In My Own Words

The Music of Now

Claire Chase
Flutist, Cofounder of the International Contemporary Ensemble

Claire Chase knew from a young age that she would pursue a career in music, but no one could have predicted what that career would look like. A virtuoso flutist, she has performed the world premieres of more than 100 new works for flute, released two full-length solo albums to critical acclaim, and is working on a third album. In 2012, she was named a MacArthur Fellow, in part for her work with the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), which she cofounded in 2001. Chase favors the Webster definition of “contemporary”: happening, living, existing, coming into being. As you’ll see, this definition applies not only to the music she commissions, but to a performing career that is still taking shape.

Enchanted

When I was three years old, my folks took me to a symphony orchestra concert. We sat in the nosebleed section of the balcony, and what caught my eye and my ear immediately was this golden rod in the middle of the orchestra. I was completely enamored with the sounds and the visual quality of this instrument. I remember how it caught the light as it moved. I could not take my eyes off it, and all I wanted to do was hear it.

After the concert I told my mother that I wanted one, and she said, “That’s fine, but you’re a little young to start on the flute.” So I started on the piano and the violin, but for every birthday and every Christmas, I kept on asking for a flute. Finally, on my eighth Christmas I got a flute. I was the happiest kid in the world when I opened that present.

I remember clearly the first time I blew into it. I wiggled my fingers and made a trill, which is one of the easiest things to do on a flute but it sounds really great. I felt the vibration of the instrument under my fingers, and in my chest, and with my breath, and it was a very powerful experience. It still is. Every time I pick up the flute, that tactile relationship still mystifies and enchants me.

Beyond pretty

When I was about thirteen, my music teacher put a score on the music stand one day when I came in for my lesson. It was a seminal piece by the composer Edgard Varèse called “Density 21.5,” which is the density of platinum. It looked so strange, with all these squiggly lines. It didn’t look like Mozart or Bach or anything else I was working on.

Then, for the next four and a half minutes he played me this piece, and it completely blew my mind. I had never heard or imagined anything like it. The flute was taken to a completely different planet. It was a piece that defined the possibility of the instrument beyond just being pretty. The flute all of a sudden was capable of articulation like a percussion instrument, and volume like a brass instrument can produce, and emotional power like a singer can communicate.

I became obsessed with this piece and didn’t want to play anything else. It’s an incredible work of art, and hearing it was the beginning of my interest in what is called new music.

Cliff-jumping

When I was a teenager, I played in the San Diego Youth Symphony, and I had a couple of freelance orchestra jobs when I was in college. I loved playing in the orchestra. I mean, the principal flute spot in the orchestra is pretty much as sweet as it gets. You’re right behind the cellos. You’ve got the oboe next to you. You’ve got the percussion and the brass behind you. You’re sitting dead center, looking at the conductor, communicating with the chief. It’s a pretty awesome spot.

But when I got to Oberlin, I started playing in smaller...
chamber groups. I was so energized by the cooperative and community dynamics of the chamber music experience—everyone in the group is just jumping off the proverbial cliff together. That kind of cooperation, that combination of vulnerability and total empowerment was something I had never experienced in orchestra.

**Testing the water**

About halfway through my freshman year in college, I started thinking about how amazing it would be to combine the best of an orchestra environment, the best of a chamber music environment, and the best of an experimental music environment where the performers could essentially make something up as we go along.

In 1999, my junior year, I got to do a test run of that idea. With a grant from the Presser Foundation, I assembled an ensemble of my colleagues and of recent Oberlin graduates to perform some music that I commissioned in celebration of the millennium. It was the most amazing experience, and it made me realize that I needed to create not just an ensemble, but an organization that would support and nurture that ensemble, that kind of creative environment, and that kind of freedom on a daily basis. ICE [The International Contemporary Ensemble] was born as a result of that trajectory.

**The beauty of chance**

The program that is most central to our work right now is ICElab, a commissioning program for emerging young composers. Each year the ensemble selects six composers to work in close collaboration with performers in the group. Those selections are made cooperatively among ten members of ICE called the ICE Core. We get together in a room over many, many sessions and listen to hundreds—this year it will probably be thousands—of entries. We read project descriptions, listen to music, and watch videos of composer samples.

We choose music that a particular member or group of members are interested in. It may not interest us all at the time. But we’re willing to take a chance for any member of the ICE Core. Often, things that I don’t find interesting at first I find fascinating by the end of a project, and I’m really glad I was pulled in a direction I never would have taken on my own.

**Pushing forward**

Our primary job is as performers. When we get onstage or in a rehearsal studio, we just take the jump. We jump with abandon, commitment, and joy—and the possibility of being changed. That experience of being changed is the most wonderful thing, and it happens quite often.

I’m an utterly different flute player since starting ICE. I would even go so far as to say I’m a different flute player every week. I hope that that will be the case for as long as I’m making music and especially as long as I’m making music with ICE. We need to keep transforming ourselves and reimagining our instruments to push the repertory forward. That’s how we will stay true to our mission of being contemporary.

**Fail, fall, grow**

I think the single most important thing I could tell a young musician is don’t be afraid of failing. Don’t be afraid of falling down. A toddler learning to walk is the image I keep in my mind when I’m trying to do things that are currently impossible but will someday be possible.

It’s through those “failures” that we learn what our unique contribution is to be made. For this reason, I think as musicians we need to have a loving relationship with failure. We’re so often taught to prioritize playing things correctly. And of course, we have to do that as we develop technique. But for young musicians this can instill a total fear of doing something outside our comfort zone. We have to remember that doing things outside our comfort zone is necessary to develop as musicians. It’s how we find out who we are.

We’re all different. We all have different sounds, just as we all have different speaking voices. We all have unique contributions to make to the field, and to the performance of a single piece of music. We need to nurture those ideas and those differences.

**Staying unfamiliar**

One quote that I’ve been thinking about a lot recently and that has grounded a lot of my recent work is by John Cage. He said, famously, “I’m trying to be unfamiliar with what I’m doing.” I think that’s such a marvelous invitation to create and to be unafraid of failure. And to be unafraid of risks and unknowns. I try to remember that as much as I can.

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Read more about Claire Chase at clairechase.net. Read more about ICE at iceorg.org.