

Interview with Brian DuFord

Amy Hardison Tully

At the recent spring festival, the South Carolina Flute Society programmed something very different than at past festivals -- a new work featuring 32 South Carolina flutists on one piece. This was truly one of the highlights of the day: the premiere of *Concert Etudes for Flute Quartet*, by New York composer, Brian DuFord. This eight-movement work takes the audience on a journey of different levels of technical facility and different levels of difficulty with a different quartet performing each movement. Premiering new music is such a privilege and such an exciting experience for a performer, I always wonder about what the composer is thinking and feeling as well. I recently had the opportunity to interview Brian to learn more about himself as a composer, his style and the inspiration behind the *Concert Etudes* that he wrote for the SCFS.


SCFS: If I remember correctly, you are a guitarist? Where did you train as a musician and composer?

BD: Yes, I am a classical guitarist. I did my undergraduate at Mannes in New York and my graduate work at Yale. At both schools I was a classical performance major; in fact, I didn't train as a composer at all. My time at Mannes was very academic. I received a lot of training in theory, counterpoint and analyzing scores. When I think back about it, I did get my training as a composer; I just didn't know it.



SCFS: Did you grow up in a musical family?

BD: We had guitars lying around the house. I listened to a lot of folk music growing up - Neil Young, Bob Dylan, etc. I picked up the guitar when I was about 10, and my parents eventually got me a teacher. Then I heard an Andrés Segovia album when I was 11 years old and thought, "I want to do that. That is really cool." Along with rock, jazz and folk we frequently listened to classical music in my house growing up. Listening and being exposed to all kinds of music is so important. It allows and inspires you to grow as a musician and can also lead to composing and arranging.



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SCFS: What is your background on performing with or writing for the flute?

BD: I met Chris (Vaneman) at Yale in '92 and we were assigned to each other as partners for a chamber music class. He was really enthusiastic about playing music with guitar. I did a lot of chamber music at Mannes, but I never got a sense that people really wanted to play with guitar. Chris knew the flute and guitar repertoire really well, at the time better than I did. Playing with him allowed me to actively listen to other instruments and inspired me to attend concerts featuring flute/oboe/winds. We played together until about the year 2000. Happily, we recently began playing together again, and did some concerts in South Carolina. We found that we really missed performing with each other and it was good to get back together. Performing keeps me, as a composer, in touch with the realities of live music making, which has a direct impact on my compositional style and sensibilities.

SCFS: Did your musical friendship with Chris inspire the *Concert Etudes for Flute Quartet*, or did you have a previous idea or inspiration that led to their inception?

BD: A few years ago Chris asked me to do this. I thought it was a good idea, but I was hesitant at first because I wasn't sure I could write etudes or studies for the flute. Chris explained that flutists do not have anything like this in the repertoire. We talked about various compositional techniques for the 8 movements and we discussed different levels from amateurs to high school students to professional. We also talked about instrument range and the general structure of the etudes. The *Concert Etudes* was really Chris's idea. I talked to other flute players who I knew and they thought it was also a great idea. So, then I began to think about what and how I wanted to write. Because I wasn't a flute player, I didn't want to write purely technical etudes. I wanted to pieces that could be performed as works.

Part of the inspiration came from Villa-Lobos and Chopin, who wrote etudes that could be pleasurable to listen to. I also thought about the ensemble issues. If I'm going to write for flute quartet, I can't just write for one or two solo flutes with 2 flute accompanying. I really had to think about the quartet working as a unit. I'm a chamber musician and I think chamber music is the best thing. Chamber musicians working together - intimately working together - is a real inspiration. If I think of this as an ensemble project, the parts should be equally matched. It's about the challenges of creating an ensemble; I think that is an important aspect of these etudes and is always something that has to be learned in chamber music. It's about the sound together, which is more important than a solo part - I wanted to make it an ensemble exercise and an enjoyable pleasant piece.



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SCFS: What composers or styles of music inspire your compositional writing? Did any of those styles influence your writing in *Concert Etudes for Flute Quartet*?

BD: I'm very influenced by French music – Francaix, Ibert and also Piazzolla and Stravinsky. I don't know if my influences come out in a way where a listener can actually point to that composer. Rather, it's more of an impression. When I hear pieces I get impressions from the music. It's something about the energy - the rhythm, the feel of the piece. Instead of using a specific composer's language, I'll use their impression, which can be very effective. The last movement, "Arhythmatik", contains a thick chromatic harmonic language and is very contemporary - it's not atonal - but there is actually a moment that sounds like Philip Glass. I didn't intend on that, but I realized later that is what it sounds like.

SCFS: Some of the movements are more difficult than others, and some are more traditional, while some movements require extended techniques. Did you imagine different grade levels performing the work, like it was premiered at the SCFS spring festival, or do you ideally view the piece to be performed by one set of quartet performers?

BD: That was Chris's idea to have different performers for each movement. At first I didn't know how I would do this with 32 flute players. I just said, "Ok – I'll do it!" I wrote the hard ones first – No. 8, "Arhythmatik" and No. 7, "Choralations". I went for complexity first, so I knew where I needed to take away and make the musical language more succinct for the less difficult movements. It was great

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(the SCFS performance), and I'm really happy with how it came off. It's really a big piece and I was impressed.

SCFS: Each movement has a witty subtitle that kind of hints at the flute technique that will be explored in the movement. Which came first? The title, or the music?

BD: The titles came after the movements were done. I almost never title a piece first because I might end up with something very different from where the music began. I always follow the music - it's as if I arrange it as it comes to me. I know from the beginning I'm going to deviate from my original intent or idea, so I wait until the end to title the work. These movements were easy to title because the various techniques used helped to define each etude. I enjoyed it because it was fun to come up with the cheeky/witty titles.

SCFS: Performing *Concert Etudes* at the SCFS was a wonderful opportunity for the students and the professionals involved. For the students, it may have been the first time they had the opportunity to perform and be coached on a new piece by a living composer. What is it like for the composer - for you - to hear your music come to life?

BD: I love it - I think it is wonderful! I like the surprise of hearing the piece being performed live for the first time. I begin hearing the piece almost as if someone else wrote it. Because I can't play the piece, the music comes to life with the performers - in a sense they know the piece better than I do. I just open my ears, listen to the music and enjoy it like any other audience member. It's taken me a while to do that. Initially I didn't know what to do when I was in the audience listening to my own music. I was a performer, and had to learn how to be part of the process as a composer. I've coached a lot of my music now. I remind the performers that this music doesn't exist until it's played. I'm interested in their opinion and want them actively part of the creative process - if an articulation works better a different way let's try it. I want the music making atmosphere to be open and supportive - it's all about collaboration

SCFS: What is your opinion as a working musician and composer about the state of new music? In 2012, what do audiences expect to hear in the concert hall?

BD: Well, you know, new music is still a small aspect of the classical concert scene. If I go hear the New York Philharmonic, they have a separate series for new music. Beyond that they do a few new works throughout the regular season. This is still only a sliver of their total concert programming a year. In general I feel that the audience wants to hear something they recognize. When I write something new, something old and familiar always works its way in. But, I think it is a great time going forward in classical music. Classical composers have a whole world of music at their fingertips - literally - one can draw on so many different influences now. When I was in school there seemed to be a big distinction between performers and composers. I don't think that is the case now. Many performers are actively seeking careers as composers because of their own experiences with different styles of music and sensibilities to the needs of the audience. I came back into classical music very recently, just in 2009. I was doing a lot of film scoring from 2001 to 2008, but I felt restricted by it and realized it was not what I wanted to do as a composer.

I became acquainted with the timbre and range of the flute by playing a lot with Chris. It seemed logical when I wanted to go to the next step in my composing to write for wind instruments. So, I began by focusing on writing for winds – 2 wind quintets (1 for the Imani Winds) and several pieces for featuring flute and oboe. Everything is different now than when I left classical music. The internet was not utilized like it is now – Facebook, Youtube, etc. As a composer, there are so many possibilities at your fingertips and no one is saying you have to compose in any particular way. Presently, I think audiences are opening up to new music while ensembles are becoming more bold in their concert programming.

SCFS: What kind of compositions are you working on now? What currently inspires your creative process?

BD: What inspires me to write are the performers themselves. I make a point to get to know the people I'm writing for. I go to their concerts and I get to know them. With the *Concert Etudes* I obviously didn't have a chance to get to know 32 flute players before I wrote for them, but my connection was Chris. That is a really important part of how I write – knowing the performers personally. Currently, I'm working on a string quartet, sax quartet and a piece for choir and 2 pianos that will be performed in Germany next year. Also on the horizon is a work for voice, flute, clarinet and guitar commissioned by a group in Italy. All of these works are for people that I know and collaborate with. The best collaborations come about when performers and composers get along creatively and can work together. That way the composer has unique personalities to work with and the performers have freedom to make suggestions that enhance the music.

SCFS: How has your music changed over the years throughout your career as a composer?

BD: It's changed a lot. I've always tinkered with composing. In undergrad I composed, but I never finished anything. At Yale I wrote stuff for guitar, and it sounded kind of folksy or like new acoustic. When I got out of Yale I continued to create simple pieces for guitar, only solo guitar. My career as a composer really began when I started scoring films. That is when I learned to use a wider pallet as a composer and starting writing for other instruments. Composing film music also introduced me to the concept of compositional tone color and more complex harmonies. After I got back into classical music, my style had really changed. The *Concert Etudes*, in their varied musical stylings, really show the breadth of my musical language and the growth of myself as a composer.



SCFS: What advice would you give to young musicians or musicians thinking of embarking on a composition career?

BD: All I can say is if you're young, just take every opportunity to grab as much experience as possible. Write lots of stuff! When you give your music to a real live person, be open to changes, be open to working with the performers. That is a tough lesson to learn, because the maturity might not be there yet to compromise and be flexible with other people. Develop your voice and be passionate, but also cultivate a sense of community when working with others. Composing is a tough business to be in. The hard part is finding the funding, writing grants, programming the music and being patient. Also, you have to be organized all the time. Have everything ready to go. It may seem like nothing is happening in your career, but when something comes your way you will have to move quickly. Keep your website updated and organized. Finish your pieces and move on to the next project. Your music doesn't have to be perfect, it just has to be finished. What is perfect? It's unattainable! The tinkering can be done in rehearsals. In this business it is helpful to be able to write in a timely manner. You don't have to be prolific like Telemann, Handel or Bach, but you do need to get things done and not get bogged down with too many unimportant details. The *Concert Etudes* took several weeks from beginning to end. The composing was something like 5 weeks and editing/formatting was probably 2 weeks. That's another aspect...when you give performers your music it should not be a messy draft – with Sibelius and Finale, there is no excuse. Try to give your performers the closest thing to a final version, therefore only minor changes will need to be made.

SCFS: What piece, song or group on your iPod would surprise us most?

BD: I have a soft spot for The Cars, Duran Duran and early Madonna. It's so far away from what I write, that it doesn't influence me. I don't listen to any classical music when I'm composing, so I can limit the influences that might creep in. But, in between writing, I listen to a lot of classical music and attend many concerts. When I start writing, I shut it off. 🎵

For more information about Brian DuFord and his music, visit his website www.brianduford.com and “like” him on Facebook at www.facebook.com/briandufordcomposer.

Amy Hardison Tully is Assistant Professor of Music at Coastal Carolina University, where she teaches flute and music history. She holds degrees from UNC-W, Northwestern University and the University of South Carolina and is a board member at-large of the SCFS.



Brian DuFord with the Concert Etudes for Flute Quartet performers.