

Interviewer: Xuanyu Zhou

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Xuanyu Zhou

Hello Dr. Copeland-Burns, it's very nice to meet you. Can you tell us a little about yourself, maybe [also] your music career?

Carla Copeland-Burns

Sure, I'm originally from Florida, went to graduate school in Boston where I did my master's degree at the New England Conservatory. I met my future husband there. We both are musicians and we ended up continuing on with a doctoral program at the Cincinnati Conservatory at the University of Cincinnati. And we have ended up in North Carolina many years ago, actually, where's he's professor of Bassoon at the University of North Carolina at Greensborough, but we both play with orchestras all across the region. I'm teaching at Duke. It's quite a varied life, teaching here and there and then also performing with many different types of ensembles across the region. Also, we travel and do quite a lot of appearances, or teaching, like at a festival in Italy. Things like that. Lots of variety.

Zhou

From what I heard you are a flautist? flutist?

Copeland-Burns

[laugh] That's a very common question. Most American flute players call themselves a flutist; there are other English-speaking areas that call themselves a flautist. There is a famous, older flute player that used to joke that it sort of depended on the amount of the donation.

Zhou

That's so interesting.

Copeland-Burns

Yeah, so it tends to be cultural, depending on your location.

Zhou

So where would you say your music has taken you [to], at this point of your life? What were your professional goals and how have they progressed?

Copeland-Burns

Well, my initial game plan was to be a full-time University professor, that's what I really wanted to do. I sort of got the bug for playing in orchestras at one point, while I was doing my doctoral studies, and I liked it a lot more than I had expected. I still have a lot of interest in new music, and in chamber music and I really value the variety of playing that I'm able to do, and I never wanted to quit teaching. So, I'm really happy with where I've ended up, I'm not sure I'd have been as pleased with my original goal. I love the University environment, but I also really liked the orchestral experiences. I'm

basically part-time with many organizations. It's such a rich artistic area here. I'm really glad I've ended up in this sort of setting.

Zhou

It seems like you are both a wonderful teacher and performer. I'd really love to hear about how COVID has changed things for you, maybe as a performer in the orchestra and as a teacher to your students. Talking to some Duke students, I learned that the mask mandate has really taken a toll on wind players, so could you tell us a bit more about that?

Copeland-Burns

Absolutely, I mean when we first had everything shut down. It was during Spring break for us at Duke, there was a mad scramble of "okay, how are we going to do this," "what are we going to do." I spent all that Spring break studying and learning about air and with the different instruments what tools we might use, how do you zoom with music. Because it's very different than just talking on zoom. It became clear that Zoom was the first, quick solution, and learning about microphones and placements and all that to make it that so it doesn't distort. There was really a mad scramble to get that functioning. And I've learned which device would make things work relatively well and produce a reasonable sound. I've also learned that there's a very recent laptop that some of my students had that will not work very well with sound, there's a constant distortion. It was fairly frustrating to have that going on. I think a lot of us had gotten into a little bit of a rut. **We were used to things happening a certain way and being able to do that and count on that and then, all of a sudden, we had to teach and learn in a really different manner and using different devices than what we normally do.** It meant that I focused on solo repertoires much more than things with accompaniment or playing with others. You know, playing with others is such a desired thing to do. One of the most interesting things for me though was, I think, a great tool for refining your own performances is to record yourself and then self-evaluate that recording. Most of my flute students were not into that, just, really did not want to do it. Being in that online environment, some students would occasionally have whatever connection issues and they would make a recording and send it to me, and I'd provide commentary and send it right back. Immediately, [students were:] "sure, I'll do a recording." I was so impressed with how they kind of flipped a switch and went from really not wanting to watch themselves play, to "okay, that's what we're going to do." For almost all my students, that actually kind of changed, how they were willing to work on their pieces. So, we're still using that much more, now, that we even are in person. So that's been kind of a surprise, just a little bit of surprise there. I've also had, after this time, when we were working on things online, on some different techniques that maybe we wouldn't normally focus on, such as extended techniques for contemporary music. I've had more students now, be excited about playing contemporary music. [laugh]

Zhou

[laugh] Does that have something to do with the audience that you're faced with?

Copeland-Burns

I don't think so, I think it's more we were really working different materials. Because we were not in person, not with a pianist, and if you want to do something productive right now, this is a good way to do it. So, they were a little more willing I think, to start opening up and trying something that were really different. A couple of my seniors, here it is, the beginning of their final semester back in January and now they are saying, "I really think I should've done that, can I learn it now?" [both laugh] So I'm noticing more flexibility in all of the students, being just a little bit more open. There's been such a flood of videos of people doing various experiments, writing new pieces, just so much

that has come forth online. Obviously, before the pandemic, we've had a lot there already. Now there's just an extra flood of new compositions and people having a little more time to actually try those and then there was just more exposure for my students to see that happening.

Zhou

Absolutely, I have noticed that a lot of the voice and music department teachers have been very creative [laugh] in maintaining teaching in this environment on zoom, and it's really impressive. So, when was it that you felt your approach to teaching needed to change? That you're giving your students these new repertoires and that you're adapting to music without a pianist, or not playing in the orchestra, more solo pieces, for example. Can you bring us back to that time?

Copeland-Burns

Oh, that was pretty much immediate. There were lots and lots of studies that were coming forth pretty quickly about how aerosols spread with the voice and with all the different wind instruments and comparing different wind instruments. We did try using masks and we did have some students give senior recitals wearing a couple of different contraptions and it greatly affects your airspeed and so it really was not the most satisfying experience. Another kind of cool thing, but maybe not something to do long term was this recording your parts individually and putting them together in technology to create an ensemble but you're not actually playing with other instruments. **So pretty much immediately, I thought, okay, we will use this as an opportunity to learn more about solo repertoire, which there's hundreds of years of solo repertoire for solo flute, or music with electronic sounds so that's getting [students] more into contemporary music again. It was fast that it became obvious we are going to have to do something that will not require playing at the same time with other people. Because doing it artificially was limiting in some of the classes for ensembles.** That was a necessary thing and it was a good thing to do, but I don't think it's what we want to do long term it's just not the same thing. You're just not getting the same benefits. So, it was an opportunity to explore this other repertoire more fully and by and large, the students jumped in and did it. I mean, if you are playing repertoire that's intended to have other things with it, and you can't have it or you're just playing to a recording, it doesn't feel very good. But if you're playing repertoire that's intended to be a solo flute or there are some composers that are doing some different backings that are pretty different from a well-coordinated piano part. It might provide a texture underneath and the flute plays something over it or around that, or the controls it over their laptop or something like that. **So I try to turn it into an opportunity instead of a negative.**

Zhou

That's great. I'm actually very curious about the masks you guys are wearing because I've heard about very creative devices. What types are there, and you said that affects airspeed? How does that work?

Copeland-Burns

Yes, so just a quick mini-lesson on the flute. [both laugh] Let's say you're playing the flute and you're blowing your air at a certain speed. If you make your aperture right here, between your lips, a little larger, the airspeed slows down. If you make it a little bit smaller, the speed gets faster. So, what would happen to that one note, instead of being steady, it would go up or down depending on whether your aperture's getting larger or smaller. That's one thing that we encounter quite a bit in our normal playing of the flute. Yeah. But if you put a cloth, so when we play the flute, we have a small opening right here, and we blow. **But if you put a cloth over that, right, it blocks the air, shows certain notes, especially in the lower register, it would really block it more. Because it just feels very**

different. It's already sort of a slower air. It would really affect how flat or sharp you were and it would not be the same as if you're playing without it. So it's, it would require you to kind of play your instrument almost incorrectly in order to make it work with the mask. So it's it was doable. But especially for [the] young you know, professional players could kind of deal with it. But for younger players with less experience, it was much more difficult. And you know, from my end a little bit frustrating to attempt to teach how to apply to the mask which might not be the best way in the long run for them as a flutist, you know? Yeah. So anyway, to answer your question, there are you've probably seen some singer's masks which are quite large, they're bigger than the mass that you would walk around with. And there's a bit of a structure to it.

Zhou

Oh yes, the duckbill.

Copeland-Burns

Oh, yes. Yes, the duckbill. **So there are the ones that I have found maybe the most effective were kind of like the singer's mask but they were bigger, they came out further, and there was a hole cut on each side. So, you would like, if this is my flute, [laugh] I would put the head joint through that hole and the end of it would also possibly stick out here or there will be a flap, and then the part where you blow is contained there.** And then there's a relatively small...so, okay, let me back up even further. [laugh] So, what they discovered when they studied the various wind instruments and how much they produce in the way of aerosols, they found that the instruments that have a bend, so like a saxophone, you blow into the mouthpiece, and it has that curve: it's got this [gestures] and then it comes back [gestures]. So that actually produced relatively few aerosols, as compared to like a clarinet, where you blow into a mouthpiece and it's straight. And so, you know, that would come straight through. The flute, at first everybody thought, it would be just like a singer, it's going to be you know because we're just going to blow and there's nothing containing it. Well, that's not entirely the case because we form a tiny little aperture here, and it's very focused, and a good chunk of that air actually goes into the flute, and then, it makes a turn, a sharp turn to the right so more of it kind of stays more within the instrument. So, I learned a lot about all of those different things. I do wish that we had been able to set up our own testing studio to measure things at Duke. But, you know, it was certainly happening in many, many other places. There was not a lack of studies. It just would have been sort of fun and a good learning opportunity to experiment a little bit more and see what might work and what you know would be beneficial. So, we use those devices, and then ultimately they did sort of find...the University of Cincinnati has a conservatory there which is where I graduated, but they also have a medical school and they have a strong engineering program. So they combined those three departments into this big study with a big focus on air and using HEPA filters in like the voice studios and measuring, you know, if you put the HEPA filter here and they sing, so they had this size room and a variety of parameters so that actually was really informative. And so, I think this air quality thing is going to really be something very important, you know, as we move forward so the masks were a quick fix. And you know, probably not perfect, but it was a quick fix. It was okay. It did really affect how you played the flute. So I'm glad that we are you know, at a point where things are beginning to get a little more under control.

Zhou

For sure. I mean, these tests are so important because, you know, wind and air instruments. I remember, I think it was 2020 spring when the pandemic first broke out. I was walking through the practice rooms, and they had this sign on the door that says no wind instruments in practice. That must have been really hard.

Copeland-Burns

That was very, very hard. We were not allowed to play on campus. Basically, students had to practice in their dorm rooms. And sometimes people were receptive to that and other times they weren't so that was that was extremely challenging. Yeah, so you know, we were online, but it was difficult because the students, some were in situations where it was almost impossible to practice. So that's very discouraging, as you can imagine.

Zhou

Absolutely. So, dwelling on the issue of mask-wearing and you know how music has changed. I'm also curious about how [the] connections with your audience or connections with fellow members, let's say you're playing in an orchestra, that kind of community change. So how did interactions with other musicians and with the audience change while flutists were trying to navigate? In this situation?

Copeland-Burns

Sure. Well, the first thing that happened is we didn't. So, for example, I have played for several of the Broadway national tours, they usually have a, you know, a big chunk of that tour traveled as a self-contained unit. And then local players are brought in for certain portions of the orchestra. But Broadway stopped completely that meant all of the Broadway shows in New York completely stopped just completely shut down the tours also stopped and then or like our local full-time orchestra, the North Carolina Symphony, **they stopped for a bit and then kind of regrouped and did much smaller pieces, much more with strings, because string players could keep a mask on and keep playing and they can keep distance. And so, they just left out all the winds and picked repertoire for that and then they started in doing a few works that would have just a few wind players and they have really spread apart on the stage, and they would use plexiglass shields in between those.**

Zhou

Yeah, I've seen those.

Copeland-Burns

so there are some pros and cons with using those that I've read about because it can affect the flow of the air conditioning systems. However, you know, with the distance in between and the Plexiglas here. A lot of the aerosols we've now learned travel up and so with the air systems pulling it from high. That's extremely helpful. So, it actually went pretty well. **And then gradually, you know, as we got more tools, the vaccines especially, they started adding people back in, and of course, just like Duke they needed to require vaccines and they did a lot of testing they have weekly PCR test for everyone plus some additional rapid tests that were brought in. And they basically, the winds and brass did more testing than the strings because we couldn't play at a professional level with a mask on.** When I first went back where we were really playing in a more normal fashion because of the vaccines and the boosters and all of that, it actually felt a little bit, I was a little nervous, it felt a little odd after so long, you know, but everyone's being so careful. And there's [an] extra extraordinary effort in keeping everything safe. **I played for Wicked when it first came back, back in the fall. And they actually had kind of like little miniature rooms with plastic shielding or the wind and they had these huge air ducts. They were removing...so they brought that into the orchestra pit so they were able to keep fresh air going and remove what we were producing basically. So its really a massive, massive effort to keep everyone safe.** You talked about the interaction with the audience. You know it's it does feel different with everyone on the stage with the exception of when

the winds and brass are playing with everyone wearing a mask. I found myself you know, we're going through all these extra efforts to try to be safe and still perform. I sometimes found myself if there was an audience member clearly not into wearing the mask or the rules of the of the facility. I got a little bit resentful because it was you know, we can't play without inhaling all that stuff, you know, and we wanted to keep our audiences safe. Of course, you know. So I did find myself sometimes getting a little bit cranky.

Zhou

I understand.

Copeland-Burns

Yeah, over that, you know, but at the same time, the vast majority of our audience members have been right there with us and trying to do their part to keep it safe and be understanding of the situation. And so, I really appreciate that, you know, it's been very heartwarming to see how much people wanted live music. And that support has been fantastic.

Zhou

Yeah. So as a performer, I was wondering, have you experienced, let's say, in terms of audience numbers, have you experienced times of highs and lows or difficulties with like, you know, worrying about not having enough audience maybe for a show? Has that ever been a consideration?

Copeland-Burns

With the groups that I tend to play with, one, it's difficult to tell because the facilities limited the numbers of people because of the pandemic. So I'm unsure. I don't really know that there was ever a problem getting people to come. More recently, as things are getting more and more normal like I've performed a few operas at this point this season. The audience has been full. But I do know that the facilities for several the orchestra concerts there they've specifically limited the capacity so that it's just a little bit hard to tell. The opera did not do this, but the North Carolina Symphony actually started a fabulous virtual series that a lot of their audience members. I mean, even without the pandemic, there are some audience members that may find it difficult for a variety of reasons to actually be able to come to the concert in person and they did it was actually kind of well, it's a huge effort by the symphony staff, but also, they tapped some of the resources within the orchestra. So, one of the musicians was absolutely wonderful with video production, and he had already been doing some, you know, sort of feature human interest stories about orchestra members and using a drone sort of thing. And so they already knew they had that, but they kind of got together, and there were musicians that were very involved in producing this. One of the other members sort of became the spokesperson. And so, in opening their virtual concert, he would give program notes and really talk to the audience on the screen and it ended up with having kind of a following of people really enjoying these virtual performances. It felt still, like it was our local audience, although anyone could do it. But it just felt like you were still watching your orchestra as opposed to you know, just whatever from around the world. It still felt like our orchestra there. So that has actually continued even though, you know, pretty much anybody that would want to get tickets could come get tickets. But they've actually continued that. So that's something that I think will probably change. I mean, it's not just somebody held up their cell phone and video the concert anymore. I mean, it was really a production that they wouldn't have normally done. So, I think that's, that's been a positive. Especially as some of the audience members maybe have been coming to the symphony for 30 years, and maybe they're older now and it's difficult. So, it's kind of nice to have that extension to the audience. So even though we

have the mask because it sort of blocks certain things. Sometimes it's hard to tell who's who. I do like the other thing that has come out of that. Absolutely.

Zhou

So, I'd like to ask one more question before we get on to what would be your next steps or what would be a future plan. One more thing I was curious about when you said, a lot of the music is now, let's say, taught over zoom, being recorded instead of like always performed live. Do you think that changed anything for you or for the people that might be watching it? The way that it's delivered virtually.

Copeland-Burns

First of all, we are getting back to performing, like, we are most definitely back to performing live. That you know, so I think that will still be our norm and our preference and all of that. But I do think that this comfort level with Zoom, or other technologies that are being developed that are better for sound you know, it's been wonderful being able to like easily, and technically I could have done this before but it just never occurred to me. I can easily contact one of my colleagues halfway around the world and schedule a class with my students with them. I mean, that part of it is nice, having some virtual performances is nice, but I don't see that becoming a permanent anything. I do think that some of the extra creative videos, maybe combining photography or dance or you know, some other element. I think that is kind of an interesting outgrowth that probably will continue to develop. But I do think that a lot of the more traditional performances will be the way that we return back to.

Zhou

Yeah, sounds good. So as maybe both a performer and a teacher, what would be what would you take away from this experience of this being, you know, thrown off the course a little by the pandemic, and into your, maybe your future professional goals and your future career path?

Copeland-Burns

Don't get too comfortable? [both laugh] I think discomfort really inspires so much creativity. And I think I said something at the beginning about getting into a little bit of a rut. And I think having to, well, we were just sort of shaken out of that. You know, it was for bad reasons, but I think some good really came out of it. And I think it's good to remain not in a rut. But you know, sometimes it takes a real push to make that happen.

Zhou

Wow, that's amazing. Thank you so much for joining me today and for our audiences. Flutist Carla Copeland-burns currently performs with the Greensboro North Carolina and Salisbury symphonies, as well as North Carolina Opera, Carolina Ballet, Blue Mountain, and with the performer composer Collective Forecast Music, and she is a professor at Duke University Music Department, please feel free to check out her performances and her upcoming performances and we look forward to hearing more from you. Thank you so much.

Copeland-Burns

Thank you.