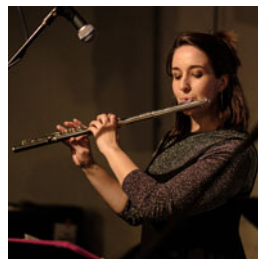


## PROFILE: KATHRYN WILLIAMS

Kathryn Williams is a flautist and educator based in Manchester. A core member of The House of Bedlam, she has also performed with Distractfold Ensemble, Ensemble Voix Nouvelle, Ensemble 360, BBC Philharmonic, The Hallé, Sinfonia Cymru and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, and has played concertos with Manchester Camerata, Dayton Philharmonic, and Royal Northern College of Music Symphony Orchestra and Wind Ensemble.



Kathryn Williams, photo by Dimitri Djuric.

As an educator Kathryn specialises in experimental and contemporary performance practice from early years through to higher education. Recent guest lectures include the Royal Northern College of Music, University of York, Carnegie Mellon University and Ohio State University. Kathryn has contributed to courses for Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme, Aldeburgh Young Musicians, and National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, and has held long-term residencies at Alder Hey Children's Hospital, Manchester Museum, and a central Manchester nursery. For organisations including Live Music Now, Peoplescape Theatre, Theatre in Prisons and Probation, and Music in Hospitals and Care, Kathryn devises and delivers performances and workshops in a wide variety of settings.

Kathryn has a BMus, MMus, and International Artist Diploma from the Royal Northern College of Music and is currently working towards a PhD in performance at Huddersfield University. Her project *Coming Up for Air* explores the creative possibilities that emerge when pieces are limited to one breath; it will be released on CD by Huddersfield Contemporary Records/NMC. Kathryn is also collaborating with composer Annie Hui-Hsin Hsieh in the development of *PIXERCISE*, a new solo piece for piccolo and exercise in which musical performance and high intensity interval training (HITT) collide.

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### *How did you come to be involved in new music?*

I had a very traditional upbringing in rural Ohio, where, surprisingly, I had an astonishingly rigorous flute teacher who militantly drilled scale and precise tuning (and expected a minimum of 21 hours per week of practice, no excuses). The newest music I had encountered was probably Prokofiev!

In 2007 I moved to Manchester to study at the RNCM. Soon after, I was asked to perform Kalevi Aho's *Solo III* in a composer-profile concert there. The piece is completely quarter-tonal, a completely new concept for me at the time. I had to learn the chromatic quarter-tone fingering chart and work out how to modify my embouchure differently for each note to help accommodate the tuning and tone colours. This was utterly fascinating: I could not

believe there were all these magical notes located between all of the normal notes.

The piece is a slow climb of delicate, shadowy quarter tones and miles more expressive than anything else I'd ever played. Kalevi Aho attended the performance and this was my first experience ever meeting and playing to a living composer. Following this frankly mind-blowing experience, I urgently needed to find more pieces which led me to find out more about the flute.

*You have been commissioning a new repertoire of flute pieces that are to be played in a single breath. Could you explain how you began this?*

*Coming Up for Air* initially began as a response to respiratory conditions I faced through asthma and a chronic sinus condition. Managing these conditions as a professional flautist made breathing a constant obstacle which forced me to develop radical and unconventional means of playing. Economising on my air supply to the extent of measuring as precisely as possible the air speed and angle necessary for all registers and dynamics on the flute (especially for the third octave and higher where the increased pressure in my sinus cavities could cause severe pain) became an obsession.

My sinus condition became severe enough to affect my overall health and quality of life, as I was unable to use my nose to breathe, smell, or taste, and a compromised immune system led to several serious illnesses. This was all transformed in 2016 after a necessary surgical operation (generously funded by Help Musicians UK). Following recovery and management of my asthma, reflection upon the time when breathing was a constant restriction led me to create this project, to enable me to explore the role of my body in relation to performance.

Compositionally, this project is an invitation to engage with restriction as a creative impetus, to consider the materiality of the flute, the physiology of breath and body as activating agencies for sound, and to explore equally the sounds possible during inhalation as well as the traditional spectrum of sounds produced through exhalation.

*Coming Up for Air* was publicly launched in June 2017 as a fundraising concert in aid of Help Musicians UK with a performance of 14 single-breath pieces by: Megan Grace Beugger; CHAINES; Oliver Coates & chrysanthemum bear; Eleanor Cully; Vitalija Glovackyte; Larry Goves; Mauricio Pauly; Michael Perrett; David Pocknee; Jack Sheen; Laurie Tompkins; John Webb; Matthew Welton; Nina Whiteman. The single breath pieces were framed by Alvin Lucier *Self Portrait for flute and wind anemometer* and Brian Ferneyhough *Unity Capsule*, pieces which feature extreme control and manipulation of the performer's breath.

The collection has grown substantially since last year through an open call for scores (this is still open) and delivering education projects for young composers, including National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain and Junior RNCM. With well over 100 single breath pieces, I will be recording an album of one breath pieces for release in November 2019 on Huddersfield Contemporary Records.

*Is there anything in common in the way that the composers address the restrictions you're placing on them? How long is the longest piece? How short the shortest?*

Inevitably all of the pieces connect to my breath and body to some extent, some more explicitly than others, and some have responded

specifically to the backstory of the project and my medical conditions. I have (partially arbitrarily) grouped the pieces into flexible, overlapping categories of breath/body, instrument/object, and environment.

There are a number of concerns that crop up more than once for different composers. For example, a number of composers have challenged me to fit as much activity as possible into a single breath (for example Jack Sheen, David Pocknee, Andy Ingamells) and others have extended the duration of the piece by prioritising the inhale and suspension of breath throughout the piece (Nina Whiteman, Megan Grace Beugger, Mark Dyer). The longest piece so far is *Untitled for amplified balloon and kalimba* by Vitalija Glovackyte: a balloon contains the exhale and is played with looping pedal as the air is slowly let out of it for seven minutes. The longest performed single breath is Mark Dyer's *Momento for Kathryn* which stretches my breath over 2 minutes and 22 seconds through heavy use of breath suspension. The shortest, *Inventory* by Max Erwin, is one second long.

For me, some of the most exciting pieces are the ones that lead very naturally into more extensive projects albeit for very different reasons. Annie Hui-Hsin Hsieh and I knew we would develop her initial one-breath piece, *PIXERCISE*, into the substantial and ongoing piece that it is today. The three tiny enticing melodies by Oliver Coates and chrysanthemum bear emerged through conversation and friendship and we plan to play more together (for example, I contributed some short flute riffs to his recent album, *Shelley's on Zenn-La*). Finally, there are composers (including Larry Goves, Eleanor Cully, Amber Priestley, Andy Ingamells) with whom I have or am planning an ongoing creative collaboration where this feels like one punctuation mark on an exciting longer journey.

*There are a number of recent versions of the flute which have attempted to make it more suitable for microtonal music. Do you play them? Do you think this is an interesting development? If you were to re-design the flute what would you change?*

At the moment, I am still a bit of a purist and I do not have a flute like this (in fact, I've played on the same flute since I was 15!). I think that instrument innovation is crucial but the high cost of them means I haven't got one yet. I'm concerned that something from the process of embodying the tiniest physical and instinctive changes necessary to produce microtones on a standard instrument can be lost when mechanics make it easier. But this might change when I get my hands on one.

If I could re-design the flute it would have the following inbuilt attachments: mirrors, marionette puppets, extendable wind anemometer, flame throwers, jet pack, foghorn, and water fountain. (I'll probably change my mind tomorrow.)

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