



The Magic Flutes

The Vermont Virtuosi Flute Ensemble presents a program of musical delights April 9 at Krinovitz Hall.

By Benjamin Pomerance

Photos courtesy of the Vermont Virtuosi Flute Ensemble.

There's no logical reason why Laurel Ann Maurer ever picked up a flute. As a child, she veered within a hair's breadth of becoming a lute player. That was the instrument that really kicked off this entire odyssey. Her violinist mother had started her on piano, but Maurer never particularly enjoyed the lessons. Her mother may have hoped that her daughter would follow in her path of violin study, but that voyage never happened.

Instead, it was an offhand remark that ignited a lifetime of study. For a couple of young years, all things about England fascinated the then 8-year-old's fantasy with no explicable origin. One day, mother and daughter were watching a television program in their Seattle home. At one point, the show featured a woman singing *Greensleeves*



and playing the lute. And then Maurer's mother casually uttered the words that changed everything: "Isn't that a beautiful English folk song?"

At the sound of her most favored nation's name, Maurer instantly took action. First, she asked her mother whether the woman on the television screen was playing an English instrument. Her mother responded that people did indeed play the lute in England, particularly in bygone days. Then Maurer posed her follow-up query, whether any other English instruments were in circulation today.

"She said, 'Oh, the flute,'" Maurer remembers of her mother's answer. "I don't know if she really knew anything about where the flute came from. It was probably just an answer that she thought would satisfy my curiosity for the moment." She laughs. "But it actually had the opposite effect. If the flute was an English instrument, then I wanted to play it." She laughs again. "And so, I guess you can say that my silly little childish whim changed my life."

She's no longer infatuated with England. Still, that early zest for the British Isles has translated into a different passion, one that has consumed much of her physical and emotional resources ever since that fateful day. "It's a constant honing and developing of your sound," she says of her instrument's learning curve. "When you play the flute, you don't play through a reed. You rely on your muscles, your insides and your outsides, to produce a sound. Your whole body is part of the process. So you become sort of obsessed with it. You can't help it."

Yet if the tone of one flute is worthy of obsession, the sonic menu of an entire choir of flutes seems to merit an absolute fixation. And for more than a year, Maurer has devoured her fill of this feast. On April 9, she will arrive at SUNY Plattsburgh in the company of her Vermont Virtuosi Flute Ensemble, a group of professional players weaving some of chamber music's most memorable resonances. "When you bring these sounds together, it's just magical," Maurer states. "I know that statement sounds kind of cliché. But there is no other way to describe it."

Indeed, the consortium represents the entire auditory infrastructure. There's the tiny piccolo chirping brightly in the attic. There's the gargantuan contrabass flute harrumphing from deep down in the cellar. And there are the concert, alto, and bass flutes spanning the corridors of every level in between the two outer voices. To Maurer, the effect of all the flutes playing together is similar to the sound of a densely clustered chord on a pipe organ.

Yet even that analogy, she quickly admits, doesn't quite capture such a moment. "It's heavenly," she finally exclaims. "I really don't know how to say it any other way."

In the beginning, of course, such an experience seemed like little more than a pipe dream. "After I told my mother

that I wanted to learn how to play the flute, she started me in a band program," Maurer recalls. "And I simply couldn't get a sound out of that instrument for a month."

Thus began the quest that still continues on, that still-ever-present scavenger hunt for the flute's promised enchantment. To reduce her daughter's initial frustrations, Maurer's mother hired a private teacher. Under that tutor's guidance, the instrument's mysteries began to slowly

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unfold for the increasingly devoted novice. By the time she reached high school, she was hooked. Lessons from a particularly dynamic band director sealed the deal.

She ran the audition gauntlet near the end of her high school career. Opportunities beyond Seattle emerged. And the best of those opportunities required crossing the country, moving into the musical heartbeat of New York City to study with the pedagogues who interested her most — first Samuel Baron, then the more mercurial Julius Baker. "Sam Baron was very analytical, very interesting," she remembers. "With [Baker], you were more on your own. He was incredible. But he wanted to see how much you could pick up and figure out."

Evidently, enough of those lessons permeated her psyche. The proof was in the playing. She crossed the country again, moving to Utah with her then-husband, and wound up winning an audition for the Salt Lake Symphony's principal flute position. And that was just the beginning. She founded a contemporary music series. She performed at Carnegie Hall in 1994. Working with compositional luminaries — Joan Tower, Ellen Taaffe Zwillich, Jennifer Higdon, Augusta Read Thomas, and more — she commissioned new solo works for her instrument.

A decade ago, she changed homes again, moving with her husband to Vermont. The move jolted Maurer from an artistic landscape where she had flourished, opening her eyes to a different artistic reality in the Green Mountain State. "In Vermont, I saw this sad situation where the flute players didn't really get together," she recalls. "They were really spread out around the state, and they often didn't play with one another, which I thought was too bad." Then, when her marriage ended in divorce, she found herself looking for that artistic camaraderie more than ever.

Yet the rebuilding began with surprising swiftness. At a Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble rehearsal in 2009, she met a man named David Gunn, a composer who proudly counted himself among the purveyors of Vermont's "non-pop" movement. Before long, they realized that they shared a love for each other as well as a love for music. For the last couple of years, Gunn's output of flute-centric compositions has increased dramatically, designing cleverly named new pieces for his wife to perform.

And together, they decided to carve a new performing arts opportunity within the state that became their home. "Whenever you move to a new place, it's a little tough getting started again," Maurer explains. "So we decided, through both of our musical frustrations, that we were going to do something different."



The result of their efforts is Vermont Virtuosi, the chamber music concert series that the husband-and-wife collaborators launched in 2013. “We’ve loved it,” Maurer says. “It’s inspired David to write for a lot of different chamber ensembles. And I’ve been able to meet wonderful artists from across Vermont.”

Including, at long last, some of the region’s flute players. Along with Anne Janson, a member of the Vermont Symphony Orchestra’s flute section since 1983, Maurer began asking flutists on both sides of Lake Champlain about forming a flute choir. To her delight, five invitees joined them: Orchestra of Indian Hill principal flutist Melissa Mielens, Montpelier educator Hilary Goldblatt, Music at Orchard Hill founder Alison Hale, SUNY Plattsburgh flute professor Robin Cameron-Phillips and Schenectady-based pedagogue and performer Norman Thibodeau.

All of which left only one further obstacle to surmount: what to play. Through the centuries, very few classical composers ever crafted pieces specifically for a bevy of flutes. Consequently, the conductor-less ensemble’s programs tend to be heavy on carefully chosen transcriptions. “You see a lot of flute choir music transcribed by flutists themselves,” Maurer points out. “It’s really out of necessity. There aren’t a lot of pieces for us otherwise.”

In Plattsburgh, this trend stays true to form. The ensemble’s bill of fare includes all-flute arrangements of J.S. Bach’s *Violin Concerto in E Major*, with the soloist’s theme tossed among virtually every flute in the ensemble; Christoph Willibald Gluck’s melodious *Dance of the Blessed Spirits*, with Goldblatt showcased in a solo role; Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s volatile *The Flight of the Bumblebee*. There are flute choir settings of three movements from Gustav’s Holst’s *The Planets*. There’s a transcription of flute and piano variations by Frederic Chopin.

Still, there are a couple of new creations in the mix. One is *La Milonga*, a work of Spanish flair from Los Angeles-based composer Christopher Caliendo. The other recently developed selection comes from a composer whom Maurer knows quite well: Gunn’s *Fall In Arches*, completed in 2012.

Someday, Maurer hopes that the balance of the programs will shift to encompass more original works. Already, she’s recruited at least one believer. Not long after meeting Gunn, she handed a flute choir recording to

the composer. Soon, Gunn had heard enough arrangements to last five lifetimes. Inspired by the obvious need, he designed his first flute ensemble work, *The Fifth Universal Principle of Alignment*. That year, the composition won the National Flute Association’s prize for best new

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composition, earning Gunn a trip to Las Vegas and giving flute ensembles a new entry in their catalog.

And for the composers who may join Gunn in filling this void, Maurer offers a kernel of advice. “I think the biggest problem today is that technology makes it too easy to write music,” she states. “You set your keyboard for the flute sound and you think that you know how a flute sounds. In [music software program] Midi, the flute sound is always the same. But that’s not how it is with a real flute. You need to get to know the flute’s timbre in its different registers. Once you understand that, then you can write something that uses the instrument to its fullest.”

All of which comes back to the reason why Maurer’s enthralment with this instrument remains vibrant. It’s about using the instrument to its fullest. And it’s not a trip that she makes alone. There are six flutists who collaborate with her in this distinctive ensemble. There are the composers whom Maurer hopes will someday write for this instrumentation. And there is everyone whom she hopes to attract something that she discovered through a childhood whim and clung steadfastly to through everything ever since: the magic of the flutes.

The Vermont Virtuosi Flute Ensemble performs on April 9 at 7:30 p.m. in Krinovitz Auditorium on the campus of SUNY Plattsburgh. Admission is free. For more information, call (518) 564-2243 or (518) 564-2000.