

Mission: Commission

Peter Sheridan

Peter Sheridan recently moved from the United States and now lives in Melbourne Australia. He teaches at the University of Melbourne, and leads a Flute Ensemble for the Victorian College of the Arts. He freelances and presents recitals and master classes throughout the US and Europe.

Photo: Grace Sheridan, Aged 7



Commissioning is the process of requesting a personalized musical work for a specific instrumentation. I use the term personalized to imply a collaborative communication between performer and composer, and this concept of sharing visions, ideas, sounds, and emotions with a living composer is both thrilling and life transforming. The resulting new music not only serves the performer and composer, but also the broader objective of expanding a particular repertoire.

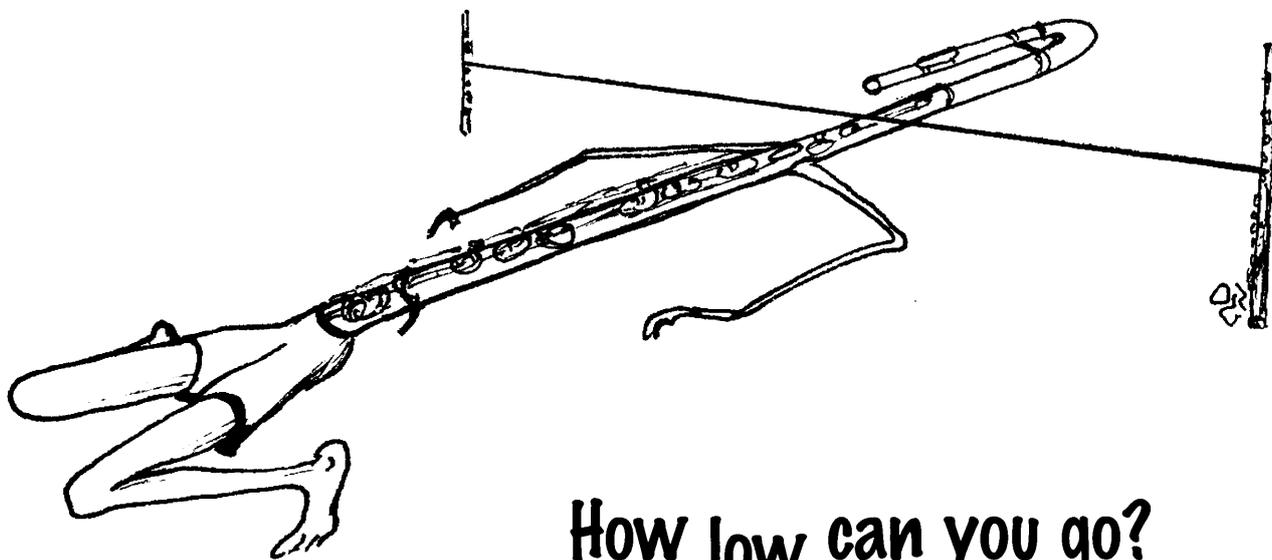
From a young age, I have had great respect for and interest in composers of all styles of music, and understood their most extraordinary gift: creating, shaping, and organizing musical sound into emotional communication. I wanted to become part of this core creative process, so my musical pathway led me down the road to commissioning new works for the flute, especially low flutes, and it has been a major part of my life for the past several years.

Originally working with composers as a student flutist in New York City, I had a strong appreciation of musical composition and could hear the patterns and forms of the master

composers. The compositional choices made by composers with their material and how they develop it through time and space is amazing, and I wanted to be part of this process, to get involved in the creating. However, I felt rather talentless as a creator of large musical material and form so I took the next logical step and began requesting compositions from the 'living composer.'

For years I continued commissioning composers and enjoyed rehearsing, performing and recording these new works. These works were student based, but I learned much about the process of working with the composer. Some works were too difficult and awkward, some were lyrical and pleasant, and some were down right weird, with strange ideas about style and content, but that was part of the process as well. Every creation was another step in my continuing journey.

Recently, as a low flutes performer, I realized that there was only a small body of original pieces for these instruments (i.e. Bass, Contrabass, and Sub-Contrabass flutes) so I began asking colleagues to create a new body of literature for these



How low can you go?



flutes of unique instrumental colour. This was a significant challenge because many composers were not familiar with the sound or range of say a contrabass flute – not surprising, really, because there are maybe only a few hundred of them in the world and it is most difficult to write for an instrument you have never heard! I wanted to create a lyrical repertoire for these instruments and to show that these instruments are as melodious as their string counterparts – the viola, cello, and double bass.

Wonderfully creative music came from these collaborations, and I marvel at the solutions and decisions that were made. One such composition, by the American composer Alex Shapiro, is a fine example of creativity. Shapiro penned a moving musical poem for contrabass flute and electronics and, having recently moved from Los Angeles to a remote island in Washington State, it was based on whale song. Unlike George Crumb's masterpiece, "Voice of the Whale," where the whale tones are induced by the flutist singing into the flute, Shapiro places a real life whale song directly into the piece, hence the contrabass flute is in essence performing a duo with a sperm whale. The effect and emotional charge is stunning...

These recent collaborations have changed me as a musician and artist, and the fruits of all our labours shall appear in a new recording titled, "(Mis)Conceptions: New Music for Low Flutes." Upcoming projects include a trio by Gary Schocker for bass flute, viola and harp and a set of concert etudes for the low flutes by Hilary Taggart. The British composer Andrew Downes will compose in 2009 a sonata for contrabass flute and piano – a first of its kind.

As a member of the active Los Angeles Flute Quartet, I also commissioned ten new works for the flute quartet. We were eager to create a fresh body of literature for this genre, and hence pave a new road of compositional possibilities for quartets. We asked the well known Los Angeles composer and guitarist, Christopher Caliendo, to compose a 'heart-felt' work for the family of flutes (Piccolo, C Flute, Alto, and Bass) used in today's flute quartet. This composer had heard our ensem-

ble before and knew what we were all capable of musically – this simple, yet vital relationship can be the key to the composer creating a fine, well balanced composition.

Christopher chose the marvellous subject of Chovichano, the legendary gypsy healer, and the work is filled with rhythmic and timbral challenges, as well as special phrasing and voicings. We were all stunned, and maybe even confused, but after a year of rehearsals and concerts we mastered the composer's magical vision. Every time we performed the work, several audience members would approach us after the concert and comment on this work, and mentioned how different it was from all the others on the program. We were all proud to be part of that piece coming into the repertoire, and it has been performed by other flute quartets as well. You can hear this exciting work on the album titled, "Above and Beyond."

The quartet went on to commission many works which are now published. One in particular is the multi-movement composition "Flute Quartet No. 1" by Gary Schocker. Watch out for the bass flute part in this piece as it is a bit of a monster! It definitely taught me a thing or two about how to use the instrument!

I am often asked, do you pay composers to write for you? The answer is yes – they have to eat too! Grants, commissioning funds, and corporate funding has paid for some of these works, and some have been paid for by me.

I believe when you are passionate about something in life, and truly know how to communicate that passion, then all your energies will guide your path. For me, there is nothing like the feeling of performing a new work for the first time – it is pure joy and excitement rolled into one. So my mission, if you will, is to keep on doing the same: commissioning quality music for flutes for many years to come. I encourage all flutists to consider doing the same.

ANYONE WHO TAKES
HIMSELF TOO SERIOUSLY
ALWAYS RUNS THE RISK OF
LOOKING RIDICULOUS;
ANYONE WHO CAN
CONSISTENTLY LAUGH AT
HIMSELF DOES NOT

Vaclav Havel