

Flute Innovation

Excerpts from an interview between Matthias Ziegler and Nancy Andrew 12th
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Flutist Matthias Ziegler has created a world of new sounds through use of improvisation, technology, and consistently fresh approaches to how he plays and hears music. As a teacher, he says he is “very traditional.

One of the world’s virtuosos on the large flutes—stand-up bass and contra—Matthias Ziegler has a charismatic presence, and the music he creates is fresh and engaging. His stage set-up usually includes electronic equipment that allows him to augment and manipulate his sound options, complementing his mastery of extended techniques. Indeed, he has created not only a whole new world of sounds, but new musically satisfying applications of these sounds. In his solo appearances, he performs mostly his own compositions, which are organized around a basic structure with room for improvised variation.

Many American flutists first heard Ziegler at the National Flute Association Convention in Kansas City in 1994. Those of us in the audience knew that we had just heard something special. A few years later, I interviewed him for a flute magazine article and I have been following his creative developments ever since. This past August, he performed at the NFA convention in San Diego, and I had the opportunity to talk with him about his creative growth over the past several years.

Were you always interested in new music?

I always played improvised music, but none of my teachers emphasized contemporary music. After my conservatory training I became more interested. Such techniques as multiphonics and singing while playing fascinated me, and I began using them in my improvisations.

Often the way I heard these sounds played was not attractive at all—there was no consideration of the audience, or of basic qualities *in* the instrument. We leave out so much stuff to be able to create a pure sound. We reduce what we’re doing—first, harmonically, by playing *equal tempered* pitch, which leads to tonal harmony, and second, setting the parameters of the instrument with the aesthetics of pure sound quality. We accept these as the notes and raw materials with which we will make a piece. But the “note” in western music was not

discussed until the 1950s, with *Giacinto Scelsi* and others talking about something “inside” the sound. In non-western music, sound production and the sound itself is already something. So I began exploring to find more appealing ways of presenting extended techniques.

Can you talk about the evolution of electro-acoustic applications in your music?

First, I discovered new possibilities with microphones. I heard a didgeridoo player in a concert, and he had a microphone inside the didgeridoo. I thought “Why don’t I do this with the flute? I want to hear the flute from inside.” So I went straight home that night and put microphones in my bass flute and discovered the most beautiful things. Of course this is just the beginning. Now you have to make these sounds speak and integrate them into your musical language. That was the main work and my musical goal. I had to solve technical problems, practice the techniques, and see how I could involve them in my playing. To do that, I made a lexicon—every single sound with dynamic range, how long I could do it, and how to notate it—and I recorded it. I created a CD and a chart documenting every single sound I can use.

Once I had the sounds, I had to decide how to get from one sound to the next. It’s like looking at the flute as if you have an orchestra inside it. How do I use the bass and treble register compositionally? How do I keep something going while giving the illusion that something else starts? I’m always trying when I’m improvising to have two or three things cooking at the same time, to refer to ideas again so that people have some structure to listen to, on different levels.

How did you get into tape loops and delays?

I became fascinated with these techniques because they made it possible to have something going and play on top of it. But I also like to play without the loop and try to get things going simultaneously. It’s like the old dream you find in Telemann Fantasies—trying to play bass and melody at the same time—or the operatic pieces with all those variations. You want to play the whole picture.

Where did recording and touring with Andreas Vollenwieder come into all of this?

I had known Andreas since I was about 12—we lived near each other in Zurich and knew some of the same people. One day he called me and said, “Look, I’m going on tour, and I need a wind player—would you like to come?” By this time, his music had become a huge success. I had just finished the soloist exam at the conservatory, so I went on tour for one year with this pop group all over the world. When I was playing with Andreas, I had all those wonderful technicians around and learned that you can make a first-class high-fi sound on stage with

no buzz, no hum, just pure sound. They developed the harp sound with Andreas and helped me to develop my microphones. So I had this experience with electronics and amplification. We also spent lots of time in the studio. Andreas would record a song and then take two weeks to mix it; making a record took three months. This was a tremendous experience for me, from the technical side as well as the musical side.

Did you invent the Matusiflute at this time?

Yes. On these tours I was using *chinese* bamboo flutes with the *paper membrane*. I always had problems on stage—the heat and the lights would affect the membrane and it wouldn't vibrate consistently. Intonation was also complicated. I said it must be possible to have the same mechanism on a normal flute. I drilled a hole into a headjoint and put a paper on top and it worked. And that was my Matusiflute with the membrane headjoint. And of course I had to put on either a *membrane* head or a normal head and that's why I developed a mute triggered by a little string to put it on and off; I control it with *my right thumb*. I can also play around with the sounds in between—in the spectrum between on and off.

You've been traveling a great deal since I talked with you in 1998 and have been influenced by other artists and non-western world music. Can you talk about these influences, particularly polyrhythms and microtones?

There are three people who are very important for this. One is Mark Dresser, a virtuoso bass player from New York who specializes in new music and is also pushing the limits of his instrument. We started working together about 10 years ago. I commissioned a piece from him for flute, string quartet, and bass, which we played on several tours. We also formed a trio with myself, Mark, and Denman Maroney, a pianist from New York. Denman is "Mr. Polyrhythm." We would clap polyrhythms on the tour bus, from New York to Chicago. Denman would say, "you take seven, I'll take five, and he'll take six," and we would go like that for hundreds of miles. We were also experimenting with microtonal stuff. Then I met Joe Maneri in Boston, one of the craziest musicians I know. He's around 70 and teaches a course on microtonal music at New England Conservatory. He's been following microtonal music developments for years and has published several works. I played the quarter-tone flute for his class and did a workshop. I did some improvs and he went nuts—really started pushing me. That was an exciting influence on my microtonal usage.

What about structure and improvisation in your music? There are pieces with specific titles and a basic outline, but every time you play them they're the same

yet different.

You have to ask how much complexity you want in your music and how you define or write down the complexity. I write down as much as needed and as little as possible. In writing chamber music, I'm working with specific musicians. I know what they can do, I know how they play their instruments, I know the way they think musically, so I just write them a road map.

Is it the same with your own solo pieces?

Yes. I try to leave it open. It's good to have navigation in your car, but it's sometimes nice to take detours. I try to imagine I'm standing there with my back to the wall, saying, "Here I am and I have a story to tell." That situation triggers creativity.

And yet the structure of your pieces is always clear. Is any of this sense of structure influenced by your love of architecture?

With architecture you have an overall structure that comes out of a basic idea, but as you proceed, thousands of situations are created that require quick feedback from the basic structure, which influences the structure or shows you if the basic idea will work. When you play, you create those small situations, which force you to integrate something new, and this is when creativity happens. Through architecture, I saw that having an idea and making something out of it was a personal technique you can develop.

You said once it's like walking the same route every day, but noticing different things.

You try to do the same thing every day, differently. This concept is also good for traditional flute playing. If you get up in the morning and do your tone development exercises, it's just a primitive work-out. But if you give yourself a subject you want to work on, it stays fresh. I'm fascinated right now with having resonance in my head while playing. If you practice your sound exercises with an idea like this, you will play them differently.

You were commissioned to write a piece for the NFA High School Young Artist's Competition this year. What was it like to hear these young players perform it?

It was a new experience for me, and very nice. In writing the piece, I first put on the mini-disc recorder and improvised. Then I wrote down the structure of the improv, and saw that I had to reduce here and cut there. From this I developed ideas about how to get from a horizontal melodic situation into a vertical rhythmic, even poly-rhythmic structure—the transition challenge that I find so interesting and creative. At the same time, I wanted them to combine several

contemporary playing techniques to have a little bit of everything. The *morceaux de concours* pieces at the Paris Conservatory were always constructed this way. You want to hear them do some double tonguing, some melodic stuff, some technical...you want to show all the skills. I was impressed with the performances. Each person played the piece very differently, but the structure was there. They had all done a lot of work and they also memorized it!

What have you gleaned from your studies and your career so far? How do you work with your own students, and do you have any advice for young players?
I've developed my basic technique, which serves me well, and I also have this light way of playing and not forcing too much, which helps me to keep in form. [For many years Ziegler has taken weekly Alexander Technique lessons when he is in Zurich.] But I'm very traditional in my teaching. Rhythm is a big issue and something I emphasize. I also feel that when my students come with questions, they want—and deserve—answers. My teachers— *Conrad Klemm*, *Andre Jaunet*, *Geoffrey Gilbert*, and *William Bennett*—gave me a fantastic background, but also liked that I was doing different things and encouraged my creativity. Great artist/teachers do not clone students, but allow them to develop an artistic personality. I try to do this with my own students.

A former member of the Zurich Chamber Orchestra, Ziegler now teaches at the Zurich Conservatory, when he is not on tour. More information is available by visiting matthias-ziegler.ch. His live interview with James Galway can be heard by visiting thegalwaynetwork.com/interviews/intervue.htm.

Nancy Andrew is the flute professor at the University of Oregon in Eugene, where she also plays with the Eugene Symphony, the Eugene Opera, and the Oregon Mozart Players. She is the Executive Director of the Marcel Moyse Society and has presented lectures on Moyse in the United States and abroad.