

Art Lives 2:1 Christopher Lee Transcript

Music Cue 0:00

[Trumpet and multiple percussion play a duet titled "Slightly Funky," written by Nicholas Meyers.]

Elizabeth DeLamater 0:07

Hello! Welcome to Season 2, Episode 1, of Art Lives. My name is Elizabeth DeLamater. On this podcast, I talk with artists one-on-one about their art, their lives, and how they navigate the world. This episode features international flutist, Christopher Lee. Chris is a certified personal trainer and a founding faculty member of Whole Musician, a team of teachers who provide holistic, artistic workshops. On this episode, we talk about staying healthy on the road, no matter where you tour, and the Whole Musician mission. And Chris shares the remarkable story of his sudden heart attack last year and his astounding recovery. This episode was recorded over the internet, and there is some compromised audio quality. But everything that Chris has to say is excellent, honest, and heartfelt. Here is Christopher Lee.

Music Cue 1:09

[Solo marimba piece plays, titled "Echo of Time," from Four Reflections for Marimba by Nicholas Meyers.]

Christopher Lee. 1:09

The nice thing about the arts is that, everything you do, can become an option for somebody else.

Elizabeth DeLamater 1:33

Right.

Christopher Lee. 1:33

And it's kind of nice. I was actually doing a similar kind of a workshop last weekend in Omaha. And just talking about people's options.

Elizabeth DeLamater 1:45

Nice!

Christopher Lee. 1:45

Just getting the students to sort of put down what their ideas of what they could possibly do are. These were mostly music students, so everything was sort of centered around that. You know, we got the usual, "I could become a college professor," or "I could go play in an orchestra," and "I could be a soloist," and so on, so forth. All of the usual things that we would normally see. And my big this is that, hopefully I can put this succinctly, but it's easy to come up with those because those labels have already been invented, because somebody has already done that.

Elizabeth DeLamater 2:26

Yes.

Christopher Lee. 2:26

And, you know, my big this is that, we can sure follow along that path, but it is already somebody else's path.

Elizabeth DeLamater 3:14

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 2:38

And it's not necessary that we fit into that, because we all have our own. And the big deal is just trying to figure out our own passion, our own path and stuff like that, that is viable in today's world. And it's very, very possible that, because my big, my underlying thought or feeling is that, if somebody is doing something that they're absolutely in love with -- and I mean absolutely in love with -- then they'll do it pretty well. And it automatically will become viable to somebody else.

Elizabeth DeLamater 3:14

Ahh. I know that there was a time when you were playing in an orchestra.

Christopher Lee. 3:20

Yes.

Elizabeth DeLamater 3:22

So, does that mean there was a moment when you said, "I am going to do my own thing"? Or has your career to this point been creating your own path?

Christopher Lee. 3:37

No, it certainly wasn't creating my own path. When I was in university, I was, I had the same goals that a lot of other people had. It was to go and get out, and we were definitely all going to get an orchestra job.

Elizabeth DeLamater 4:00

Yes!

Christopher Lee. 3:48

You know, there was no doubt about that. And, you know, for your students, I'm being really facetious there. It's not that it was easy back then, it was just -- we had no other option. So, luckily enough -- and it was sheer luck -- that's what I did. And, I got my first job, and that turned into a 21-year job. But I tell you, during that time, yeah, it felt pretty good, I was doing the thing.

Elizabeth DeLamater 4:04

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 4:27

But I was pretty dead, you know, inside.

Elizabeth DeLamater 4:38

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 4:39

Absolutely. I would go to the hall. I'd play the rehearsals, and I'd play the rep, which was lovely and all that.

Elizabeth DeLamater 4:48

Yep.

Christopher Lee. 4:48

Sometimes there were veterans there that had been there much longer than I had, and people were just putting in their time. So, it wasn't as enjoyable as I had dreamed. And, after a while, the years just flew by, and we never paid attention to that-- or, I never paid attention to that.

Until, you know, the orchestra had some financial difficulties, serious ones, and they ceased operating. And, so all of a sudden, at the end of the season, I had to figure out, "Well, I'm not going back. It's not there anymore. So what am I going to do?" And, it was funny, right at that point in time, I realized that I hadn't been doing the thing I always wanted to do, all these years.

Elizabeth DeLamater 5:36
Ah.

Christopher Lee. 5:36
And, so, I decided well that's how I have to go about it -- you know, the next chapter. I started teaching a lot more, and playing recitals a lot more, and just figuring out how to go about getting into that world. Now, again, it's about people I knew and being lucky and so on.

Elizabeth DeLamater 6:02
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 6:03
But I started doing quite a number of festivals, where we, we have lots of those.

Elizabeth DeLamater 6:09
In the flute world.

Christopher Lee. 6:09
In the flute world, yeah. Yeah, it seems like every little town has one. So, I just decided I was going to do that. Now, you know, a lot of these were for no fee.

Elizabeth DeLamater 6:24
Right.

Christopher Lee. 6:24
That's important to know that, even after playing in an orchestra for all these years and so on, that it would be unreasonable for me to expect it -- to go and automatically be hired to do recitals and stuff for a fee.

Elizabeth DeLamater 6:42
Yes.

Christopher Lee. 6:44
This was a new beginning, if you will. So, back to the old days of "Yes, I'll do that." Because, well, for no other reason other than I thought it would be helpful, to me, personally. And, then I started doing them and I realized there was another side to it. There were all of these kids that would attend -- students -- that would attend, and, through teaching them and getting to listen to them and them listening to our shows and so on, I realized that it meant so much to them.

Elizabeth DeLamater 7:17
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 7:18
And, it was just an amazing energy that came out of every one of these. It didn't matter where it was. And that, that became pretty infectious, so I started to give out more, actually. Again, for no fee.

Elizabeth DeLamater 7:35
Right.

Christopher Lee. 7:37

It's one of my "must dos" these days, I keep thinking "If anyone asks me to do a festival, I'll say yes, automatically!" Because you sort of know that it is mending an awful lot of important -- it's doing a lot of good for the young people that are in whichever location.

Elizabeth DeLamater 7:57

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 7:58

And that is certainly a huge part of our lives, I think, as artists, is giving back.

Elizabeth DeLamater 8:04

Right.

Christopher Lee. 8:05

Or feeling that you're giving back and being useful. It's not all about making a paycheck or anything like that. So, it's all goes in a big parcel together. And I still teach.

Elizabeth DeLamater 8:23

So, I think this relates to your Whole Musician project.

Christopher Lee. 8:28

Yes, very much. You know, we started about six years ago, just sitting around a dinner table. And we realized that we all had these other interests, in addition to the flute and music.

Elizabeth DeLamater 8:41

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 8:41

And they all actually fit together really well. So, we just started doing this. But we all have different specialties that we bring to the table, and putting it all together, it sort of gives a really nice, rounded view of things, which is always focused on being kind to yourself and not -- how should I say it -- not getting caught up in the negativity that can be so prevalent in all these institutions.

Elizabeth DeLamater 9:19

Sure.

Christopher Lee. 9:20

The pressure and the "shoulds." We all have a lot of "shoulds." I should be doing--

Elizabeth DeLamater 9:26

"Shoulds!"

Christopher Lee. 9:26

So, we try to just expose those things for what they are. We realize that they're of no consequence, whatsoever. So, it's all in a service to the students, because we realize that the students, especially in universities so on, either they're wandering, a little lost, or afraid, definitely afraid of the future and what it has for them. Or, they're struggling to catch up to their peers and so on.

Elizabeth DeLamater 9:59

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 10:00

And, the thing is though, not everybody comes to their idea, or their level of success, at completely different times.

Elizabeth DeLamater 10:09

Right!

Christopher Lee. 10:09

And that's totally cool. There's nothing wrong with that. But I know when you you're young, "It's my time. I must do this now before I'm thirty."

Elizabeth DeLamater 10:19

Oh, yes.

Christopher Lee. 10:20

All these strange things. So, we decided we needed to help a lot of these students out, and, in doing so, we also help each other and ourselves.

Elizabeth DeLamater 10:33

Wow!

Christopher Lee. 10:35

Part of it is focused on meditation, part of it's on yoga, part of it is on fitness. There's also a life coach. So, a lot of it goes on inside our heads.

Elizabeth DeLamater 10:45

Okay.

Christopher Lee. 10:46

But then a lot of it, too, is very practical, hands-on music stuff.

Elizabeth DeLamater 10:52

Yeah!

Christopher Lee. 10:52

And, "This is what we can do. This is what you can look forward to in your careers." So now we do like-- yeah?

Elizabeth DeLamater 11:05

I'm sorry. Who's in the group?

Christopher Lee. 11:08

That's okay! Well, it's myself and Christine Beard, who's a professor at Omaha. She just joined us. And Dr. Megan Lanz is teaching in Colorado U. And Dr. Meg Griffith who teaches down in Dallas. And Dr. Rik Noyce, who's at Cal State Dominguez Hills. And that's it; there are five of us.

Elizabeth DeLamater 11:37

Okay.

Christopher Lee. 11:37

Now, we all happen to be flutists, but actually these residencies that we do are open to everybody. It doesn't matter what discipline in music -- they're usually performing artists. But this last one we had some actors drop in, which I adore.

Elizabeth DeLamater 11:53
Neat!

Christopher Lee. 11:52
Because the interaction between actor and music, I mean, that's fantastic. And then, the last one we had a lot of guitar players come in.

Elizabeth DeLamater 12:05
Cool.

Christopher Lee. 12:07
You know, everybody, it's applicable to everybody. And that's what's nice, because even though we do masterclasses, it doesn't have to be flute masterclasses. It could be anything, because music is music.

Elizabeth DeLamater 12:20
Right.

Christopher Lee. 12:22
It's really fantastic how that happens. But, what I find was, this was the second year we went back to Cal State, and we had a lot of the people come back, a lot of the students that were there the year before had come back. You know, you get to check up on "How are you doing? What are you doing now? And how is school going?" One of the things that we found that makes us feel so good, is that a lot of times they've managed to compartmentalize and organize their time.

Elizabeth DeLamater 12:56
Oh!

Christopher Lee. 12:58
So that the perceived pressures that they had, they realized weren't really at all. It just took some shifting here and there.

Elizabeth DeLamater 13:09
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 13:10
And a lot of it was stuff they put on themselves. But, our young people don't have those skills yet, so of course it's tough on them. It's difficult enough for us teachers, but if we can sort of show them how to do things--

Elizabeth DeLamater 13:30
Yes!

Christopher Lee. 13:31
And to organize things, then it's much easier for them.

Elizabeth DeLamater 13:34
I'm not sure what skills I truly comprehended when I was in college, but I know that some current college students really lack in certain life skills like that. They'll, they'll actually say that.

Christopher Lee. 13:53

Yeah. Well, of course, I mean, nobody's told them how.

Elizabeth DeLamater 13:57

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 13:57

And they haven't quite gotten enough life experience yet to figure it out. At a certain point, you get to an age or a stage, I guess, where you can just say, "No, I'm not gonna do that."

Elizabeth DeLamater 14:09

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 14:12

When you're young and in college, you're saying yes to everything. That can be an issue in itself. But that's just prioritizing. But, remembering where the, at that point in time where your goal is, and then we can say, in everything that you do, is this going to serve it? Is it going to serve it by spending this much time on this or that? I mean, we have courses that we have to complete and so on, so forth. But I think a lot of the college students we've seen lose sight of the fact that college is just four years, six years if they're doing something more or, maybe, maybe if they're going into a doctorate a couple more years on top of that. But it's not a forever thing.

Elizabeth DeLamater 15:05

Yes.

Christopher Lee. 15:05

And it will be over at a certain point. And then what are you going to do? Think about that part of it, and, just, this is the preparation for it. This is the time that is allowing you to learn how to have all these projects on the go. It's also a time to network with your peers who will become your colleagues in the future. And it's the time when you have the ability to get up on stage and make a complete fool of yourself.

Elizabeth DeLamater 15:38

Ah, exactly!

Christopher Lee. 15:41

That's why it's there. You don't want to do that later on. Because you have to learn how to prepare.

Elizabeth DeLamater 15:47

I love this.

Christopher Lee. 15:48

So, yeah, it's pretty cool.

Elizabeth DeLamater 15:53

Can you talk me through a residency? What happens?

Christopher Lee. 15:57

Sure. So, what happens -- it's usually like three days, three or four days, something like that. And it kind of depends on the school, what they want to focus on. Sometimes they'll tell us,

like, the kids really need this or that. But, if we get no direction then usually our residency is about, at the beginning we'll try to find out, get to know the people who are there.

Elizabeth DeLamater 16:24
Mmhmm.

Christopher Lee. 16:24
The students, and see what kind of people they are, and what they're aiming for, and also what their principles are. But most of the time they all come down to the same thing. I'm sorry to generalize like that. Students are all the same. We'll then try and break down what, exactly these pressures are, and that's where our life coach takes over. And he manages to talk out all of these points, like, "Your grades are suffering this semester because of XYZ, whatever, and here's how you can look at it. Is it really the same, is it really what you thought about it?" So this is all a mind thing, psychologically. And, we'll also, usually, then move straight into a playing thing, a musical thing so we can ask the class or somebody to play, where we all teach. So it's not a masterclass with one person.

Elizabeth DeLamater 17:27
Nice!

Christopher Lee. 17:28
We're all there, we listen, and then we chime in when we have something.

Elizabeth DeLamater 17:33
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 17:34
And then that usually goes into our open mic, which is one of my favorite things. Which is just anybody can come and do anything.

Elizabeth DeLamater 17:43
Oooh, cool!

Christopher Lee. 17:45
They can even play something that they've never played before. You know, all of that. It's not about being great. It's about sharing music with each other and taking the pressure out of it entirely.

Elizabeth DeLamater 17:57
Yes.

Christopher Lee. 17:58
So we'll do ridiculous music and we'll do strange things and all that. So, that is usually a night that goes on and on and on. And it's wonderful. And then, we will do, the next day, we'll start off with the more physical aspect of things. So we'll get people into the right mindset with yoga, stuff like that, talking about the body and how it actually helps us perform, and where the pressures are. Because things like muscles resonate, lots of people don't even think about that. But, how to be completely physically relaxed on stage every time you play. And that's linked into the psychological aspects of things, too, because tension a lot of the times comes from our brains telling us, "Ah, I'm overstressed."

Elizabeth DeLamater 18:51
Yeah. Yes!

Christopher Lee. 18:53

We don't always have complete control all of the time. But this is about teaching how to gain control.

Elizabeth DeLamater 18:59

Right.

Christopher Lee. 18:59

And to be able to, under a pressured situation, like we all do as musicians, get up there and just say, "Okay, I got this."

Elizabeth DeLamater 19:07

Nice!

Christopher Lee. 19:08

And that changes your physique, your entire way of being, and changes your mindset, and then it change the chemicals in your body, too.

Elizabeth DeLamater 19:18

Yeah!

Christopher Lee. 19:18

So you are actually more relaxed.

Elizabeth DeLamater 19:20

Wow.

Christopher Lee. 19:20

And, so, just gaining mastery over the body. It's shocking to me in particular how little control, students of 18, 19, 20, 21, how little control they have over their bodies.

Elizabeth DeLamater 19:34

Very little.

Christopher Lee. 19:34

They don't even know their bodies. So we make them know the important sort of depths of their body when it comes to performing. Then we'll move into my sort of day, which is sort of an interpretation workshop about how to pull out these little ideas and stuff from just looking at a score.

Elizabeth DeLamater 19:36

Mmhmm.

Christopher Lee. 19:38

And how to execute them, to find technique to do that. My line is always that you have to find-- you have to let the imagination go. Imagine all of these things that you could do, and then find the technique to do that. Rather than saying, "I can't do that because my technique won't allow me to do that."

Elizabeth DeLamater 20:20

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 20:21

It will if you look at it. If you try to find a way to do it, you can find it. So that's where technique improves, I think. But through a purpose.

Elizabeth DeLamater 20:30
Yes.

Christopher Lee. 20:31
It's a different purpose, rather than just getting fingers moving. And then we'll move into -- and these are all sort of with people volunteering to do these exercises and stuff, with or without their instrument. And then, what we did last week where I said the actors came, one of our things was just getting an actor to come up there and improvise--

Elizabeth DeLamater 20:57
Wonderful!

Christopher Lee. 20:58
To what they are hearing from somebody playing. It's an interesting exercise. So, the first time we did it without the musicians seeing what the actor is doing. I didn't want them influenced by that. And then the second time to play the same thing, this time seeing what the actor is doing. So in one, one sense, in one version the actor is leading the music, in the other version the musicians are leading the music. And for the students to see that they actually can do this and the power they have to change a scene or an emotion, that is very powerful for them.

Elizabeth DeLamater 21:37
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 21:39
That's a really fun one to do. And then we go into, some schools, like last year we had to get creative, we talked about practice techniques and how to be efficient with time. Because lots of the students, as you might know, say the same thing. "Oh, I worked on this passage for so long, and then it fell apart when I got to the concert!"

Elizabeth DeLamater 22:05
Right!

Christopher Lee. 22:06
And then we have to talk about, well, was that really practicing?

Elizabeth DeLamater 22:11
Yes.

Christopher Lee. 22:14
But, of course, nobody's told them before. So this is, at that age all we knew was "You just have to play more."

Elizabeth DeLamater 22:22
Oh my gosh.

Christopher Lee. 22:24
But how to actually practice to deliver results is what we're after, how do we do that. Because as you get older, as you get out of school, as you know we have much less time available to practice.

Elizabeth DeLamater 22:36

Oh, yeah.

Christopher Lee. 22:36

So you have to be good at it. And just being able to say, "Okay, this is what I'm going to achieve," and "It's time to really go back to doing that." But that leads to better results, as you know. It leads to results you can count on for the times when you are up on stage, and it's, "Okay, I fixed this." You actually fixed this, you didn't just repeat it and got it right maybe five times out of ten. So, it leads to a different level of confidence when you're on stage.

Elizabeth DeLamater 23:08

Sure. Absolutely!

Christopher Lee. 23:12

Less fear, it's all about less fear. And then we move into, sort of, usually, by the last day, is to put everybody back together again. So, our life coach comes back in and starts talking about exactly all the tools we've given, how you put that together and to make it work for yourself -- everybody's a little different -- and just trying to give them something that they can take away and practice on their own. But a lot of times they, a lot of the students seem to hit on meditation. They like doing that, and it seems to make a big difference with many of them. Because our meditation is not about quieting your mind.

Elizabeth DeLamater 23:59

Mmmhmm.

Christopher Lee. 23:59

It's just about focusing the mind. Because I think the first challenge that everybody has about meditation is that, "Oh, I can't shut my mind off!"

Elizabeth DeLamater 24:07

Right.

Christopher Lee. 24:07

But you don't need to. You just need to focus it, that's all.

Elizabeth DeLamater 24:12

Yeah, that's exactly what I hear from some of my students.

Christopher Lee. 24:17

Yeah, yeah. And of course, because we all think we need to be thinking of nothing, which is kind of impossible. And it adds more pressure, doesn't it?

Elizabeth DeLamater 24:28

Yeah, yes!

Christopher Lee. 24:29

"I can't even meditate!"

Elizabeth DeLamater 24:30

Ahh, yeah. Yep. "I'm failing at this, too."

Christopher Lee. 24:36

Exactly. I like to see students smile and enjoy themselves. I hate to see our young people suffering when there's maybe something we can do about it.

Elizabeth DeLamater 24:52
Right.

Christopher Lee. 24:53
So, that is one of the greatest joys, I think. Being able to go into schools and meeting people that might get something out of our residency, and then keeping in touch. We always keep in touch with people.

Elizabeth DeLamater 25:09
Awesome.

Christopher Lee. 25:11
Just seeing how things go and develop. Because, you know, we never had this when I was in school. Well, nobody talked about this stuff. It was almost taboo, I would say.

Elizabeth DeLamater 25:26
Oh!

Christopher Lee. 25:28
You don't talk about any weaknesses that you may have. But I'm so happy that, these days, a lot of schools are more open to that.

Elizabeth DeLamater 25:36
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 25:38
The students definitely are more open to that.

Elizabeth DeLamater 25:41
What seems to be a huge, very crucial difference in what you folks are doing, is that wrap up day. That, "Okay, what can we, how can we move from here?"

Christopher Lee. 25:56
Right. It is--

Elizabeth DeLamater 25:58
I have--

Christopher Lee. 25:59
No, go ahead.

Elizabeth DeLamater 26:00
Yeah, sorry. Yeah, please go ahead!

Christopher Lee. 26:04
Yeah, well I was just saying, it's essential because the worst thing I think anyone can do is come in somewhere and say all these wonderful things, "Blah, blah, blah." And that's it.

Elizabeth DeLamater 26:16
Yeah!

Christopher Lee. 26:17
You've gotta give some kind of ammunition to go that can take and apply it themselves.

Elizabeth DeLamater 26:24
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 26:25
Even if it's maybe just a little handout, although it's much better if it's a whole, hands-on thing. And then it shows them how they can take that crucial first step. This is what you can do after you leave this room, be that psychologically speaking or even musically speaking. If you're going into your practice room right after here, this is what you can do. Just try it.

Elizabeth DeLamater 26:49
Bam.

Christopher Lee. 26:51
That gives them something to do. Once they discover that, it's fine.

Elizabeth DeLamater 26:58
That's great. So, you perform recitals, you do these residencies. Sounds like your day-to-day life can be quite varied.

Christopher Lee. 27:14
Yeah, it's always different. I keep having to check the calendar for what day it is. There's no routine. That, for me, is a good thing.

Elizabeth DeLamater 27:22
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 27:23
I know a lot of people who thrive on routine, and this would probably drive them insane. But, no, for me it's different, because I also have my own private students here that I see. And I like the fact that the weekend, for instance, doesn't mean anything to me. A holiday is more of a pain because certain stores are closed or whatever. To me, every other day is just a day with music or with students where I get to work with them, or work with my colleagues. I mean every day is fantastic. Except for, I have to say, the only one thing I don't like is travelling.

Elizabeth DeLamater 28:10
Oh, yeah!

Christopher Lee. 28:13
I can't stand airports. But, other than that, we're good.

Elizabeth DeLamater 28:20
Yeah. I mean that is something that I never considered when I was younger, and I didn't think it would get harder as I got older.

Christopher Lee. 28:32
Oh, it does get-- But what do you do? You have to do that bit of it to get to the good bit. But, one of my friends this week -- what am I doing? -- so, right now my students are on spring break.

Elizabeth DeLamater 28:50
Okay.

Christopher Lee. 28:50

So that's very nice. But I have to prepare stuff for next weekend -- which is, next week we're gonna be in Belgium and teaching there. That's a, a university in a small city, smaller city called Leuven in Brussels.

Elizabeth DeLamater 29:12
Called what?

Christopher Lee. 29:13
It's just outside of Brussels.

Elizabeth DeLamater 29:16
Okay.

Christopher Lee. 29:17
And, over there for like -- it's a luxury actually -- because I'll be there doing stuff in the university for two days. But the third day is a day off!

Elizabeth DeLamater 29:26
Woohoo!

Christopher Lee. 29:28
We're gonna get to see some of the sights, maybe. And then the next day is a travel day. So, we go back then. And then spring break's over, so we're back into teaching and doing some rehearsal for a musical in April.

Elizabeth DeLamater 29:48
Yeah, cool.

Christopher Lee. 29:50
Which is, yeah, it's interesting. And then ongoing prep, because my next festival, which I love, as you know I said before I love doing festivals, is in Costa Rica.

Elizabeth DeLamater 30:05
Cool.

Christopher Lee. 30:06
And, you know, I love that part of the world, I know you dis--

Elizabeth DeLamater 30:10
Yeah, yeah.

Christopher Lee. 30:13
So, I can't wait for that. That's gonna be in July, which is like, it can't come fast enough.

Elizabeth DeLamater 30:20
Nice!

Christopher Lee. 30:20
But, yeah. So, that's the next little while.

Elizabeth DeLamater 30:25
When you, when you travel, is it hard for you to physically play the next day?

Christopher Lee. 30:35

Yes, yes.

Elizabeth DeLamater 30:35

You are a flute player--

Christopher Lee. 30:36

Yes. I don't know exactly, physiologically speaking, exactly why.

Elizabeth DeLamater 30:40

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 30:41

But it's probably just brain tired.

Elizabeth DeLamater 30:43

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 30:44

And I think, like, last week was actually a challenge because the organizer planned to have a short concert the day I arrived.

Elizabeth DeLamater 30:55

Oh.

Christopher Lee. 30:55

And it was sightread-able stuff, which is what we did, so that was fine. But it's not something I want to do, necessarily, because then the flute feels like you've never touched it before. And things like breathing and stuff like that, it's just not working.

Elizabeth DeLamater 31:18

Right! Well that's the thing. I mean, I arrive, especially from a long plane ride, I arrive physically sore. So my shoulders and arms are sore, so if I'm gonna play the drums it's rough.

Christopher Lee. 31:33

Exactly.

Elizabeth DeLamater 31:33

But I can't imagine, then, having to breathe in order to play.

Christopher Lee. 31:39

Yeah, it just feels like you're not even in your own body. And so, then you can't depend on muscle memory or anything like that or your technique. It's just one big blur. But, sometimes people have to do that when they're traveling on the audition circuit.

Elizabeth DeLamater 31:58

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 31:59

You know, they have to get used to that feeling.

Elizabeth DeLamater 32:02

Oh yeah!

Christopher Lee. 32:02

I'm lucky that I haven't had to do that in a long time, so, you know. But you can, you can get into the gist of it if you do it often enough.

Elizabeth DeLamater 32:14
True.

Christopher Lee. 32:15
And a lot of concertizers, a lot of soloists, I mean they have to do so many concerts, they're constantly doing this. They'll get off the plane and go right to the hall. It's just a fact of their life.

Elizabeth DeLamater 32:29
True.

Christopher Lee. 32:30
But, for us now, for me, traveling means I have to set aside a whole day to do just that.

Elizabeth DeLamater 32:40
Mmhmm.

Christopher Lee. 32:41
And then the next day I'm starting to, I will do certain things to try to get into my normal body again. I'll exercise--

Elizabeth DeLamater 32:51
Nice.

Christopher Lee. 32:52
You can't always depend on the food wherever you are, as you know.

Elizabeth DeLamater 32:59
Yeah!

Christopher Lee. 33:00
That's a big one, isn't it?

Elizabeth DeLamater 33:03
It is!

Christopher Lee. 33:03
I try and get out and see, just to have a quick walk around the neighborhood of wherever I'm staying. And that tends to help feel like you're human again.

Elizabeth DeLamater 33:15
Sure.

Christopher Lee. 33:16
Then you can maybe go and do a rehearsal. Ideally, I would never have to play on the day, but sometimes it does come up. What are you gonna do? You just have to get through it.

Elizabeth DeLamater 33:31
Right.

Christopher Lee. 33:32

It is possible. I will say, I know this doesn't help with the sore arms and stuff, but flying on those Boeing 787s, the lovely new things--

Elizabeth DeLamater 33:44
Yeah!

Christopher Lee. 33:46
They have this climate controlled cabin and the lighting that changes colors depending on the time zone you're in, it really helped me. I don't know about the others, but I got a feeling much less tired than I usually do.

Elizabeth DeLamater 33:59
Oh, good!

Christopher Lee. 34:01
Really good. So, I try and make sure that there's a 787 on my trip.

Elizabeth DeLamater 34:05
Sure! That's important. That's important to know.

Christopher Lee. 34:08
Yeah, it's huge. But most of it, you know, is because of the altitude that the cabin is usually at.

Elizabeth DeLamater 34:14
Oh.

Christopher Lee. 34:16
I think they usually keep it at about 8000 feet, which is pretty thin for oxygen, and stuff tends to get dry, and stuff like that, and dehydrated. But with the 787, I think it's now lower. I wanna say it's like, 5000 feet, which might be like being in Denver. So it's a little more human, you know?

Elizabeth DeLamater 34:38
Yeah!

Christopher Lee. 34:39
And you don't dry out as much, and all these things are very important. And, of course you know, you don't get sick as much, you know, thankfully. So, really important. I hope the airline industry can change all their planes eventually.

Elizabeth DeLamater 34:52
Oh, absolutely.

Christopher Lee. 34:55
Because the musicians need it!

Elizabeth DeLamater 34:57
Holy cow. Oh, yeah.

Christopher Lee. 35:00
Yeah, but flying--

Elizabeth DeLamater 35:02
When you --

Christopher Lee. 35:04
Mmhmm?

Elizabeth DeLamater 35:05
Sorry, I think you're about to say it. After you come back, or before you go, do you have a physical way that you are preparing for a trip?

Christopher Lee. 35:18
It depends on where I'm going to.

Elizabeth DeLamater 35:20
Okay.

Christopher Lee. 35:21
So, if it's somewhere within a time zone, maybe a five hour flight, I'll just -- nothing special. But something longer than that, yes, I do have to prepare. Now, like, for instance, going to Costa Rica is a bit longer. It's kind of the same time zone, but one of the things that's really interesting about that is that I don't know the schedule that I'm on. I know what day I should get there.

Elizabeth DeLamater 35:51
Right.

Christopher Lee. 35:52
I don't know what's happening after that--

Elizabeth DeLamater 35:54
Nope.

Christopher Lee. 35:54
And that's typical for South America.

Elizabeth DeLamater 35:56
Yes!

Christopher Lee. 35:57
I could actually be playing a concert the next day, I don't know! So I kind of psyche myself out just in case. And I will pretend, when I'm here at home, I'll pretend, like, concert time's in two days, the day after my travel, or whatever, and go through the motions of that.

Elizabeth DeLamater 36:19
Oh.

Christopher Lee. 36:20
Because somebody's gonna be first. So, when I get there, then I'm sort of psyched out to already be performing.

Elizabeth DeLamater 36:30
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 36:32
That has been a big help, I think, in a lot of places where you don't get the schedule ahead of time. I quite enjoy that. The nice part is that I can stay on that, for a week, probably.

Elizabeth DeLamater 36:46
Ah, right.

Christopher Lee. 36:47
You know, I can be on that edge like that, ready to go. I run on a lot of adrenaline at these things, so I don't want to miss a second of anything.

Elizabeth DeLamater 36:58
Ah, yeah.

Christopher Lee. 36:59
And just being out there all the time, with the kids and with your colleagues, is just fantastic. So, when I come back, that's the recharge time.

Elizabeth DeLamater 37:01
Uh-huh.

Christopher Lee. 37:15
Yeah, it can sometimes take me a week, depending on where I am, to get back into the swing of things and feel rested. If I was doing things, if I was doing more concerts, or whatever closer together, I'd have to find a different way of handline it. Because I probably put myself out there too much when I'm traveling. I get too excited to do everything. And I should probably take it a little more easy, but that's not in my genes. You know, I keep thinking, "You're gonna do everything, 100%."

Elizabeth DeLamater 37:55
Yeah, but that's how you experience and interact with people.

Christopher Lee. 37:59
I think so.

Elizabeth DeLamater 38:02
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 38:03
I remember, like, when we were in Honduras, you and I together, and--

Elizabeth DeLamater 38:08
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 38:09
You know, there were all these activities and things to do. I mean, but when I look back on that, yes, it was a lot of time to relax. There was some downtime; I just didn't take it. Because everything was so amazing. You know, even when we would all hang out at the pool so late at night, it was just--

Elizabeth DeLamater 38:30
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 38:31
Yeah, I could go to bed, but when am I going to be with these people again? And, you know, that's part of our life.

Elizabeth DeLamater 38:39

Right. Yeah. So, what would you, what would you like to be doing in five years?

Christopher Lee. 38:48
I would love to be alive.

Elizabeth DeLamater 38:52
Yeah!

Christopher Lee. 38:53
I would love to be doing exactly what I'm doing now.

Elizabeth DeLamater 38:56
That's pretty awesome.

Christopher Lee. 38:57
Yeah. So, if I have the time-- that, to me is the thing. I want to be here and just continuing.

Elizabeth DeLamater 39:09
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 39:12
And I think, you know, when I was in the hospital, there was a lot of time to do nothing. And I had a lot of time to think about what I wanted to do, and so on, so forth. And, definitely, one of the projects I also wanted to do -- and we're going to do it through Whole Musician -- is to form an Instrument Bank, where we can have some higher quality instruments available to really talented kids who just need a better instrument to progress on for a certain length of time.

Elizabeth DeLamater 39:49
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 39:50
So, that's the next project we're working. And that always stuck in my head, when I was in there. "This needs to be done. This needs to be done." And, I think, things like that -- when I was telling everybody what I was thinking -- everybody was saying, "Well, that's, that's the reason you're still here." And it might be. I don't know. I feel like there's still a lot of things left to do. But it all has to do with getting to reach as many students all over the place as I can and make sure they're not suffering. Because there's no need for that. But, we're actually in one of the most amazing and wonderful professions, and nobody needs to suffer. We just need to give and share. That's it. And getting that understanding can be a bit tough, but really it's the internet age. I mean, everybody has a gift. So just share it.

Elizabeth DeLamater 41:04
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 41:05
And that's why I love all other kinds of music, too. Like, the vibe is usually different than in Classical music where we're all a little starchy. But all music is, should be the same, right?

Elizabeth DeLamater 41:19
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 41:19
So, when I see students just, "Ahh!" I wanna just grab them and say, "It's gonna be okay!"

Elizabeth DeLamater 41:27
Yeah. Right.

Christopher Lee. 41:30
So that's what I'm after. I do not need to retire. I love doing it. In ten years or more, pssh. But where I am now, what I'm doing now, is exciting. And I love it, so, yeah. Exactly that.

Elizabeth DeLamater 41:47
You mentioned being in the hospital.

Christopher Lee. 41:48
Mmhmm.

Elizabeth DeLamater 41:50
Would you mind quickly sharing why you were in the hospital?

Christopher Lee. 41:55
Oh, yes, I should put some context to that!

Elizabeth DeLamater 42:00
You don't have to. I can just put something in the intro.

Christopher Lee. 42:03
No, I don't mind at all. This is part of sharing everything I do. Yeah, I was in the hospital in Orlando last August, 2018, because I had a heart attack. I was there to do a convention, a few conventions, and some joke that that's the reason. But anyway, so I ended up having a heart attack, which developed straightaway into cardiac arrest. I was shocked about nine times. And I was down, as they call it, I was down for just over half an hour.

Elizabeth DeLamater 42:46
Wow!

Christopher Lee. 42:46
And they, I am quite lucky to be here. And I was quite lucky that I had people around me that just sprung into action, and that the hospital was very close by, and that the paramedics just happened to be very close by as well. So, a lot of luck happening, which is why in my previous statement people say, "That's why you're still here. There must be a reason." Which is what I was trying to understand, "Why am I still here?" With all of these things that could have gone wrong. At the same time, when they were doing the operations, whatever complications -- apparently, the doctors said were very rare -- I had them all. So various things failed, like my kidneys failed, and I was in cardiogenic shock, they call it.

Elizabeth DeLamater 43:44
Right.

Christopher Lee. 43:45
But eventually that all sort of stabilized. But I ended with a total time in the hospital of about three weeks only, I think. Something like that. And I was determined not to stay there.

Elizabeth DeLamater 43:59
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 43:59

So, apparently, they said my recovery was a little on the quick side. And that's fine by me.

Elizabeth DeLamater 44:10

Yeah, I would guess! I would have sworn in a court of law that you were the most healthy and fit person I knew.

Christopher Lee. 44:22

Yeah. It was always very important to me, and then look what happened. But they, the doctors would say that being fit doesn't really help you avoid the event of a heart attack.

Elizabeth DeLamater 44:36

Wow.

Christopher Lee. 44:37

What it does do is it helps you survive.

Elizabeth DeLamater 44:39

Ah hah!

Christopher Lee. 44:42

That is why they kept going, shocking me, they say, as long as they did. Because they knew my body could handle it.

Elizabeth DeLamater 44:49

Great.

Christopher Lee. 44:51

So it was sort of the after effect that you're looking at, right? I mean, right now, as far as in the cardiac rehab program, we have an exercise program basically, which I'm really looking forward to. But it's so mild and gentle. And I'm like, "Ah, this is driving me insane." So, I just started going back to the gym and working on cardio stuff. So, I feel 100% better.

Elizabeth DeLamater 45:19

Amazing.

Christopher Lee. 45:22

I have one small, little issue with, my leg was damaged in one of the operations a bit. So -- I say a little bit, I don't remember any of this -- but apparently it was bad enough that, if it didn't get circulation back in it, they would have amputated.

Elizabeth DeLamater 45:43

Oh!

Christopher Lee. 45:45

But, so that one is, I would say, 99% back to normal.

Elizabeth DeLamater 45:49

Incredible.

Christopher Lee. 45:50

And I'm happy about that. So everything that I had, and the kidneys are functioning again, so that allows me to travel.

Elizabeth DeLamater 45:58

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 45:59

I remember saying, while I was having dialysis one day, I just looked up, and I said, "Just let my kidneys work. Anything else I can deal with." Because, without my kidneys working, I knew I couldn't travel anymore and meet all these kids and do all these things.

Elizabeth DeLamater 46:15

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 46:15

And, then, I didn't know what I would do. That was a big depression. But then they woke up, and they just started working again.

Elizabeth DeLamater 46:26

Incredible.

Christopher Lee. 46:27

Yeah, I don't know why. I remember distinctly, after the blood test that showed they were starting to work, the nurses in the ward, they brought in cake and all that.

Elizabeth DeLamater 46:42

Hey!

Christopher Lee. 46:41

I said, "What is this?" They said, "Well, two people in the year, two of their patients have had their kidneys start working again, and you're one of them."

Elizabeth DeLamater 46:43

Wow!

Christopher Lee. 46:43

I said, "Two? Are you serious?" Like, out of these thousands of people, two!

Elizabeth DeLamater 46:47

Wow! Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 46:59

Yeah, okay, I'll take that cake.

Elizabeth DeLamater 47:04

You were in a big hospital in Toronto, too, right? With specialists.

Christopher Lee. 47:08

Yeah, yeah. So, apparently, that happens occasionally, but there's no rhyme or reason as to when or where or why. And I just figured it happened because I asked something or someone for it. You know, I have other stuff to do, and I couldn't be bothered being stuck to a bed for dialysis three times a week.

Elizabeth DeLamater 47:32

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 47:34

But I think that's key for everybody! You know, determination is not about saying, "I will do this, and I will do that." It's just about knowing there is nothing-- there are no other options. This is what I'm meant to do.

Elizabeth DeLamater 47:52
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 47:53
And that affects our physical nature quite a bit, as we already know, but also our mental status and purpose. Everything is about purpose. Having a reason for why you do everything. Why you're running that scale, or why you're going to that airport to go here. It makes it better.

Elizabeth DeLamater 48:18
Right. Yeah. Yes, yes.

Christopher Lee. 48:22
Yeah, that was my, my hospital story. I don't think I left anything out. I think it's important for me to share that. I have no secrets.

Elizabeth DeLamater 48:31
Well, it was such a testament to who you are and how many lives you've touched, because when the news of what had happened to you, when that news got out, the outpouring of love and concern for you was inestimable. And it came from all over the world.

Christopher Lee. 48:55
Yeah, I was really surprised. I was so touched. I couldn't believe it. It was the most amazing thing. And I'll say that I think that was one of the most strength-giving things. It really helped, because I could read messages from people. It really does make a difference in those times. I never would have believed it could make such a difference. And it's amazing, each person brought back memories of when we were together. Some people I had not even met yet, you know. It gives hope to that, too, but, people who I hadn't heard from in years. It was just -- I really remember that experience with great affection. I mean, I feel like if I could, I want to travel to all their homes, and give them a hug, and say "Thanks!" Because that really gave me something to look forward to and some strength.

Elizabeth DeLamater 50:08
Yeah, sure.

Christopher Lee. 50:11
Hospitals are pretty bleak. Having that in the outside world and thinking, "Wow, there are actually all these people that give a damn."

Elizabeth DeLamater 50:21
Wow. Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 50:23
Actually, I was really surprised about it. I just never, never realized there was that kind of community there.

Elizabeth DeLamater 50:33
Well, you know, at the risk of being sappy, I mean that's, that's the power of you. That's the the power of art and music.

Christopher Lee. 50:43

Aw, yeah.

Elizabeth DeLamater 50:44

That's your ability to work with people and inspire young kids.

Christopher Lee. 50:51

Yeah, well, I hope so. Also, you know, I really-- there's one line that we use in our residencies, basically at the end to wrap it up. I keep misquoting it, but I'll try to get it this time. I think it goes something like, "You cannot recognize inspiration unless you, too, are inspiration." And I think that is so true, that I don't recognize that in me, in myself, obviously. Who does? But there is some comfort in knowing that, because I am inspired by so many other people, that perhaps I do the same. And that's a very nice thought. Because, you know, people talk about legacy and things like that, what are you gonna leave behind and so on. And that's the only thing that I hope I do leave behind. Because if somebody will remember how I made them feel, that would be cool. Because then you are always remembered.

Elizabeth DeLamater 52:05

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 52:06

And I think our young people are so -- now I keep talking about students and young people with people in college -- and, actually, we do it with our group, our colleagues. We've had retreats for our colleagues. But it's just letting everybody know that they are valid, and they have a voice, and they have something to share. It's just amazing! I learn so much from students.

Elizabeth DeLamater 52:39

Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 52:40

I learn, number one, how to try and teach better.

Elizabeth DeLamater 52:45

Right.

Christopher Lee. 52:45

Number two, I learn a lot, too, about actually playing my instrument better, and so on, so forth. Yeah, it's pretty selfish actually because I learn so much. But it was really nice to hear from all of them, and just to know that I might have made a difference. I can't tell you how heartwarming that was.

Elizabeth DeLamater 53:09

That's great.

Christopher Lee. 53:11

I'm trying to find them all now and say "Thank you, thank you, thank you." It really is an amazing gift that everybody gave to me when they reached out and said, "Hey, I'm watching over you." It's kinda cool.

Elizabeth DeLamater 53:28

Yeah. Well I'm so glad that people were able to say thank you to you for what you've already given them.

Christopher Lee. 53:41

Yeah, I guess they felt it, too. It was certainly an amazing time in that respect.

Elizabeth DeLamater 53:49
Yeah, yeah.

Christopher Lee. 53:43
And I loved getting to hearing about people and what they're doing. The, you know, one of the interesting things was that all of the nitty gritty details about what the doctors doing and saying and the news about that, of course, I wasn't being too forthcoming on that. Just because I thought, "Oh, it's kind of boring. Who cares?" But, overall, I think people could tell when I was, sort of, fixed. Healed, if you will.

Elizabeth DeLamater 54:26
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 54:27
And that was definitely stuff that should be shared. I wonder sometimes, I mean, people have said, some people have said to me "This was a private thing and why do you want to tell people about it?" Exactly that reason.

Elizabeth DeLamater 54:41
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 54:43
So that nobody feels like they have to suffer alone.

Elizabeth DeLamater 54:49
Yeah.

Christopher Lee. 54:50
The hardest part for me was when I was actually going back to my home. You know, I live on my own.

Elizabeth DeLamater 54:55
Yes, right.

Christopher Lee. 55:01
My doctor was saying, "Fine, but check in." Just getting used to that time was nearly my biggest challenge. But there were people all around just eady to be there.

Elizabeth DeLamater 55:17
Right.

Christopher Lee. 55:19
I never felt completely alone.

Elizabeth DeLamater 55:21
Good. Good.

Christopher Lee. 55:22
And that was important. None of us really are. It's such a thing for, because you know our parents generation and so on, one of the biggest problems is that so many of them get isolated.

Elizabeth DeLamater 55:37

Yes!

Christopher Lee. 55:38

And they feel like there's no one to talk to. How sad is that? Of course there are. There's always somebody to talk to. You just have to be aware of that.

Elizabeth DeLamater 55:49

Right. Yes.

Christopher Lee. 55:51

You can always share. Share everything.

Elizabeth DeLamater 55:57

Well, thank you so very much for doing this. And we should have those other conversations; I love talking to you. Hopefully my students can meet you sometime soon!

Christopher Lee. 56:09

Yeah, anytime! Yeah, these are-- it's a wonderful series you've got here. It was a great idea. Your students are so lucky!

Elizabeth DeLamater 56:21

Oh, that's really nice of you!

Christopher Lee. 56:25

To have somebody who cares. Oh my gosh. It's fantastic.

Elizabeth DeLamater 56:29

Yeah, well, some of us learned the hard way. So,

Christopher Lee. 56:33

Yes. But, here we are, and we can actually change things.

Elizabeth DeLamater 56:38

And I'm so glad you are here. Hooray!

Christopher Lee. 56:42

Thank you. Yeah, me too! Yeah, I plan to be here for a while.

Elizabeth DeLamater 56:47

That is an excellent idea. I love that plan. I support that plan 100%.

Christopher Lee. 56:58

Awesome! So hopefully we get to meet up at a festival again soon. It was so much fun!

Elizabeth DeLamater 57:05

Yes. Okay, good plan, too, another one. And hopefully we'll talk soon.

Christopher Lee. 57:12

Okay, thanks so much, Elizabeth!

Music Cue 57:13

["Pacoca," a flute and guitar piece from Christopher Lee and James Brown's album "Bailar conmigo."]

Elizabeth DeLamater 57:29

You have been listening to the Art Lives podcast. My immense gratitude to Christopher Lee for talking with me and his absolute generosity. Right now, we're listening to Christopher Lee, playing with guitarist, James Brown. This is the first track from their 2011 album "Bailar conmigo."

I have posted links to Chrstopher's website, www.ChristopherLee.ca, on the Art Lives page of my website, ElizabethDeLamater.com. Please give us a rating and comments on Apple Podcasts or Stitcher or both. You probably know this, but more ratings and more comments allow more people to hear us.

Special thanks to Bill Sallak, artist Eduardo Moreno, and composer Nicholaus Meyers. And, of course, thank you so much for listening to Art Lives.

Transcribed by Emma Haley Jensen