

**Interview with Joanna G'froerer – Principal flute**  
National Arts Centre Orchestra  
*FOURTH STAGE*  
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**Please introduce yourself and tell us your position with NACO.**

Hi. My name is Joanna G'froerer and I'm the principal flutist of the National Arts Centre Orchestra.

**Please explain what your position entails.**

As the principal flute of an orchestra there are many responsibilities. First of all, preparing all of the first flute parts and performing them. These parts often have many solos in them so you're not only an orchestral player in the group but you sometimes come to the forefront as a soloist. You're also in charge of the flute section. In my case I have one colleague so together we make a two-person section. Some of the decisions I have to make would be to do with breathing, where we breathe. Whether we breathe together, or what we call staggering, which is breathing at different times. Any questions that aren't clear in our parts, I as the section leader would address them to the conductor to ask. Other things, are just making sure that the flutes are together and in tune and performing as well as we can. In bigger orchestras you might have three or four people to be in charge of but in ours it's just the two of us [Jean-Guy Brault and myself].

**When and why did you start playing the flute?**

I started to play the flute when I was ten years old. The reason was that our elementary school was starting a band program and that grade level was about the right age to start wind instruments. Before you are around ten years old your fingers really aren't long enough to properly reach the keys on wind instruments so ten years old is really about the right age to start. When I was younger I had studied piano and had done other musical studies but at age ten is when I started playing the flute.

The reason I picked the flute was because I was about to get braces put on my teeth and the flute seemed to be the least painful wind instrument to play with braces. With brass instruments you're playing with your lips up against a mouthpiece and it's really hard. With reed instruments like oboe and clarinet and bassoon you have to clamp down very firmly on a reed. With braces I figured that would really hurt. With the flute your embouchure is really just resting on the lip plate and you blow across it (like this...) You really only have a very little bit of pressure on the bottom lip so it was the least painful to play with braces. The

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flute is also very easy to carry and I'm sure many people pick the flute for that very reason. I had a very long walk to school up hill and it was light to carry.

**Do you come from a musical family?**

Yes, I come from a musical family. My father is still a professional horn player in the Vancouver Symphony and my mother is a professional singer in the Vancouver Chamber Choir. They have been doing that for as long as I can remember.

**Do you play any other instruments?**

I started on piano at age five. I don't play it very much anymore. I find that if I want to practice piano to stay in shape it's very hard on my hands. It's a very different way of using your hands and it's a very repetitive activity and I find that it hurts if I try and play piano too much. But, every once in a while I play for fun. I have a piano in the house. On occasion I also play the piccolo which is a small flute.

**What kind of flute do you play?**

My flute is a Brandon-Cooper flute which is made in Boston. The flute's body is made out of 14 karat gold and the keys, which are a slightly different colour; are silver. A lot of people compliment me on the colour of gold in my flute. It's called a rose gold so it's almost a pink instead of a yellow gold.

One thing that is interesting about my flute is that I have extensions on the keys making the left-hand position a lot more comfortable to play. You normally wouldn't see a flute that looked like this but more and more people are using extensions these days.

[Demonstrates comfortable holding]

Without the left-hand extensions my hand positioning is very awkward and my physiotherapist does not like the position. The extensions really straighten out my wrist. I have been using the extensions for about two years now.

**What is the most difficult thing about playing the flute?**

For me the most difficult part about playing the flute is breathing. Something interesting about the flute that not many people know is that because you are not blowing directly into the flute – you are blowing across it – you actually lose a huge amount of air; it just doesn't enter the instrument to make a sound. I've been told that you need the same amount of air support to play the flute that you would to play the tuba. A lot of wind players take special classes on breathing to

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try and learn to breathe a little more like singers. I've improved my breathing over the years but it's still the hardest thing for me. You have to have a lot of air support to play long sustained phrases without sort of dying off at the end.

For a lot of people when they start the flute the breathing is the hardest part. It can be a challenge to learn how to blow and breath properly and even to learn how to make a sound without hyperventilating.

If you're starting the flute and you find yourself unable to make a sound don't get frustrated. Just keep trying to centre your embouchure and play around with it a little bit in front of the mirror. Try making it smaller and eventually you'll get a sound. It took me about a month when I first started the flute to make a proper sound but after that it was easy. Once you find it you don't lose it.

### **What do you enjoy most about playing the flute?**

I like the sound of the flute. I think it's very similar to the human voice so a lot of the time when I am trying to think of how to play a phrase I think, "How would I sing that?" That's a lot of fun. Also, a lot of times the flute is the highest voice in the orchestra, so it floats on top of all the other instruments. It is a really neat to be heard above every one else. Even if it's just a "colour" it's nice to be there at the top.

### **What are your habits – things you always or never do – before a performance?**

It depends on the performance but sometimes I take a nap before the show if I am feeling low on energy. It's a little weird sometimes going to work at 8:00 at night. You have to be fresh as if you're going into the office at 9:00am. Sometimes in the morning I like to go to the gym and do some cardio work because I find it helps keep my breathing in better shape for the evening. A lot of the time I do last minute practicing. I go over hard parts that I've flagged and work on anything that hadn't been going well. I try and fix these for the show.

### **In terms of the way that you play and feel, what are the differences between playing in the orchestra and being featured as a soloist?**

In a way, playing in orchestra is a lot more complex than playing as a soloist. In the orchestra you're part of a team of, in our case, 47 people. As a principal player sometimes you have a solo line which needs to come forward and be heard and other times you're more of a colour or part of the massive sound. The art is in knowing which you're supposed to be and when you're supposed to be it. Sometimes you will be heard because your sound is nice and high and it just projects. Other times you will have a solo that is lower and you really have to

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work to push the sound through all those 47 people in order to be heard. All of this involves a lot of different kinds of playing, different colours, blending with the people around you, having to play in tune with the people around you. Knowing when to be at the forefront and when to back off and let someone else shine.

When I get to do solo work it's very rewarding, satisfying and very exciting to be at the front of the orchestra showing what you can do. Being a soloist is a very different role and sometimes it's hard to switch from the soloist role and back in to the orchestra role if you have to play in the orchestra on the same show, When you're a soloist your sound is at the forefront all of the time. It's a different kind of playing. You're constantly the soloist and you have to be really present all the time. You never really are in a background blending role.

### **How do you react to or approach media reviews of your performances?**

I tend to trust my own instincts about how a performance has gone. I'm pretty sure when I have played well or when I have played badly. I think I'm a little hard on myself so sometimes when I think I have played badly I still get a nice review, which is nice.

I read the reviews and it's always nice to get one that is a positive. It always makes you feel good. But first of all I rely on my own instincts about it. So, if I know that I have played well and I get a bad review I don't take it so seriously.

### **What advice have you got for a beginner musician learning to play the flute?**

For someone just starting the flute I would say to have patience, especially when it comes to just learning to make that first sound. It's easy to give up in that first period of trying . Keep with it.

Find yourself a really good teacher and practice regularly. Make sure that you pay attention to the building blocks of flute playing like practicing your scales and practicing long tones to make a more beautiful tone and don't rush in to just playing pieces all of the time. Those building blocks , the scales and long tones, etc., will make your pieces sound better.

### **Do you have a practicing strategy?**

When I practice at home I divide my time between practicing long tones and tone development so that my tone stays nice and vibrant and how I like it. I have to do that every day otherwise it goes down the drain. I work on technical things to make sure that my fingers are moving nice and smoothly. Also, there is always work to be done preparing the pieces I will be performing. Usually I will have

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pieces that we are performing that week – very immediate things to work on – and then there are the things coming up a week from now or a month from now that I want to look at for any hard parts to take care of. Additionally there are the long-term projects like solo work. If I know that we have a concerto coming up in six months that is something that is in preparation on the back burner. My practice time is organized by considering all of these things.

**Please demonstrate a good warm up exercise.**

My normal morning warm-up routine consists of exercises that warm up different parts of flute playing. I first start with something technical just to get my fingers moving if they are feeling stiff. I move through the range of the flute.

[On video, Joanna demonstrates a scale]

Then I move on to tone studies {She demonstrates an example]

Again I move through the range of the flute, working on a nice tone. You want it to sound sort of like a bell ringing: nice and clear. Sometimes it feels a bit fuzzy in the morning so you need to get it going.

There are other exercises that I do for flexibility and getting around the different areas of the flute.

[On video, Joanna demonstrates this]

My warm-up routine in the morning takes about a half-hour. It includes all kinds of things for getting my low register sounds nice and big and getting my high register speaking because that can get very squeaky in the morning as well.

[On video, Joanna demonstrates this]

I do different exercises to make sure that the notes come out just by air alone and that I'm not relying on articulation to punch them out.

**What are some practice techniques that you can suggest?**

For practicing technical things I always rely on the metronome. I suggest you always practice things slowly to begin. Reducing the tempo to half-speed is usually where I start when I'm practicing something technical. I slow it down to half-speed on the metronome and practice it quite slow and long. If I have something with a lot of tonguing and short notes I actually play it long and make sure that the sound is good on every note and that it all sounds musical. If you

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speed up something that is technical then the musicality and the sound quality get lost. If you start with something slowly and make sure that it is always musical and good sounding then as you gradually speed it up those qualities will remain.

### **What can a student do to improve his or her tone?**

Playing long tones is the answer to tone development. Listen really well to yourself when you are playing long tones and make sure you don't move on to the next note until you are really happy with the note you are working on.

The greatest thing for improved tone development is to listen to recordings of flutists that you really like and that you want to sound like. Model your sound on those flutists. Get that sound in your ear. Try to imitate it when you play your long tones and when you are practicing. Capture the sound that you really like. This may involve getting in front of a mirror. Looking at your embouchure and playing around with it. You should be able to find something that you really enjoy if you work hard on it.

### **How can a student improve his or her fingering?**

I think the best way to improve fingering is through scale and arpeggio practice. Also, when you're playing your scales and anything technical, make sure that you don't slap the keys really hard. Doing so actually makes it harder for you and it makes the sound come out less smoothly. Even if you've got perfect fingering it won't sound as smooth because you hear this slapping. So, try and make your fingering almost *legato*, as if you're singing. Move your fingers very smoothly and don't bring them up high off of the keys. That is another thing that you can practice in front of the mirror as well.

The mirror is really good if you are having a technical problem in a piece. If there is a combination that is really not working for you and you can't figure out what is going wrong or how to make it better, get in front of the mirror and maybe you'll see what is causing the problem. Perhaps a certain finger is not coming up with the others or one of your fingers is a little slow. Seeing what you are doing can be a great way to solve your problem and help you know what to think about and what to work on.

### **Can you please play an excerpt from the upcoming NAC Four Strong Winds Young Peoples Concert?**

This is J.S. Bach's *Badinerie*, Suite no. 2 in B minor. The suite for flute and strings [we performed it last month but we're performing it again at the upcoming NAC Young People's Concert called Four Strong Winds]

[On video, Joanna demonstrates this piece]

A lot of you probably recognize that. It is a very famous piece.