



Performing Contemporary Music

An Interview with Patricia Spencer

Flutist Patricia Spencer has made a career of performing contemporary music. On September 26, 2012, she gave the New York premiere performance of Elliott Carter's Flute Concerto at Alice Tully Hall with the Mannes Orchestra. Through her solo and ensemble performances, she has worked with many of the major contemporary composers. She teaches flute and chamber music at Bard College and Hofstra University and is a member of the Da Capo Chamber Players, resident ensemble with the Composition Program of the new Bard College Conservatory of Music.

Were you always drawn to contemporary music?

When I first came to New York to study after graduating from Oberlin, I played for about a year in the American Symphony Orchestra with Sophie Sollberger, a wonderful flutist who was then married to composer and flutist Harvey Sollberger. Sophie invited me to concerts performed by the Group for Contemporary Music, of which Harvey was a founder and co-director, and I accepted with no clue that I was making a life-

changing directional curve. I simply thought I should find out what the composers of my own time are doing. The music was electrifying, mysterious, and wonderfully intense. I heard the works of Davidovsky, Wuorinen, Wolpe, Sollberger, Babbitt, Carter, and many others. I could not begin to understand it. Edgard Varèse's *Ionization* was so exciting I was in tears.

Just choosing a chamber music career, let alone one in contemporary chamber music, made me a trailblazer at a time when everyone defined a flutist's success by his or her orchestral job. This was in the late 60s and early 70s before the appearance of the dozens or perhaps hundreds of active chamber music groups now in the United States.

What skills did you have to develop to play contemporary music?

The technical demands of new music seemed ferocious to me then. These challenges included complete facility with such rhythms as seven in the time of three, extreme dynamics from *pppp* to *ffff*, registral demands (Milton Babbitt's solo flute piece opens with a fortissimo C4 followed by a G6 pianissimo), and a correspondingly wide range of articulations such as sneaking in from *niente* (in all registers) or somehow getting a no-holds barred *sforzando* on the lowest note of the flute.

But in fact musical demands are greater and even more exciting. Musicians should learn the language of each composer, understand the musical forces behind the compositional style, and determine how it all interacts with the background

architecture of the piece. This is already an exciting challenge in a work by Mozart whose language is more familiar. It can become a profound and mysterious search in the case of today's composers.

How did your recent New York premiere of the Elliott Carter Flute Concerto come about?

It was a natural evolution over years. The Da Capo Chamber Players, of which I am a member, has played a lot of Carter's music, including his incredible *Triple Duo*, the quartet for flute, oboe, cello and harpsichord, the premiere of his *Enchanted Preludes*, and many other works. Carter wrote in his program notes for the *Concerto*, "For many years flutists have been asking for a flute concerto," and I was certainly one of those flutists. Soon after I heard he was writing a flute concerto, I saw him at a concert and told him how excited I was. He replied, with a wonderful twinkle, "You can't play it yet!" He explained that the commissioning orchestras, the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Festival, the Berlin Philharmonic, and the Boston Symphony, would give the world and U.S. premiere performances before others could program it.

Sometime after those premieres I had lunch with Joel Lester, a founding member and former violinist with the Da Capo Chamber Players and Dean of the Mannes School of Music. We agreed that the Mannes Orchestra would do the New York premiere of the Carter concerto with me as soloist. The Mannes orchestral players were superb and the conductor, David Hayes, was wonderful to work with. Alice Tully Hall was filled for the premiere. At first I thought the audience was there

primarily to hear the Haydn and Schubert pieces on the program, but I was wrong. The audience was very excited to hear the Carter.

What was it like working with Carter?

Elliott Carter was the most generous of composers, always aware of the instrument while still asking for the highest musical statement. I treasure the memory of many wonderful rehearsal experiences with him. A session on *Scrivo in Vento* stands out as passages which had been difficult somehow magically became easier. He shed light on the musical meaning. It felt a little like speaking a foreign language with a native. The syntax and shapes easily fell into place.

Who are the Da Capo Chamber Players?

The Da Capo Chamber Players was formed in 1970 and presents an annual concert series in New York City. I was a founding member along with American composer Joan Tower and theorist Joel Lester. In 1973 the group won the Naumburg Chamber Music Award and continues to be a leader in building present-day American chamber

Flute Concerto

By Elliott Carter (1908-2012)

Duration: 13 minutes

Publisher: Boosey & Hawkes

Scored for: Solo Flute, Flute/Piccolo, Oboe/English horn, 2 Clarinets with 2nd doubling bass clarinet, Bassoon/contrabassoon, 2 Horns in F, Trumpet in C, Trombone, Strings, Harp, Piano, Percussion

World Premiere: September 9, 2008. YMCA, Jerusalem with Emmanuel Pahud, flute, and Jerusalem International Chamber Music Ensemble, Daniel Barenboim, Conductor.

Composer's Note: "For many years flutists have been asking for a flute concerto, yet I kept putting it off because I felt that the flute could not produce the sharp attacks that I use so frequently. But the idea of the beautiful qualities of the different registers of the instrument and the extraordinary agility attracted me more and more, so when Elena Bashkistrova asked me write something for her and the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Festival, I decided it would be a flute concerto. From mid September, 2007 to March, 2008 ideas and notes for it fascinated me without relief." – Elliott Carter, May 2008



Working with students at Bard College



music, commissioning more than 140 chamber works. The group has toured Russia and Belarus and has recorded over 16 CDs on various labels.

Da Capo is a group very close to my heart. They have been fabulous colleagues who share a commitment to new music. We have dynamite discussions about tempos, balances, dynamics, and program order. These discussions by chamber musicians are very different from those in orchestral rehearsals.

The current members are Curtis Macomber, violin; Meighan Stoops, clarinet; James Wilson, cello; and Blair McMillen, piano. Besides touring overseas, we have also toured in the U.S. The group frequently spends several days at a host campus, playing and recording pieces by student composers as well as giving masterclasses and discussions on contemporary repertoire and rehearsal techniques. Our next concert on this year's series in Merkin Concert Hall will be June 6, titled *Pierrot at 100!* presented in honor of the 100th anniversary season of Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*. We will perform the landmark classic with soprano Lucy Shelton as well as a new work also titled *Pierrot lunaire* by Mohammed Fairouz, written for the occasion.

What is it like to work with composers of commissioned pieces?

The interaction with composers can get pretty hairy as they are often nervous about the birth of a new piece. The rehearsals also provide a wonderful opportunity for musical growth and technical development. When George Perle was writing his *Sonata a quattro* for Da Capo, he called me to ask if the alto flute could flutter tongue on a B7. I tried

it and told him, "Sure, it's no problem." When we received his piece, however, I found out the note was to be played *pianissimo*. The best part is that the phrase was so beautiful, and the flutter tongue such a perfect sound for the chord underneath, that I learned to do it.

What were your early musical experiences?

My earliest training was singing in a church choir conducted by my father when I was seven. Two years later I started piano lessons with the wife of the school band director. Two years after that my father went to the band director and said, "My daughter wants to study an instrument. What do you have?" To which the director replied, "We have a school flute, since one of the flutists just graduated."

The band director and his wife, James and Inga-Lill Wilson, were immensely important to my musical development. They took me to concerts (when there were any, in my small town), recommended flute lessons with the teacher at Ithaca College (since Mr. Wilson was himself a trumpet player), and hired me to babysit for their children, which meant I could spend the evening listening to their record collection.

I was in high school when I began lessons with the teacher at Ithaca College, David Berman. He taught me how to be demanding of myself in practice sessions and how to find the musical shape of a phrase.

What do you teach in your studio?

My students cover the whole spectrum. I teach flute and chamber music part-time at two schools, Bard College and Hofstra University. The Da Capo

Chamber Players are also in residence with the Bard Conservatory where we work with wonderfully talented young composers. I have creative, highly original Bard College flute majors along with philosophy and other majors who want music and the flute in their lives.

Hofstra University students are most often music education majors. This field is so important, and they are a pleasure to teach since they are professionally interested in the process. In ensembles there, I routinely ask the seniors to teach the freshman. I often learn something as well from their casual contemporary phrases and approaches that sometimes produce better results than my carefully chosen words and specific explanations.

A recent junior flute recital at Hofstra included George Crumb's challenging *Idyll for the Misbegotten*, for flute and three percussionists. My private studio in New York City includes young professionals preparing big recitals and chamber concerts, as well as dedicated amateurs who are also preparing chamber concerts.

My annual flute retreat seminar at Bard College also attracts a wide spectrum from professionals trying out unfamiliar contemporary repertoire to college majors and dedicated amateurs who are adventurous and game to try new repertoire and techniques. We stay in a villa run by Franciscan nuns as a retreat facility, take walks down to the picturesque Hudson River, and spend time listening to new recordings brought in by the seminar participants.

Do you play music from other style periods?

I love to play traditional repertoire. At the NFA New York Convention "Telemann-athon," organ-

ized by John Solum, I played three duo sonatas with Carol Wincenc. At Bard I have performed duo recitals with Tara O'Connor, playing works by Johann Sebastian Bach, Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, and even Franz Doppler.

Who influenced you musically?

Robert Willoughby was my primary teacher at Oberlin. I was unbelievably fortunate to have been accepted to Oberlin and work with a great teacher with such a clear methodology. I still start every practice session and lesson with his tongueless attacks and other exercises I learned from him. He gave his students ways to find musical shapes and communicate harmonic structure. He always trusted our musicality, and we grew to trust ourselves because he did. The more I teach, the more I realize how hard he worked with me.

Another major influence and mentor was oboist Josef Marx. His Saturday evening chamber music gatherings helped me learn to sightread and to discover unpublished repertoire (worthy and not) that helped my understanding of the great music of the surrounding era. His charge to "find the best composers of your generation" and champion them is something I am still trying to accomplish. His Saturday night gatherings have inspired copy-cat chamber music evenings hosted by my husband and me on summer Saturdays in our Winnipeg home. In these gatherings we also copy the quartet playing tradition of the Viennese as Mozart, Haydn, Dittersdorf, and Vanhal played together regularly.

Marcel Moyse, whose Vermont seminars I attended for many years, was also an important influence



Patricia Spencer and composer Thea Musgrave

in my playing. I routinely use his book of opera melodies to help find the right tone colors for contemporary phrases. I use the expanding interval exercises from his *De La Sonorite* to develop secure attacks for multiphonics. I am still trying to figure out how he got such a beautiful sound on E^b5.

What composers have influenced you?

Joan Tower was the first composer I asked for a flute piece. I was beyond thrilled when she agreed. Joan and I played together in the Da Capo Chamber Players for the group's first 15 years. We performed her *Flute Concerto* together (she played her piano reduction), and subsequently I played the concerto with an orchestra for the Nashville NFA convention. Joan still works closely with the Da Capo Chamber Players in our residencies at Bard College and Conservatory. She always wants performers to think "off the page," to approach every piece as a living, breathing entity, and to take risks with it. She says that if a ritard or accelerando feels right for the piece, even if the composer didn't put it there, try it. If it works, keep it.

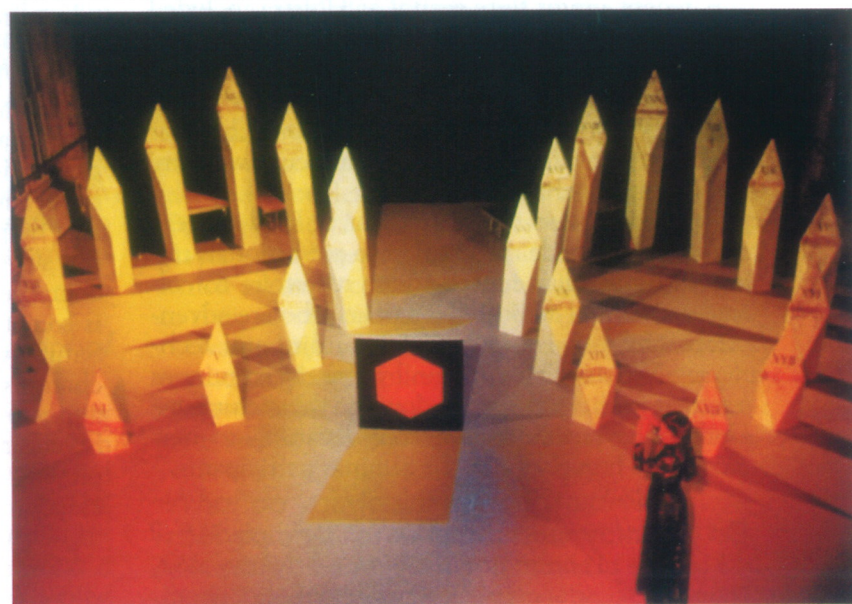
Composers are all different, especially on that topic. George Perle, a wonderful composer, was supremely committed to what he had put on the page. Unlike many others, he actually composed a performance of his works in his head and wanted performers to line up with it. George's deep theoretical knowledge of other repertoire was very exciting. While working with George on his solo flute piece, *Monody I*, we started talking

about Varèse's *Density 21.5* in particular about whether it was a B or B[#] in measure 23. Both Thomas Nyfenger and Harvey Sollberger reported that Varèse told them it should be a B-natural on the triplets. However a later edition made during Varèse's lifetime did not include that correction. George commented that "composers are not always right about these things," meaning that Varèse could have been wrong about his own piece. An extraordinary statement, given George's strong ties to his printed page. George then said he thinks the B-natural on the triplet is correct.

Shulamit Ran is another composer who has been a particular joy to work with. Her *Mirage*, written for the Da Capo Chamber Players, has become a contemporary classic. While she was writing it, I sent her a note asking her to please use the expressive capability of the flute, rather than that of the bird or butterfly role. She said this idea lined up perfectly with her concept, and the resulting piece has a profoundly expressive flute part. Further, the incredible concerto she wrote for the NFA, *Voices*, expands her concept of the vocal, expressive flute voice as well as including a wonderfully playful, exuberant final piccolo movement.

Meeting with Karlheinz Stockhausen (in Kürten, Germany) in preparation for my U.S. premiere of *Katinkas Gesang als Luzifers Requiem* was another experience that has shaped my musical understanding. Stockhausen does not put dynamics into his electronic parts because every concert hall has different acoustics, and the dynamics of the electronics must be guided by those acoustics (just as we adjust our flute dynamics and attacks to different halls). Stockhausen was absolutely passionate about the placement of the speakers around the hall. Kathinka Pasveer, an incredible flutist with his ensemble who is now also the sound

Stockhausen's "Kathinka's Chant"



projectionist for Stockhausen performances all over the world, worked with me every day for a week on the piece.

Thea Musgrave is another giant on the list of composers with whom I have been fortunate to collaborate. While she was writing *Narcissus* (commissioned by the NEA for flutists Robert Willoughby, Wendy Rolfe, Harvey Sollberger, and myself), Thea asked if I could meet with her and try out some of the delay system effects that she planned. The delay system influenced her musical choices. She had listened to what the system could do, namely reflect whatever the flute did, and that sparked the idea of *Narcissus* and his reflection. It was exciting to assist her in this process.

Judith Shatin is a composer whose work resonates with my own vision of what I try to say with a flute. Her *Kairos* expands the voice of the flute, both electronically and with extended techniques. Harvey Sollberger's *Riding the Wind I* was an early landmark example of opening up the flute's voice through extended techniques. It included a huge variety of air sounds, key clicks, and tongue rams, that all combine somehow to communicate a dramatic urgent musical message. Harvey, a flutist himself of course, coached the piece within an inch of his life, to my eternal betterment and gratitude.



Da Capo Chamber Players

Arthur Kreiger's works for flute and electronics are all about bridging from the flute into the world of electronics and back. As we worked together in the studio, he discovered ways of melting from our world to his that are continually fascinating to me every time I play the pieces.

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What are your goals?

One of Da Capo's major projects next season will be the premiere of Shirish Korde's chamber opera, *Phoolan Devi: Bandit Queen*, depicting real, re-imagined and often contradictory events in the life of a woman revered by some and reviled by others in contemporary Indian society. The work examines caste, gender, and violence against women, issues of particular relevance in light of recent events in India. I also plan more contemporary concerto and solo flute performances.

This coming November I will play the Chinese premiere of Ge Gan-ru's flute concerto with the Shanghai Philharmonic Orchestra. The concerto is titled *Fairy Lady Meng Jiang*, and depicts a tragic tale of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC). It is in four movements: *Savage Land*, *Gourd Girl*, *Abduction*, and *Crying Down the Wall*. It is an unbelievably expressive and strong work that was written in 2008 and premiered in Spain in 2009 by the flutist Sharon Bezaly and Orquesta Castillo y Leon under the direction of Enrique Diemecke. The Shanghai performance will be part of the 2013 Shanghai International Arts Festival.

What practice techniques do you use to learn contemporary music?

No matter how slowly, or in which octave, or whether you whistle some notes, singing is a proven technique for internalizing a musical shape that feels odd or foreign. I also suggest improvising on unfamiliar pitches or rhythms. Take the pitches of a phrase that is eluding you and rearrange them into several other configurations. Then gradually put them back into the composer's shapes. Be careful, you might get the composing bug.

Is there a particular role that the flute plays in contemporary music?

Flutists are playing an exemplary role in the contemporary music field by commissioning, organizing new music concerts, and performing this music at an inspiring level. The number of new music concert series and groups headed by flutists is awesome: Toronto's New Music Concerts (Robert Aitken), the New York New Music Ensemble (Jayn Rosenfeld), Bridgehampton Chamber Music Society (Marya Martin), the Imani Winds (Valerie Coleman), the Seattle

Premiere Performances of Flute Works

Elliott Carter, *Flute Concerto* – New York premiere, Alice Tully Hall, September 28, 2011 with the Mannes Orchestra conducted by David Hayes.

Shulamit Ran, *Voices* (concerto for flute, alto flute, piccolo and orchestra) – World premiere, NFA Convention August 2000, conducted by Ransom Wilson

Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Kathinka's Chant as Lucifer's Requiem* – U.S. premiere, Miller Theatre, NYC, May 20, 1991

Thea Musgrave, *Narcissus* for flute and digital delay – U.S. premiere, Merkin Concert Hall, NYC, March 1988

Eric Chasalow, *Flute Concerto (Three Love Poems)* for flute with ensemble – World premiere, Merkin Concert Hall, November 2006

Elliott Carter, *Enchanted Preludes* for flute and cello – World premiere, Merkin Concert Hall, May 16, 1988 with André Emelianoff, cello

Harvey Sollberger, *Riding the Wind I* for amplified flute with chamber ensemble – World premiere, Alice Tully Hall, April 25, 1974 with the Da Capo Chamber Players

Chamber Players (Paul Taub), International Contemporary Ensemble (Claire Chase), and of course Da Capo to name just a few.

Editor's Note: for more information go to www.PatriciaSpencerFlute.com

NY Flute Club Winners

The New York Flute Club announces the winners of the Flute Fair competition held on March 17, 2013. They are 1st place - Rosie Gallagher, 2nd place - Christina Hughes, 3rd place - Eun Ji Oh. These talented musicians will perform along with the winners of our Young Musicians Contest on Sunday, April 21, at 5:30 PM in the Engleman Recital Hall, Baruch Performing Arts Center, 25th Street & Lexington. www.nyfluteclub.org