



Low Flutes in the Time of Locusts

by Tessa Brinckman

In Part One I shared a few resources and thoughts on going back to the drawing board, which we all need to keep our low flute playing honest. Part Two is probably one of my favorite topics, as it invokes the world we live in, and your place in it. In keeping with zero pressure and maximum curiosity, visit the links, and let them percolate. The music world as we know it is not going back to what it was. Grab that pillow, scream out your exhaustion, and let's begin.



Part Two: Recreating the Canon - Identity, Repertoire, Commissions and Curations

Identity

Many classical musicians and critics are on a fiery mission to deconstruct the identity of western "classical" music and its "canon". I think this is a great time for low flutists to rethink issues of identity and repertoire. Low flutes occupy less cultural space than the C flute, relegated to being exotic animals. Yet we are more than scaffolding for flute choirs.

Let's go there:

- Kelly Wilson addresses the issue of claiming space as flutists, This is especially useful for low flutists who want to go beyond exoticism in the margins.

- Shanna Pranaitis wants us to widen our perceptions and use of sound, framing it as sound inclusivity vs. sound exclusion.
- John Hong goes through some of the controversy around repertoire databases in The Institute for Composer Diversity: White Leadership, DEI Initiatives, and Ethical Advocacy. He describes how well-meaning organizations can do more harm than good if they operate without collaboration or accountability from the people they claim to represent.
- George Lewis explores the decolonization of new music - his interview with Will Robin on Sound Expertise is a great discussion on identity, improvisation and "hybridity". By the way, Sound Expertise is a fabulous podcast on all aspects of music.
- Phil Ewell stirs up the musicology world, tackling music theory's white racial frame in a six part series. If you like entertaining videos, enjoy Adam Neely's Music Theory and White Supremacy.

In other words, examine your ideas around today's music and low flutes. If extended techniques make you feel self-conscious, irritable, and like Aunt Sally, don't worry! Embracing new sounds and forms is about trust, and giving in to curiosity. Sound is happening all around you, all the time. All of it can become music, given the right shape and attention from performers and listeners. The work of the late, great Pauline Oliveros, feminist, composer, accordionist and Deep Listening pioneer, is a great portal to understanding unconventional music, and Oliveros even has a Ted Talk.

When good composers include the listener and the performer as owners in the process, magic can happen. Nobody wants to be treated like a utility box. We need mutuality, as our personal and political identities shift.

Repertoire

Low flutes are young instruments, so we are still building the culture. That means that you are an important part of the process.

Some thoughts:

- Finding music that resonates, especially for low flutes, can take time. Enjoy. Get inspiration from the links in the **Identity** section of this article, and also links to flutists with low flute repertoire

lists in Part One - Back to the Drawing Board. Composer Brandon Scott Rumsey has set forth some great composer lists and advice on how to use them. Countries all over the world have funded their own cultural identities and composers, accruing all kinds of flute repertoire eg. New Zealand or Australia. Social media has huge networks of musicians who share repertoire and advice. Please (please) do your own research, so that you also become a resource for others.

Hear the recording on YouTube: [Wiri](#)



Recording "Wiri" by Abby Pinkerton with Horomona Horo, in the presence of the composer, with me playing alto flute, during my artistic residency at Waikato University, New Zealand (2017).

Horo, a highly regarded tohunga, is playing Maori instruments known as taonga pūoro, which have very specific spiritual demands and patterns. "Wiri" is one example of repertoire that explores how differing music cultures can work side-by-side, without becoming subsumed.

- Connect with living composers through their websites or social media. Even if they have not published any low flute works, there may be some pieces that translate well from other instruments. Listen attentively, ask questions, tell them what you enjoy about their work, and your intentions for performing it.
- New works need the same intense theatrical arc as traditional repertoire. Be creative in your analysis of how materials reshape themselves, and what elements move between background and foreground. You can also draw from your knowledge, say, of theatre, mathematics, literature or art. Your analysis should inspire you, and relate strongly to your intuitive "read" of the work.

- Be systematic when you're challenged by playing low flutes. They are unwieldy, temperamental beasts, so don't be in a hurry. Keep your process clear and simple. Make notes on how you are adjusting your technique, and use tape, marker pens and photos to explore your optimum flute set-up. Again, low flutes are young instruments. We are literally creating the culture around how to play them.

Commissions

If you're yearning for music tailored to you, jump in:

- Apply for grants to commission a composer. It is time-consuming and highly competitive, especially now. Contact your local arts commission, which has a ton of information and workshops about applying, and learn how this process can best work for you.
- Start a co-commission. This means a group of people pay to have a piece written for them. I highly recommend this, as it can properly fund the composer, at low individual costs, with little or no grant-writing. Composers all differ in how they like to communicate, collaborate and deliver the new work. [Alex Shapiro](#) is a great example of a composer who systematically involves all her commissioners in the process, even with complex needs and wants. Be very clear about your own desires and boundaries. It's very (very) important that you establish an excellent working relationship, and create a legal contract that covers all your terms. [New Music USA](#) is a [mega-resource](#) to think through these issues.
- Join [Flute New Music Consortium](#) to be a co-commissioner. You don't have to struggle through grants and contracts, as it's all set up. You pay your share, you become a co-commissioner of their selected composer, and you have access to a lot of other compositions through FNMC.

Curation

I feel the same way about curating or designing a concert that I feel about cooking a knock-out meal. It's full of surprises (some you wish you never had!), it has fearless spontaneity and careful design, and you and your guests feel alive, and connected to the things that matter.

Some things to think about:

- We are lucky. Low flutes are an easy sell to audience ears and eyes (program a contrabass flute and they will come). If you want to include high flutes, the contrast goes down well.
- Refresh those those "standard repertoire" pieces that you really want to play by contextualizing them. Old and new works performed in proximity change how the audience perceive them individually, often in subtle ways. Take some risks, think interdisciplinary media (eg. text, video) if you have the horses to make it happen, and think of your concert within a long narrative arc.
- You can subvert dreary classical concert conventions (but anticipate audience reaction, positive or negative, if you do). You don't have to over-explain everything. Program notes are really useful in that people can mull over everything at their own pace. Is your concert a contemplative experience, a boisterous one, or is it casual and chatty? Don't box yourself in.
- Composer Brandon Scott Rumsey notes that even if we curate a "diverse" program, the over-all effect can be lazy, "rather than responsible and humane". Don't tokenize pieces by marginalized composers. Build honest, mutual relationships, do your research, and stay current with critical thinking. It might mean inviting living composers into the process (and paying them for their time). Take some time to think about building your audience, and "community" - who, why and how? [Chamber Music America](#) and the [National Flute Association](#) has sponsored great workshops on all of this in the last few years.
- Chris White explains why we should [full-name famous composers when we program our concerts](#).
- Try to perform in venues where licenses have been bought from PROs, (publishing rights organizations like ASCAP, BMI) - universities are often the best for this. Performances covered by a license earn money for the composer. Send your programs to the composer so they can submit them to be paid by their PRO. If your venue does not have a license you can buy a blanket one to cover your concert in any venue. Also know that if you are an American Federation of Musicians union member, you can use MPTF funding to pay performers, for online, as well as in-person, concerts.

- Low flutes are vulnerable to bad acoustics, and may need amplification. Choose your room and electronic equipment well (I go into this in Part Three of the Low Flutes series). Figure out if your venue offers enough comfort for both performers and listeners, whether it's the temperature, seating, atmosphere etc., and come up with solutions that support your musical design. I read music from an iPad Pro, using Forscore, and therefore the lighting is never an issue. Lighting is genuinely terrible in many venues. Using an iPad solves so many problems with page turns, you can make edits, and you can also practice with an mp3 accompaniment.

Music = relationship. Don't be afraid to ask big questions about where we're all going, and what you really want to say. Chances are, this is on everyone's mind.

Next time -

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Part Three: Electrickery - Amplification, Sound Processing, and Recording



New Zealand flutist Tessa Brinckman has been described by critics as a “flutist of chameleon-like gifts” and “virtuoso elegance” (Gramophone), an “excellent...flutist” (Willamette Week) and “highlight of Portland” (New Music Box) , who “play(s) her instrument with great beauty and eloquence” (Music Matters New Zealand) . As an interdisciplinary flutist and composer she has premiered over a hundred (and commissioned more than twenty) new works, within many classical music ensembles and concert series in the United States, South Africa, France and New Zealand. Ms. Brinckman has served on the music faculties of various Oregon universities and colleges, and now teaches workshops and masterclasses in the USA and abroad. Projects in 2021 include a collaboration+residency with flutist Jane Rigler at the

University of Colorado Springs (“Re-assembled and Embodied: Flute Music by Women in Parallel Empires”); recording for an upcoming solo album (New Focus Recordings) featuring artists from New Zealand, France and the USA; collaboration with animators Miles Inada and Devyn McConachie for an upcoming animation short; Bandcamp single releases, international concert collaborations and video with her flute and percussion duo, Caballito Negro.

www.tessabrinckman.com