstatic joy, after the misery of the first two weeks. At which point I was essentially kicking and screaming begging to be taken home to Providence.

Nadia: Nico was born in Vermont, but did the bulk of his growing up at Rhode island.

Nico: Providence is an amazing place, actually. It's a place that when I was there in high school, maybe not quite as fun as it is now, and it felt a little bit less connected to the rest of the world. Now, I look on it fondly. My high school years were strange. It felt joyful in a way, and I had a lot of great friends, and I really liked my school but it also felt in a sense like a holding pattern to get out. I think that's probably true of most people in most places in most configurations. [chuckles]

[music]

Nico: Music has been central to me, I think, probably since I was about 10 or 11. I was in fifth grade, and I started singing in a boy's choir in Downtown Providence, which at that time was a really depressed northeast city that once had been in some way grand and then for a variety of reasons became less grand. Now, I should say, they cleaned up the river and now it's kind of undergone the Renaissance as it's affectionately known. In 1991, I guess it must have been, it felt really wild and there was this Anglican Church in the middle of town called Grace Church.

It was middle downtown where no one really lived so it was a strange congregation. For some miraculous reason they had a budget for, and the principles in practical insanity, or impractical insanity to have this really divine choirmaster, who was really steeped in the English tradition and figured out how to have a choir of men and boys due to services weekend. It was a really, it was a really spectacular thing.

Nadia: What kind of music did you perform in that context?

Nico: In that context, we sang primarily, I would say, the music of the English Renaissance, but spanning out so that includes Byrd that includes Tallis and into Parsley and Tye and Sheppard and even Mundy instead of even more esoteric things. In addition to that, the meat and potatoes of the early 20th century English [unintelligible 00:09:13] that's Howarth, and that's Finzi in that strange way that a lot of choral music bypasses the classical Romantic era almost entirely. That lay the groundwork in my head about how music went.

[music]

Nico: It was in that choir that I was first exposed to the Stravinsky, *Mass*, which again, is a wild thing to have happened to you when you're 12 years old. The first time you hear that first four notes of the Stravinsky, *Mass*, if you're 12 years old, it's like a really erotic experience.

[music]

Nico: What was extreme about the fact that we were performing is that this is a congregation with not that many people in it, not necessarily the most musically sophisticated landscape, and yet here we were doing Stravinsky, and then we were doing Tye and we were doing Byrd. It felt idiosyncratic and also magic.

Nadia: Wait, PS, it's not the plot of *Sister Act*, the church with the thriving music scene and not so many parishioners but with Motown instead of Stravinsky? [laughs]

Nico: Cool.

Nadia: When did constructing your own ideas into something performable start in your life?

Nico: In terms of writing my own music, I think because I had keyboard skills, my first, what could casually be called compositions, stemmed from messing around. Stemmed from improvisational gestures aimed from a piece of music that I was playing that I didn't particularly like. For me, writing early on it was very much about notation. I would never just improvise and not write it down. It was like drawing the triangle between what you see, what you hear, and what you want was really important really early.

You're messing around and you realize that there's a life beyond the notes that are written that can be derived from it.

Nadia: I'm picturing the scene from *Amadeus* when Salieri writes to Mozart that little thing, and he just like--

Nico: He just does that thing too. I know but that's a extraordinary moment in all of our collective imaginations, isn't it? Where it's like that one thing becomes transformed in a magical way. What does he say, "And the rest is just the same," isn't it?

Speaker 1: The rest is just the same, isn't it?

[music]

[laughter]

Nico: So good.

Speaker 1: That doesn't really work, does it? Try this.

[piano playing]

File name: meetthecomposer121115nico.mp3

Speaker 1: What do you think?

[laughter]

Speaker 1: Grazie signore.

Nadia: Did you always know that you wanted to be a professional musician or was that something that came a little later?

Nico: The professional musician question and this is always something that baffles me a little bit is that I feel like I was born without the gene that tells me to have to know what I'm doing in a year or to know what I'm doing in five years. I feel like I'm really almost to a fault unable to think about the future. I wouldn't even know how to have that idea about what I wanted to do and if I tried to image myself into the future, I couldn't do it. I think it's a form of lack of depth perception that I've gotten used to it myself, but I think it's interesting when I meet people who are in a similar position to me who have their whole life mapped out.

They're like, "I want to do this. I want to do this and then I'm going to do this and I'm going to do this." I think, "Whoa," I had nothing, nothing, nothing at all like that. It still actually feels inconceivable to scheme about your own life in that way to me. The idea of professional musician has always been really alien to me. I guess that's technically what I am now. There's no denying that really but it still feels strange that's something that could have been planned for at the age of 14.

Nadia: I think this is fair. Nico is someone who is excessively in the moment and when that moment was applying for colleges, he applied to all kinds of college at the same time, eventually attending both Columbia and Juilliard from 1999 to 2004. Something borderline romantic about Nico's time in college is that he paid for it or most of it himself.

Nico: It became pretty clear the way to make it through school was to be very vigilant about making money by trying to supplement schoolwork with any other thing that I could do just to make a bit more money to live in New York. I realized quite quickly that that was something that was interesting to me on a practical level and also on an emotional level. I felt I wanted the flexibility of having a bit of cash. At that time, one of the larger influences in my adulthood has been the illustrator Maira Kalman and her family.

Nadia: Maira Kalman is an author and an illustrator and you might have seen her stuff in *The New Yorker*. She, among a lot of other things, is one of the people who was responsible for that *New Yorker* stand cover.

Nico: I met Maira and her late husband Tibor and their children Lulu and DB when we all were living in Rome when I was 13 years old, and they were a year or 2 years younger than I am. Maira and Tibor lived in the village. When I moved to New York I had been coming down to visit them a bunch and then eventually, I told Maira that I really needed some work and did she have anything in M & Company, the design company that she and her husband ran was still extant. They needed someone to do a variety of small jobs on a hourly basis.

File name: meetthecomposer121115nico.mp3

My freshman year, I started this very long project working for Maira archiving all of her photographs. She's an illustrator primarily and a children's book author. Her art is derived not necessarily from life but from photographs. She'll take a photograph of a thing and then paint from the photograph. Her eye and her photographic eye is really specific and really weird. To look at the photograph is to see her obsession. For instance, you'll have a photograph of a seemingly ugly courtyard in Cuba and you realize that the reason she's taken the photograph it's because she's obsessed by buckets and specifically red ones.

Then you'll realize that every couple of weeks in her photo archive there'll be a bucket somewhere and that's the path through. When she asks about it when she says, "Where's that picture of that bucket?" You need to be able to cross-reference it with where's that bucket, where's the courtyard, in what contexts were they there? This is again, before iPhone--before even the world of easy way to cross-reference things.

Nadia: Before tags? [crosstalk]

Nico: Before tags, yes. Maybe people had it but I didn't know how to do it. I was doing this all manually and it was this crazy Excel thing that I spent hours going through to see-- and I felt it actually was incredibly useful for me as a musician because it was the same way that I navigate the world which is these little obsessive things that aren't necessarily related that you force a relationship through time, essentially. You say, "This bucket in Naples relates to this bucket in Marrakech which relates to this bucket in Florida. Buckets." Personal ensemble.

[laughter]

[music]

Nico: Then, actually, through Maira, strangely, I met this very nice man called Jim who said, "Oh, I'm Philip Glass' publisher and if you're looking for other work, we have these internships with the recording studio you should come in." I did.

Valgeir: Since you didn't have a studio-- I think he was just hanging out in the office outside.

Nico: I was terrible. I was a terrible, terrible intern because I was so distracted by what was going on.

Valgeir: I think it was in 2004.

Nadia: That's, Icelandic composer and producer, Valgeir Sigurðsson.

Valgeir: I was at the studio with Bjork.

[music]

Valgeir: Working on *Medúlla* album.

Nadia: He and Nico started a record label together in 2006 called Bedroom Community but when they met, Valgeir was working with Bjork on *Medúlla*. This bonkers acapella record with completely crazy sampling and production.

[music]

Valgeir: There was a situation in her studio which caused us to look for another room for a week and started working in this small room at the Looking Glass which I later found out was Nico's workroom so I kicked him out of his room, more or less and we started talking in the hallways.

Nico: Bjork was finishing up her album *Medúlla* and she called people in New York to say, "Is there anyone you know who could really quickly come in and realize this crazy piano thing?" that she had done

Valgeir: Based on an idea of Richard Clayderman and Liberace being in a piano battle.

Nico: Somehow she got a number and rang me up.

Valgeir: It was suggested by Alex Ross that we speak to Nico.

Nico: I was like, "Obviously, obviously, I'll do whatever you say."

Valgeir: I didn't make the connection right away that it was the same Nico who I'd kicked out of his studio.

Nico: It was through her that I met some of my now closest collaborators.

Valgeir: We just started exchanging emails quite frequently around the same time sending each other music and ideas. He started sending me his own music which I really liked.

[piano playing]

Nico: I sent him what then was the norm which was a piece of music that I had written that was played at a Juilliard Composers Concert, and I had been handed at the end of that, a cassette tape with that music on it which I had then somehow thought to digitize and turn into a CD which I then sent to him.

Valgeir: Really, really bad recordings.

Nico: He called me back and was like, "What is this? Literally, why does this sound like this?"

Valgeir: Those pieces really deserve to be recorded properly.

Nico: I was like, "Well, because it's the cassette that they handed from the composition department." I thought, "What's wrong with it? It's how it goes."

Valgeir: They were just documents, they were just a microphone on the floor and on the ceiling so they were not really in any way proper acoustics or they always felt really far away. They always seemed that you really had to listen for what was going on rather than it being presented in the recording.

Nico: He was like, "Check it out. What you should do is get on a plane, come up in here and record this properly." I was like, "Okay."

Valgeir: I offered my help.

Nico: I got on a plane and then out of that stemmed this idea that you can make music in the studio and you can write music that works for the stage but that can be recorded in the studio or built in the studio and that the studio itself becomes a form of, I don't want to say instrument because that's cliché, but it becomes a special cauldron in which you can do things that you're not necessarily able to do with two saucepans and a butter knife.

[music]

Valgeir: Also, I think me coming more from the production of not the purely classical way of recording which is more about capturing a room sound with one or two mics, I wanted to take it a little bit further and produce this. I would do any pop or rock music to take every instrument and bring it really close and put it in the right space and allow the recording to be a creative process as well as the writing of the piece.

[music]

Nadia: This is Nico Muhly's piece *Mothertongue*. If you've heard the show before, you might recognize this as the music we use in our logo. Probably the most common question I get about this show on Twitter or whatever is, "What is that logo piece?" Well, it's by Nico and it's one of my favorite collaborations of his and Valgeir's from those early days at Valgeir's studio in Iceland.

Incidentally, if you ever want to know what a piece is that you've heard in passing on the show, we post a playlist page for every episode that has all the music laid out with time codes and stuff, and most questions will find answers over there. That's at q2music.org/meetthecomposer. When we come back, Nico writes an opera. Stay tuned.

[music]

[advertisement]

[music]

Nadia: Composition is a solitary art. Ask any writer really, and they'll tell you that the creative process requires large swaths of time and isolation. In order to really hear the ideas as they crystallize in your head, you need a quiet space, a solitude. Nico Muhly is a rabid communicator. He is very much in touch, texting and emailing many dozens of people a day, and this would seem incongruous with the lifestyle of a composer. How could these two behavior patterns possibly exist in tandem?

File name: meetthecomposer121115nico.mp3

I think for Nico he supplements the truly solitary parts of his work with a massive number of collaborations. Nico is a virtuosic collaborator. He's able to create environments wherein every contributor feels invaluable, pushed, creative. He's incredible at drawing the best out of people, hearing them, and then adding a musical element that's just unexpected enough to create something that couldn't have been imagined by either party.

[music]

Nadia: Nico has worked with film directors, librettists, clarinet players, choreographers, as well as having written arrangements for an impressive roster of bands and songwriters. My friend, Rob Moose, once likened writing arrangements, strings for a rock song, for example, to doing wine pairings. It's a very specific and subtle type of magic.

Nico: An arrangement is a funny thing. No one's quite sure what it means. It's rather like producing. Everyone's like, "What exactly is that?" An arrangement can be something so simple.

[music]

Nico: An arrangement can be something like taking someone singing a folk song and playing four notes over it. You know what I mean? On the piano. Just the most nothing, nothing, nothing. Sometimes an arrangement can be doing nothing. That's it. You just say you're done, that's it. There's no arrangement. Usually it's not quite that simple, but sometimes it's the littlest thing. Then other times, an arrangement is - I feel like the prime example of someone like Van Dyke Parks where it's the opposite of nothing. It's literally everything.

[music]

Nico: It's all there. That process has been something really fascinating for me to learn. In a lot of cases, what you're doing is you're submitting your skills as a musician and as someone who's trained and as someone who knows the way in and out of traditionally notated traditional instruments as a final process in what's been a long maybe not notated sequence of work or something else.

Nadia: Why do you have to notate it?

Nico: You don't necessarily have to notate it, but I always feel like an arrangement stems out of a tradition of a bunch of people doing the same thing like a section of strings. It stems out of a tradition of something distinct from the song itself. I think when I say stems from it, it doesn't necessarily mean that there aren't songs whose arrangements are key to them. I think you find that a lot where the arrangement has a line that you think is part of the song. You find this a lot even in Sinatra, where it's-- the thing that the horns do is part of the composition.

Nadia: Or like, "Sweet Caroline." [sings]

[music]

File name: meetthecomposer121115nico.mp3

Nico: Yes, exactly. No, exactly. That's a perfect example. That's probably an arrangement but that's also not. [chuckles] It's part of the DNA of the piece. That's the weird-- that's the gray area of being an arranger. That's the gray area of being a collaborator ever. Who did what is unclear, and that's great, I think.

[music]

Nadia: How does that process compare to, say, the process of constructing a ballet like how you did with Benjamin?

Nico: I've worked with the choreographer Benjamin Millepied for years and we've made maybe seven or eight ballets together in varying sizes. Working with dance is really fascinating to me because in a sense, it's the ultimate classical collaboration. There's such a long history of composers and choreographers working together. Benjamin and I have enjoyed not just a long relationship, but I would say a very easy one in which I think we understand each other very well and can do a lot of work without saying much.

One of the things that's difficult about working with dance is that you have to understand when you're writing it that not just the choreographer, but then a group of dancers ranging from 2 people to 25 people are going to need to internalize your music into their actual bodies in a way that far surpasses instrumentalists. This is not in any way to belittle what instrumentals do, but it's just a whole different process. We love to say as instrumentalists, "Oh, I have it in muscle memory, which in a sense is true, but it's also a very miniaturized version of your whole body. This toe and that finger and this pelvis and that thing and this piece of your hair. [chuckles] That extent of full body musical knowledge is, I think, unique to dance.

Nadia: I'm always obsessed with the fact that dancers are constantly working from memory. I have a score and I can check it out as many times or as few times as I want, and even in the concert, I can check out a score. Whereas, if somebody's choreographing something on you, you have to immediately memorize it, which is-- There are these systems of dance notation, but they're not--

Nico: The first time I watched a dance rehearsal with Benjamin, who was at ABT, in American Ballet Theatre, and I saw him teaching them a phrase that they didn't know. I realized they're just putting this together. He teaches four gestures, and then all of a sudden, there's 20 women doing it. It's the craziest I've ever seen, and you think it's-- I can barely memorize the first movement of the *French Suites* of Bach. It's an extraordinary thing to watch because you really realize that they're taking the music, and they're reacting to it, and putting it inside their bodies in some memory bank that is really authored to the way that I think about how music goes.

[music]

Nico: The collaboration for me is one of wonder and awe half of the time. I just think, "Just on a technical level, how are you doing this?" Then also, interestingly, when you watch dancers react to music, you realize that their itinerary through it is wholly other to the way that I listen to music and that--

Nadia: How so?

Nico: They react to different things. If you ask them where do you think the climax of this thing is, they wouldn't necessarily say at the same place where I would. I think it's a corporeal, almost reptile brain reaction to the music that-- They're saying, "This is how I see this phrase. This is how I count. This looks like 18, 6s, a 17 and a 3," and you think, "Oh, yes?" [laughs] Then you realize they're totally right. That's how they've internalized that. Then you realize that they're itinerary through a piece, you get to the same place, but it's a totally different way to think about it.

It feels like the closest analogy is the first time that you turn the map of the world upside down and you're like, "Huh? That's what shape it is?" It's amazing when you-- We're so used to Florida sticking out in that direction, and then to see it the other direction, even though it's the same shape, you think something's wrong here or something's beautiful here. That's always what I feel like when I go to the first rehearsal of dancing. You hear them shouting and counting and people are screaming in French and you're like, "What's going on right now?" [chuckles]

[music]

Nadia: In 2006, Nico through a really funny series of events--

Peter: I met him because he was helping Rufus Wainwright on a piece that Rufus was developing for us, which ended up not being in our program.

Nico: That's the Met's general manager.

Peter: I'm Peter Gelb. I'm the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera.

Nico: Nico came to be commissioned by the Met to adapt a true crime story from the early days of the Internet into an opera.

Peter: I was so struck by Nico's talent in helping Rufus that I ended up having a conversation a few weeks later, with Nico, in which he described his ideas for several different pieces, one of which was the story of two boys.

Nadia: I remember when he found out that it would be premiered in the fall of 2013 and thinking that 2013 was an impossibly futuristic date. It was like he was being commissioned to write a piece for someone's wedding on Pluto in 2068.

[music]

Nico: Working on Opera is one of the scariest things I've ever done. It's a big collaboration with a million people, and it happens in incredible slow motion glacially slow. It feels like you're just climbing through molasses to make the simplest decisions.

[music]

Nico: Then the two weeks before you open it's like the craziest fastest most like coked up it's ever happened and everyone is screaming in French. [laughs]
Basically, it is so wild.

[music]

Peter: It was Nico's story idea in the early horror story of the internet in internet chat rooms where one boy is preying on another and ultimately plans his own murder at the hands of the boy he's preying on. Obviously, you've mentally deranged child. The story which was so compelling it was based on true events that took place in England in the '90s was the subject that Nico was pulled towards.

[music]

Peter: I was struck by music that he had composed up to that point, which I had gotten myself better versed with. I think his choral writing is uniquely beautiful and is what we're always looking for today in new composers of classical music. Compositional voices who are both original but are also accessible.

[music]

Peter: Composers who are successful today, I think for the most part are ones who are able to find this road between originality and accessibility.

[music]

Peter: His beautiful choral music has served very well in a interesting and perverse way. The most beautiful music into boys is the music of the chat rooms of the internet, which are full of the most obscene and perverse language sung beautifully and woven together in these incredible harmonies of different voices. The effect is one of great beauty even though your audience may not be able to understand the individual words that are very perverse and obscene.

[music]

Nadia: When we come back, emails, illness, and community. Stay tuned.

[music]

[advertisement]

Speaker 2: Right now I'm looking up one of the many emails that has been sent to me by Nico Muhly titled, You.

Speaker 3: There's not a day that goes past when we don't get an email with the subject line "You" from Nico.

Speaker 4: [chuckles] I don't know how many thousands I have?

Speaker 5: Oh, my god, "You" emails from Nico.

Speaker 4: Yes

Speaker 5: Yes, in fact, let's see. Did I get one this morning?

Speaker 4: I collect them and I try to keep them in a folder for later.

[laughter]

Speaker 5: I keep them all in a folder somewhere.

Speaker 4: It's basically like-

Speaker 3: It's the email with a photo.

Speaker 4: -Domino's Pizza-

Speaker 3: If anything, it's dog--

Speaker 5: There was one of a woman-

Speaker 4: What else?

Speaker 5: -who was totally naked playing the piano.

[laughter]

Speaker 4: Penguins.

Speaker 3: Yes, the photo [crosstalk] that the-- I got one as well.

Speaker 5: She had a really interesting tattoo on her back and it said, "You."

Speaker 3: It just said, "You," on the back. [laughs] It's very, very funny.

Speaker 6: They tend to be ice-related or Viking-themed or--

Speaker 3: I remember Nico sent a "You" email to another friend of ours that was a burger-

Speaker 6: -or very rude.

Speaker 3: -that he said that looked like his face.

Speaker 4: Mean stuff about other people.

[laughter]

Speaker 6: The whole spectrum.

Speaker 2: Today's definition of me is this old woman on a blue bedsheet surrounded by crucifixes lying in some 1970s negligee. [laughs] That was me one time. We can literally look up every time he's sent me something called "You".

File name: meetthecomposer121115nico.mp3

Nadia: I feel like you also send me a lot of things about the trans community for some reason.

Nico: Yes, there's that. There's a lot of stuff about if you have a conversation with someone about a topic or whatever, it can be really anything. You just keep it afloat. I have a friend who wears really high-waisted tight jeans from the past. Basically, they're vintage jeans. Anytime I find a collection of horrifying denim on the internet, I "you" that to her. I feel it's a way of being in touch without being in touch.

Nadia: How many people do you think you, "you" on a daily basis?

Nico: [laughs] It's probably 65. It's probably about 65.

Nadia: You're in touch with a lot of people every day?

Nico: Yes.

[music]

Nico: Being in touch with people is my I'm not even sure what the word is. It's so much part of the engine of my day. I think part of that is because my, quote-unquote, "world of ideas", it's easy when you're a composer to get really caught up in a private twin speak with yourself. Sometimes I really do feel like **[unintelligible 00:40:42]** but with myself. Where I'm saying things that only I can understand and that my processes are so circular and so self-referential that even though they're influenced by external things, and that I have all these wonderful collaborators, it's easy to feel like I've just spent three hours thinking about something and it's actually been 10 seconds. It feels like the brain is in overdrive. Of course, this is something that is partially really useful for me and also partially why I've been seeing Dr. Rosenfeld for nine years.

It's one of those things where you have to figure out ways to get out of circular thought and what the danger would be is entering a manic spiral. For me, being in touch with a lot of people and feeling people are there, even if they're not physically in my dwelling place, which God forbid, keeps me healthier I think.

[music]

Nico: Part of my life, which has been true for about almost 10 years now is a almost constant connection to England. To a world there, which obviously overlaps with my life here. Having so many friends in a different time zone slightly adjusts your sense of yourself, knowing that wherever you are in the world, you can probably call someone. Even if you don't actually call them, but you can just send a text or something just so it doesn't feel like you're post-apocalyptically alone so that the only thing you'll have to think about for the rest of your life is some weird grammatical rule folding question. [laughs]

[music]

Nadia: Do you think that given how much you travel, which is obviously quite a bit [chuckles]-- do you think that the way we communicate now with the internet basically, and all of its various tendrils makes that possible for you?

Nico: Yes. For me being constantly online is something incredibly useful. Of course, it makes it possible. Although, I feel like one of the things that I was very moved by when I was reading Benjamin Britten's letters is he realized he was writing a lot of letters, not a few letters. He was writing-- It was really a lot of letters a day. It was maybe 30 letters and letters many, many pages. There are many examples of historical correspondents who were only writing with pig's blood and-- I don't know what people writing-- in papyrus or something like [laughs] he is. I feel we're lucky now to be able to do this so quickly and easily and cheaply, but I feel 200 years ago, I would've found a way too. [laughs] You know I would've, it's like my ass with a telegraph machine [laughs] like, "Yikes. I clicked." Morse code. [laughs] You'd be sitting at home, you'd be like [laughs]--

Nadia: [chuckles] Like a passenger [laughs] **[unintelligible 00:43:47]**

Nico: [laughs] Exactly. Totally. Now that you've mentioned.

[music]

Nadia: What are you most proud of?

Nico: I am most proud of my big family and community. My big community is a thing that makes me so happy. I just got back from London and it was one of these things where a whole bunch of us got together at a friend's house who's a priest on Ash Wednesday. We all cooked dinner and it's new friends, old friends. Then the next night, a whole bunch of us had dinner with different people. Then we were all talking at the same time to a bunch of much younger people who were all in the same choir. Then we were all talking to older composers and younger composers.

It's one of these things where I have so many social events that are connected to a piece of music where if you just take two steps back, it feels like you could be at your own funeral in a sense. There's a tragedy to it, but you could be at your own funeral or major birthday, more generously. I feel that's the thing in my life that I've constructed, not necessarily on purpose but it's happened by accident and it's happened in collaboration. That's the thing that's for me the most satisfying.

Again, proud is such a hard word. It's not something that it-- I feel hesitant to be proud of a piece or whatever, or proud of having written something. That feels like the wrong thing just for me emotionally. I'm happy with things, but it's never about pride and I use that in the biblical sense. Yes, but I think having a big community is really important. It's just such a beautiful thing to have so many people from so many different places, all under the same roof. If people aren't there, you toast to them and you FaceTime them and you see them and you send pictures.

[music]

Nadia: This interview, the one that we've been DJing for the most part for the whole show. It was actually conducted about a year ago and in between then and now
File name: meetthecomposer121115nico.mp3

something interesting happened to Nico. He began to notice that mentally, he wasn't where he wanted to be. Back in May, he wrote a really candid blog entry about mental health called *Thoughts on being well*.

It reads, "I have been, it turns out unwell for a long time. I didn't really start realizing how unwell I'd been until I suddenly over the course of three months, got a little bit better. The long and the short of it is that I'd had an ugly mental health episode about 10 years ago and got immediate treatment but then as a result of my own laziness--"

Nico: A punishing travel schedule and being convinced, I needed to see a shrink who takes my insurance. What had been an emergency solution to manic depression became a permanent cocktail of medications taken every day for 10 chemically unexamined years. Recently, I thought to myself in a moment of rare clarity about my own life, that maybe I wasn't feeling as great as I might. From 2009 to 2014, I wrote two operas, several orchestra pieces, a few film scores, tons of choral music, and a pile of chamber music. I was constantly busy and all of my projects were great ones to have, and all of my collaborators were stellar and it was all, on paper, going fine.

Something a friend's mother said to me kept haunting me though. She'd come to the Met premiere of my opera *Two Boys* in 2013. The opening night crowd was enthusiastic and was, as is the custom at such events, clapping enthusiastically as I took a bow. She said to me afterwards, "Wow, you must feel 10 feet tall." I said, thank you and smiled, but I couldn't shake that comment from my head. I thought about it a few months ago and realized that no, I really didn't. It wasn't the opposite. I didn't feel small, but I felt empty or invisible. This physical manifestation of the work wasn't something I'd made. It was something that was happening around me to which I was a passive and silent witness.

[music]

Speaker 1: Bounce baby, bounce with it. Oh.

Nadia: Hey. Recently we caught up with Nico this time in a hotel room in Detroit, where we both were for a concert and we asked him about it.

Speaker 1: Do you want some edible arrangement?

Nico: I'd been seeing a psychiatrist who took my insurance, which is, for anyone who's listening in another country, this sounds insane, but shrinks either take your insurance or they don't. If they take your insurance, you pay them \$50. If they don't take your insurance, you pay them \$450 for 50 minutes. It's insane. I got the sense that things were not working and came dangerously close to a previous manic state. I thought, "Well, let's let me see if \$450 can solve this rather than 50." I went to see this new psychiatrist and she is basically like, "Let's change everything."

I went off one thing and on another thing and over the course of the six months of the crossfade between the two medications, I realized that I'd been really dulled to a lot of things for about 10 years. Specifically, in my personal life, there was a lot of that, but as it relates to me as a musician, I was unable to enjoy any of the outward

or cosmetic signs of being successful. What that meant was I didn't feel good. I didn't feel specifically good if anyone clapped for something I did. Not that you should, but you should. It's a pleasure [chuckles] response. You should feel okay when that happens. You should feel okay if you're taking a bow in front of a big group of people, who've just done something.

Nadia: If you've spent years and years writing an opera, and then people give you applause, you should feel pride at that time.

Nico: You should feel pride. Exactly. I found myself feeling no pride but also it was the sense of achievement or accomplishment was as if I had done a morning's worth of errands, "Okay." It's like, I'd gone to the dry cleaner and I walked the dog. It was a sense of like, "Oh, okay, there's that." That happened. Then, I guess, the other thing I addressed, and that was like, how it had messed up my ability to feel sad about stuff when stuff was actually sad because I was always able to be practical. A friend died and I was like, "On it. Okay, let's send the money to here and deal with this and logistics," you know what I mean? It wasn't until a year and a half later when I changed this medication, I was like, "Oh God, that was really dark and sad." I hadn't been there.

Nadia: Do you think any of this is playing out in your music in any way?

Nico: Well, a little bit. In the last two years, I would say, the music has gotten a lot more complicated. There's a lot more connection with this-- not just a kind of energy being high energy or whatever, but that being in some way destructive and angry. Which again, I don't feel like in my specific process there's too much of a one-to-one correlation between what's going on psychologically and how it sounds, but it has been interesting to watch it. There's a much more panicked energy to it now.

For better or for worse. Again, that's the thing that I try not to think about too much because if you think about it, then you find yourself writing about-- you know what I mean? It's this process of-- but we'll see. The music I'm writing today we're not going to hear it for six months, so there's this delay.

[music]

Lisa: Well, I think people probably know this, but I guess one of the things I like most about Nico is that he's unafraid to say anything.

Nadia: That's Lisa Kaplan, she's the pianist for the new music ensemble Eighth Blackbird.

Lisa: I think that it's really great that he's so open about everything, music writing, combating mental illness, what medication he's taking, how he treated somebody at a concert. I love that he makes all of that public. I wish there was more of that. There's a certain kinetic element to his music. Even a lot of his slow music has very fast-moving notes if that makes sense.

[music]

Lisa: Yes, I think there's a certain buoyancy that's a part of his music, part of his energy as a person. I feel like I can really feel that.

[music]

Nadia: Actually the reason we were all in Detroit recently was for the US premiere of a *Viola Concerto* Nico wrote for me last year. The *Viola Concerto* is the latest piece we've worked on together, and in a lot of ways, it's been 10 years in the making. The first time Nico and I worked together was way back in 2004 around the time that Nico was working for Philip Glass. I was in my first year of my master's degree at Julliard, and I was taking a course on 20th-century music that was taught by Martin Verdrager. Our midterm assignment was to construct an oral presentation on a 20th-century composer.

This was 2004. I remember asking Dr. Verdrager if I could do a presentation on a 21st-century composer since I'd just met this kid Nico Muhly, and had asked him to write a viola-cello duet for my recital at the end of the year. Dr. Verdrager paused and then shrugged his shoulders and said, "Sure, I'm letting someone do Prokofiev, so why not?" I definitely thought that completing the assignment in this manner was cheating. I could literally ask the composer what went into his music. I didn't even need to use the library.

I went to Nico and I asked him for a list of music that he really liked, stuff that he found influential or life-changing or whatever. This being 2004 Nico burned me a CD. On it were a few things we had already talked about, specifically 17th-century English choral music that he and I had both sang as children, but also there was all of this minimalism. He asked me if I knew the Philip Glass opera, *Einstein on the Beach*. I remember feeling super embarrassed when I admitted that I just didn't know it. At that point in my life, I'm pretty sure I was used to being dismissive of Philip Glass. Aping the postures of older musicians. Yet I had never really listened to it. Nico put *Spaceship* on there and it completely blew my mind.

[music]

Nadia: By the time I gave that presentation, and more importantly, by the time I premiered the duo Nico had written, I had such a deeper understanding of what went into this music, went into this person. The pieces he chose, they set the stage for his language, his sense of counterpoint, his love of pulse and texture and phrase, but these ideas were all filtered through Nico's own restless brain. Nico is a social virtuoso, a keen observer. When Nico speaks, he takes sentences and idioms and perverts them, subjects them to whims and puns and linguistic games and tropes.

Musically, these influences he showed me you can hear them, but the mere act of steeping them in Nico's head not to mention the force of his compositional mind forges these very particular beautiful phrases. They're descendant from music I know. Familiar seeming, but still odd, alien. I need to listen to Nico's music a few times to even understand what he's playing with. What dozens of operations are going on. Nico pulls influences into these little ecosystems and then lets his brain ferment them into these crazy delicious new things.

[music]

Nadia: What I love, the great and intense and also selfishly satisfying thing about playing brand new pieces of music is that the performance practice is directly informed by your own impulses. I've been playing Nico's stuff for 10 years, so there's something of my musical DNA in his music at this point. It's a crazy process, and I'm in love with it. When Nico handed me the score for the concerto, I was so happy to find it both very specific and very open.

All of the large structures were very precisely notated, but the specific choreography of getting from one note to another he left open to my interpretation. This type of generosity I think is why players love performing his music. He allows for the musicians performing his work to show through, to shine, and to be heard.

[music]

Nico: To a certain extent, I think what you need is not for someone to tell you that what you like is good, but for someone to tell you that you know nothing. I feel like despite years of active study of everything there's still so much more and, of course, there is. It's literally infinite. It's as infinite as a thing could be. There's a process of discrimination when you say, "You know what? I'm closing the doors. I'm not letting anything else in," which I think should probably happen three or four weeks before you die. At which point you call your lawyer, you cleared out the fridge-- that's when you-- or even you throw the yogurt. That's when you can stop learning of things, but until that time, I feel like you have to keep moving.

[music]

Nadia: *Meet the Composer* is a production of Q2 Music, part of New York's Classical 105.9 FM WQXR. Enjoy new music 24/7 and discover the best by today's composers by listening to our stream at q2music.org. A very special thanks to this episode's Patreon producer Justus Schlichting.

Jonathan: Hi, this is Jonathan Stone from East Orange, New Jersey. Links to all the music featured on today's show are available at q2music.org/meetthecomposer. *Meet the Composer* was produced by Nadia Sirota and Alexander Overington. Additional support was provided by Carolyn Chung, Hannis Brown, and Justin Long. Our executive producer is Alex Ambrose. Thanks to our expert guests Shara Worden, Leonard Slatkin, Valgeir Sigurðsson, Lisa Kaplan, Reverend James Mustard, James McVinnie, and Peter Gelb. Additional thanks to New Music USA for their flexibility with the use of the *Meet the Composer* name which became famous through their legacy organization founded by composer John Duffy. Many thanks to our season two Kickstarter donors including Chris Kim, Jenny Peterson, Macon, Micheal Overington, Alex Ambrose, and Graham Parker.

[01:02:42] [END OF AUDIO]

Copyright © 2022 New York Public Radio. All rights reserved. Visit our website [terms of use](#) at www.wnyc.org for further information.

File name: meetthecomposer121115nico.mp3

New York Public Radio transcripts are created on a rush deadline, often by contractors. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Accuracy and availability may vary. The authoritative record of New York Public Radio's programming is the audio record.