

Flute Talk

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Laurel Ann Maurer
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Remembering Mariano



“When Baker gave instructions, it was like a light bulb going off every single time.”



Laurel Ann Maurer with her five-year old student Racquel Whatcott of Provo, Utah.

Teaching with Creativity

An Interview with Laurel Ann Maurer

by Victoria Jicha

Laurel Ann Maurer first came to my attention through her many impressive recordings. Dedicated to contemporary music, she has won awards from the National Association of Composers–U.S.A., the National Flute Association, and the National Orchestra of New York among many others, and has appeared as a soloist with orchestras around the world.

■ **When did you begin playing the flute?**

I was born in California, but we moved frequently for my father's job. I started flute at the age of nine in an elementary band program. I took private lessons and enjoyed playing in various groups, but it wasn't until high school that I really decided to make music my profession. I studied with Dorothy Bjarnason in Seattle. She was a wonderful, warm-hearted woman, who taught solid basics and gave great advice that I still remember to this day. She gave me a pretty realistic view of what being a professional musician would be like, and I have always appreciated her honesty.

Dorothy got me through those teenage years, helped me prepare for college auditions, and taught me how to select schools and teachers. She suggested that I go East, which is how I ended up at Stony Brook, where I studied with Sam Baron. I received master and doctorate degrees at the the City University of New York in Queens and then studied with Jeanne Baxtresser and Julius Baker. These four teachers influenced me the most.

■ **What lessons did you take away from each of these teachers?**

Bjarnason gave me emotional strength, support, wisdom, and direction. She taught the basics but also let me do my own thing. She encouraged me to be creative and experiment and only stepped in to provide guidance when I needed it. Sam Baron was a delightful gentleman in every sense of the word. From him I learned how to work in an analytical way. He was a very intellectual and encouraging teacher. I admire Jeanne Baxtresser so much and look to her as the finest example of perfection and refinement in flute playing. I feel her artistry embodies the highest of musical standards.

Julius Baker was fabulous and just the right teacher for me. He was open, spontaneous, and tried to shape students to be themselves, a trait that takes a lot of intuitiveness. While I played for him he listened, watched, and waited, only speaking when I needed to hear something. When he gave instructions, they were monumental, and I remember them all. It was like a light bulb going off every single time. When he spoke, you listened because he did not repeat himself!

I remember one time I was playing Jolivet's *Chant de Linos*; the section began on a sequence of ascending notes. I kept getting stuck in the middle of the passage and wasn't getting the sound I wanted. Baker looked at me and said, "Change your tone." I relaxed, produced the tone, and boom – I did it. He knew exactly what to say. I watched him teach several of his other students; he treated each one as an individual. He never tried to make anyone into a Julius Baker, Jr. type of player.



Julius Baker with Mauer in Carmel, California in 1986

■ **How did you begin commissioning composers to write flute music for you?**

While at C.U.N.Y./Queens College, I got married and after graduation we lived in New York City, where I freelanced, taught, and studied with Baxtresser and Baker. I decided to secure the help of an agent and I found Jeffrey James, who encouraged me to start commissioning composers to write music for me.

For my 1994 Carnegie Hall debut, I commissioned two composers to write new works. Meyer Kupferman wrote *Chaconne Sonata*, one of the finest flute sonatas I have ever heard. It is rich, well-developed, and a tour-de-force. (I have recorded it on Albany Records). Augusta Read Thomas was the other composer. Finding her involved a strange set of coincidences.

Jeffrey James had encouraged me to commission a second work for the debut, and I mentioned this to a friend. The friend said that one of her friends had a sister who was a composer. I had no idea that the sister was Augusta Read Thomas. (Thomas was in residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra until recently). I contacted her, and she sent examples of her music and came to hear me perform in Boston at the 1993 N.F.A. Convention. She was inspired to write an unaccompanied alto flute piece, and *Angel Shadows* was born (4-tay records).

The remainder of the debut program included works by Joan Tower and Ellen Zwillich, and I had the great fortune to receive coaching from both composers for the event. It was truly a highlight of my life and career, and I was fortunate to receive a wonderful review from the *New York Times*.

Over the years, I have felt a responsibility to keep new works coming into the repertoire and have



Augusta Read Thomas, Ellen Zwilich, Maurer, and Meyer Kupferman after her Carengie Hall debut in 1994.

commissioned other composers. When I heard Jennifer Higdon perform a concert of her music at the New York N.E.A. Convention, I asked her to write something for me. Kim Ashwell, a fellow flutist and friend from Montana, and I decided to commission Higdon, and we were put on her waiting list. A couple of years later, a very close flutist friend died and I realized I wanted Higdon to write a piece that would express the sorrow of this person's life. It was

really the first time I had asked a composer to write with a specific idea in mind. She agreed to write the piece and flutists have *Legacy*, a stunning addition to the flute repertoire (4-tay records).

Other commissions include Jeff Manookian's piccolo concerto, *Khachkar* for alto flute and orchestra, and more than one work for my flute, clarinet and piano trio. Because of the lack of repertoire for this combination, I began asking composers to write trios. So far Kupferman has written *O North Star*, Manookian and Frank Levy each wrote a Trio, Dana Paul Perna wrote *Orange Set*, and Michael Carnes wrote *Proper Motion*. I have also recorded 12 C.D.s, and two more are in the editing process. One will include some of the commissioned trios.

■ **You have given several performances in Armenia. What led to these trips?**

Jeff Manookian is a Salt Lake City composer of Armenian descent. In 2001 he wrote a beautiful flute concerto for me. He had also written a 50-minute oratorio, *Symphony of Tears*, that is based on the Armenian genocide of 1917. I learned a lot about Armenian history from this piece. He

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sent the music to Armenia so the Armenian Opera National Orchestrato could rehearse for the recording that was planned. We were scheduled to leave September 16, 2001; then the September 11 catastrophe happened. Originally, a Salt Lake City choir was to make the trip with us, but the choir members were terrified and voted not to go. Jeff and I felt that flying would probably be safer than before the tragedy, so we rebooked the flight. The Armenian Philharmonic Association agreed to provide a choir. The recording could not be postponed, because a renovation was planned for Khachaturian Hall, and we would have to wait years to record there unless we did it right then. The people in Armenia were so gracious and treated us like royalty. They dedicated the concert to the victims of 9/11. The following year we returned to Armenia to record Jeff's piccolo concerto (see *Flute Talk*, Oct. 2004) and *Khachkar*, an alto flute piece. Two Salt Lake City pianists also made that trip to record Manookian's double piano concerto.

■ **Do you enjoy recording?**

Recording is an extremely time consuming affair. First I select repertoire that I feel I play well and that

people will find interesting. I believe that it helps for a recording to have some type of concept or unifying thread that keeps the listener engaged. After months of practicing the selections, the rehearsals begin with the pianist or other musicians to refine the performance. I prepare extensively.

Once we get into the recording studio, we do a test run and listen to a few minutes of it in the recording booth, to make sure that the sound and balance are correct. I have recorded so often that I know what I am going to sound like. The editing process starts after all the music has been recorded. Because editing is very time-consuming, I don't really enjoy it and try to do as little as possible. The goal is to record each piece three times, so there are options if there is a mistake or a strange noise. I have a concept of how I want each piece to sound, so to get the outcome I want, I really have to be involved in all aspects of the process.

■ **What do you feel are the most important qualities in a teacher?**

I believe that there should be a rapport or emotional connection between teacher and student, so that the student is comfortable and open to sugges-



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tion. I don't mean to imply that teachers should be chummy with students. I think that I am extremely professional, to the point that I am quite demanding, but students understand that I am working for them and have their best interests at heart.

I like to analyze things and suppose that trait came from Mr. Baron. I teach music in an analytical way, even with young students, so they begin to understand what music is made of and how it is constructed. I have always felt that students who don't know what they are doing are handicapped.

Refinement is important to me. I try to communicate it nicely, but I insist that students are very polished, and that they refine their technique and phrasing. Sloppiness is not acceptable. Of course, that came from all of my teachers. If the music doesn't sound good, who will want to listen to it? when *Schmearandos* happen, we go back to basics. I teach students how to practice. When messiness occurs, either they were lazy and didn't practice, or they didn't know how to practice properly. Most of the time it is that they didn't know how.

Over the years I have learned that it is necessary to demonstrate and play the difficult passages with students in order for them to know how to practice by themselves. It is not enough to tell

them to practice or to suggest various rhythmic combinations. The only way to get results is to stop the lesson and practice with them. We drill running passages in 20 different combinations. I have practiced every hard passage there is with my students. I do it with them first, and then have them do it by themselves. Part of that is analyzing. I ask them to figure out the scale or key and help them determine how to break up the difficult passage, group the notes, or try other rhythmic combinations to even out the fingers. Most of this came from Baron and Baker.

I look at each student individually. My job is to listen and try to help them be the best they can be. Each person comes in, and I am there for them, and we work hard so that they can be a better player.

■ **How many students do you have?**

I currently have 30 students, from very young to young adults, although most are school-age children. I am a certified Suzuki teacher and will soon be a Suzuki teacher trainer. I think the Suzuki method has been misunderstood for a long time. Many feel that it is teaching by rote, without individuality or creativity, but nothing could be further from the truth. In many ways the method is more

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of a concept than a method. Dr. Suzuki was a great humanitarian, philosopher, and teacher. Reading his books made me realize that teaching is all about flexibility and creativity.

I have a five-year-old student, who started when she was 3½. In the beginning, five minutes was about the length of her attention span, but now she can go 20 minutes without losing focus – an amazing feat for such a young child. She recently went to her first Suzuki Institute and sat waiting for her turn to play for 2 hours without fussing. She is fascinated by watching the older children play, and can correct herself immediately when she hears a wrong note. She can even pick out melodies by ear.

Learning by ear is wonderful for young children who do not read words yet. They have fun making a sound on an instrument. Then they learn a simple melody, and then they know a piece. We build and build until they have a repertoire of a number of short pieces, learning the basics and building their skills simultaneously. When they are intellectually ready, note reading begins.

I feel extremely fortunate to be a musician. It is a great adventure. Teaching wonderful students,



who are inspiring in their desire for excellence, and collaborating with great flutists and composers has added so much to my musical experiences. †

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