



The Artful Flute: Jan Lancaster on prints from the Dayton C. Miller collection

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pan the flute magazine

3 News



BFS Performance Plus and Geoffrey Gilbert competitions. Sir James Galway masterclass. BFS AGM.

11 The Artful Flute



Dayton C. Miller is best known for his collection of flutes. Jan Lancaster looks at his other collection, of works of art including the flute.

25 Andersen's Opus 15 Etudes

Kyle Dzapo on these masterful studies.

31 Quantum Leaps



Carla Rees talks to jazz great Barbara Thompson about her new flute concerto.

The aims of the British Flute Society: ...to advance the education of the public in the Art and Science of Music and in particular the Art and Science of Flute playing in all its aspects...

37 Simple circular breathing

Mike MacMahon shows that it's easier than we thought it was.

43 The flute in Brazil



André Medeiros, editor of the Brazilian flute society's journal, tells the history of the flute in his country.

53 Reviews



CDs, music, software, courses and an amazing new flute.

66 Obituaries

Osamu Muramatsu, Jan Osman and Gareth Morris.

67 Summer schools

The annual round-up of places to go to improve your playing (and have some fun).

70 The small print

BFS Council and Officers. Area Representatives. Association of Flute Traders. Small advertisements. Announcements. Membership information.

72 The last word

Charles Dickens and the Earl of Chesterfield offer warnings...

Quantum Leaps

Barbara Thompson's new flute concerto

Interview and photographs by Carla Rees



Barbara Thompson.

Barbara Thompson MBE is one of the UK's jazz legends. A highly polished saxophone and flute player, she is known throughout the world as one of the greats.

Born in Oxford in 1944, Thompson began her musical life as a clarinettist, and while at school was a member of the London Schools Symphony Orchestra woodwind section when Susan Milan and Graham Mayger made up the flute section. At the age of twenty she gained a place on the performance course at the Royal College of Music, where she studied clarinet with Sydney Fell, flute

with John Francis and piano with Peter Element. She also studied the saxophone privately with Charles Chapman.

Barbara's route into playing jazz is an interesting one. She says, 'I started on recorder when I was five and graduated to clarinet when I was ten. I passed Grade 8 at thirteen, and not long after that played in the London Schools Symphony Orchestra conducted by Dr. Leslie Russell, every holiday. I also played in the Morley College Orchestra when John Carewe was conducting and the orchestra led by Ernest Read at the Royal Academy. When I was about sixteen or seventeen I became bored counting bars, and there were always so many excellent clarinet players that when I went to the RCM I never got a look in. I think there were ninety-nine clarinettists. So later, when a boyfriend took me to a Duke Ellington concert, it opened a whole new world. I'd never heard music like it. When the curtain rose at the beginning on this incredible band playing *Take the A Train* with the original line-up including Johnny Hodges, I was hooked. There was a freedom and freshness in the music and a sense of adventure, because unlike classical music, the solos were not written down, and the soloists had to improvise on the chord sequences provided. It was to be years before I had the confidence to take a solo, but like diving off the

Carla Rees is an alto flute specialist and artistic director of *rarescale*, an ensemble which exists to promote the alto flute and its repertoire. She has given solo recitals throughout the UK, Europe and the USA. Carla teaches at Wycombe Abbey School and at the University of Nottingham, and has given several masterclasses, including at the Juilliard School in New York and the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. She also works as a photographer and has had her work published in the UK, USA, New Zealand and France. www.rarescale.org.uk
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high board, once you've done it, it never holds the same fears. Up until that moment in time I had lived and breathed classical music—you only have to look at my music library at home to see what a vast repertoire I have both for clarinet and flute as well as piano music. It was definitely time for a change.'

Although it is quite a step from one genre to the other, Barbara suggests that jazz is a genre that is open for all to explore. 'Study jazz from the bottom up—the beat and time feel are the most important things to practise and understand. The melody, if there is one, is the icing on the top. A great way to learn is to study the recordings of jazz musicians you like and to write down the chord sequence and the solo that is played on a particular number. If the tune is underpinned by a riff, then you should learn the riff first.'

In her student years, Barbara Thompson played with many student bands, and toured in the UK and abroad with the all-girl pop group *The She Trinity*, with whom she supported *The Who* three times. She was also a member of the New Jazz Orchestra, and worked with jazz greats such as Georgie Fame, John Mayall and Graham Bond.

Thompson's career reads like a *Who's Who?* of the jazz world; she has worked with people such as Bill Le Sage, John Dankworth, Kenny Wheeler, and of course, her drummer husband, Jon Hiseman. In 1976 she played on Manfred Mann's *Roaring Silence* album, and 1978 saw the beginning of a long working relationship with Andrew Lloyd Webber. She played live on a number of his works, including *Variations*, *Requiem*, *Cats*, *Starlight Express* and *Tell me on a Sunday*. Her own groups include *Paraphernalia* (1975–

present), *Moving Parts* (1989–1994) and *Sans Frontiers* (1993). She was awarded an MBE in 1996 for services to music.

As an accomplished performer on many instruments, it is hardly surprising that someone of Thompson's creativity would also be inspired to compose. 'I'd always written little pieces as a child, and it was my idea of heaven to have some private quiet moments at the piano, where I could experiment with chords and melody. I started to write jazz themes when I began my three-year stint at the Royal College of Music. I shared a flat in Chiswick with two other girls. One was a great keyboard player and we had a lot of very happy jam sessions. I had been accepted for the performer's course and was fortunate enough to get John Francis as my flute professor. His students were mainly high-fliers, and his master classes were thrilling to hear. I learnt a lot from him and though clarinet was my first study, my flute playing caught up. When I left the RCM I got married at the end of my final term, and auditioned for the show *Cabaret*, starring Judi Dench, who were looking for an all-girl stage band. I got the job, and when the show came to an end after a year, I had found it such a tedious experience that I vowed from then on to form my own jazz group and write my own music.'

Following such a distinguished playing career, composition has now become one of Barbara's main passions. She has had several major commissions, and her

works have been recorded and performed in the UK and abroad. Her works are contemporary classical in style, with an inevitable jazz influence. They include concertos, choral works and saxophone quartets, and are written with unusual sensitivity and understanding of the instruments being used.

The transition has been a smooth one for Barbara Thompson, as composition has always been part of her musical life:

'For most of my past musical career I have been known as a performer, and the fact that I always played my own compositions went, on the whole, unnoticed despite having made at least twenty albums featuring my music. Until now, I was never recognised as a composer, and I think in the world of jazz it is especially difficult for audiences to know what is written and what is improvised. I always tried to make the two elements run side to side seamlessly and my writing has always been equally important to me as my playing, as it is the musical environment we created which attracted audiences to come and see us over the last thirty years, in many different countries. However, there have been exceptions; for instance, twenty years ago I wrote and performed a saxophone concerto which was premiered at the Freiburg Festival, and was later broadcast with the Hanover Symphony Orchestra. That orchestra also broadcast the *Selfish Giant Suite* I wrote for Paraphernalia, arranged for symphony orchestra by Bernie Ebbinghouse. I also recorded a suite based on Greek music with Evelyn Glennie, and had two commissioned choral works; the first, *Love Songs in Age*, which was broadcast live on Radio 3 twice, from a performance at the Queen Elizabeth Hall with the BBC Singers, and the second, *Journey to A Destination Unknown*, written for a hundred voices and performed three times, twice in Norwich and once at St. John's Smith Square. However, with the exception of *Journey to A Destination Unknown*, everything I ever wrote up to 2001 involved me as a performer.

'When at long last I was commissioned to write works which did not specify me as a performer, this immediately gave me a wonderful sense of freedom. I was no longer limited by my instrumental ability. I could, and did, write things for people to play that I would never even be able to approach. The Apollo Saxophone Quartet, who commissioned me twice in the last five years and for whom I wrote three quartets and my *Concerto No.1 for Saxophone Quartet & String Ensemble*, played my music stunningly and seemingly effortlessly, despite the incredible technical demands. After the recording of the three quartets they admitted to me that they had found some of my music incredibly hard, but despite this they made a point of playing one of my quartets at every concert, and as a result the quartet as a whole had considerably improved. The *Three Quartets* are now out on CD, on the Celestial Harmonies label. As a composer, the wider the knowledge you have of different forms of music, the more you can draw from them to get ideas and inspiration. The jazz world encompasses many styles. I have been exposed not only to jazz in the pure sense, such as John Coltrane, but also to groups playing ethnic and new





Shona Brown.

world music, and then of course in the early days I also played with a lot of rock groups. All these elements are part of my musical heritage, and are a great aid to my composing. A great advantage also from my experiences in the jazz world is that having played with some of the best percussionists and drummers in the world I have had to learn a strong sense of time, without which I would not have survived. This means that my compositions have been described as being very strong rhythmically. I would like to think that every composition I write has its own identity, but what I am working on in the present day can in no way be described or likened to jazz. The greatest composers were of course great improvisers and I compose as they did, experimenting or 'improvising' in my head and then writing it down—with the added luxury of being able to tinker with it afterwards. Improvising in performance is a different though similar art, but you have to tinker with the result at the next gig!

Thompson believes that to compose effectively for an instrument, it is important to be able to play that instrument, at least to a basic level. As a multi-instrument performer, this does not surprise me. She has the talent and determination to follow that through, without a doubt.

I was fortunate enough to have been invited to attend the recording session of her new flute concerto, *Quantum Leaps*. This is her first major work for the flute, written for emerging young talent, Shona Brown, and is an exciting addition to the repertoire.

Barbara says: '*Quantum Leaps* came to my mind almost as a visual experience. Musical gymnastics form an important part of the piece, with notes literally flying through the air, with huge leaps and bounds. I can visualize a dance troupe performing round Shona as she plays it or even a circus with high trapeze artists taking death-defying risks. Nothing is safe, and even the slow movement has a subtle unease underneath the dark chords.'

The piece is comprised of four separate 'leaps', making up a full duration of twenty-three minutes. The premiere recording, played by Shona, was made in December 2006 at Thompson's recording studio in Surrey. The pair met in Manchester in January 2006, at a performance of Thompson's *Tuba Concerto* by James Gourlay and the RNCM Brass Ensemble. Brown was performing in another piece on the programme, and Thompson was so impressed, she invited Shona to work with her.

It was evident from the outset that they felt a real affinity for each other's work. Thompson says: 'Shona is a delightful person, and we have great fun working together. She has an awesome talent. At 22, as she's demonstrated, she can play anything she puts her mind to. Like I was at her age, she's open to all kinds of music, and is constantly broadening her outlook. After getting the highest marks of any student in her degree course at the RNCM—she is now at the Guildhall for a final year—her performance of *Quantum Leaps* in early December was stunning.'

The piece undeniably gives away the jazz background of its composer, but is fused with a contemporary classical feel. The flute part is virtuosic (as Brown says, it's the hardest concerto she has ever played) and the fluid lines are soulful and expressive. The string orchestra accompaniment divides into many parts and creates a bed of sound over which the flute can flourish. The music seems to have an emotional depth which can sometimes be lacking in new repertoire, and the contemporary techniques (harmonics, singing and playing, multiphonics etc.) are used for purely expressive means, rather than as gimmicks. As Barbara comments, 'I feel that the use of contemporary techniques can be a dangerous thing, especially if they are used for the sake of effect rather than enhancing the music. You should use them rather than them using you and they should always be in context. I use quite a lot of techniques in *Quantum Leaps* and *Shona* and I have



had great fun in working out meticulously what works and what does not.' This flute concerto has been a major part of Thompson's life over the past year. When the score is finally ready to sell in printed form, she has plans to offer it to string orchestras all over the world, with the aim of setting up performances. She has already completed two concerto commissions, for saxophone quartet and string ensemble, and has had a working contact with the Goldberg String Ensemble, Camerata Bern, Kammerakademie Neuss am Rein and others, so the prospects are looking promising.

The future is looking bright for Barbara Thompson. Although having officially retired from performing in 2001, Barbara has plans to tour Japan and Europe with Hiseman's group, Colosseum, in early 2007. Her new album, *Never Say Goodbye* with the group Barbara Thompson's Paraphernalia, is due to be released by Schott in February 2007, and is well worth a listen. She also has more plans for flute works. As she says, 'It's a wonderfully versatile instrument to write for. One of the first things I'm going to do is write a version of *Quantum Leaps* for flute and piano. This will take some doing as there is so much going on in the string accompaniment, but it would mean that it would be easier to arrange performances. These days, orchestras are a financial commitment. I think then a book of unaccompanied pieces, varying in technical difficulty, and then a flute sonata. I'd also like to publish some of my jazz flute pieces in book form, with the solos written out, and an accompanying CDR—this will help to broaden the student's repertoire, and also have some fun!'

Scores and further information available from:
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