

Low Notes – All About Low Flutes



Low Flutes in the Time of Locusts – Part 1 of 3

Written by [Tessa Brinckman](#)

When times are rough, there's not only anxiety and paralysis, but also an urge to regenerate how we live, think and feel. It's a little bit like driving with the brakes on. In this three-part series of articles I'm offering ideas and sources for you to reframe your low flute playing, whether you are creating, curating, or just new to it all. Take your time to explore with zero pressure and maximum curiosity. If the idea of expanding your work makes you tense and tired (yes, because the world is cuckoo), just grab a pillow. Scream into it. You are now ready to begin.

Part One: Back to the Drawing Board

I won't reinvent the wheel. Take a look at these free resources on low flute fundamentals - it might provoke something new:

- Keith Hanlon's [article](#) is helpful if you're not a low flute player.
- Chris Potter's [site](#) is comprehensive with all things low flute.
- Carla Rees gives an [excellent overview](#) of Kingma system altos and bass flute, and general alto/bass flute and publishes new repertoire through [Tetractys](#).
- Shanna Pranaitis and Matthias Ziegler have some lovely explanations of [contemporary techniques](#) that include low flutes, along with their detailed [repertoire page](#).
- Facebook's [Low Flutes page](#) offers instant connection with low flutists who enjoy shop-talk - a good place to discuss flute brands.

The economics of owning a low flute is often daunting, especially now:

- If you don't have a low flute, GPFS can [lease you one](#) (post-COVID-19 though - sorry).
- You can buy an instrument cooperatively with others (with a good contract and insurance coverage). My lovely friend, [Patricia Nagle](#), professor at the Darius Milhaud Conservatoire in Paris, acquired a Kingma system $\frac{1}{4}$ tone alto flute together with her bestie colleague, Françoise Ducos. They're very happy with this arrangement as they have never needed it at the same time, and they've also jointly purchased a Kingma large bore bass flute.



You can listen here to my Kotato contrabass flute (click on the album picture). Kotatos are known for their rich sound, and are heavier beasts to wrangle than Eva Kingma's contrabasses.

Alex Shapiro originally wrote "Below" for Peter Sheridan, and my version here adds more improvisatory elements.

Below is an homage to undersea life. Recorded humpback whale melodies interact with the flute and other imagined soundscapes. Contrabasses are well suited to creating dreamy meditations.

Low flutes (especially contrabasses) are temperamental creatures - long rods bend easily, tenons get sticky, and even the flute case can contribute to problems. Chris Potter's [list of repair people who are experienced with low flutes](#) is useful, so establish a good relationship before you're stuck in a flute emergency.

Since low flutes are physically demanding, every flutist should be familiar with [Body Mapping](#). For example, if you prefer playing a straight head-jointed alto (ie. for better intonation), it's good to think of your clavicles as arm joints and be clear about how much they can move without injury - it's actually quite a lot. Ensure that you understand the anatomical process of breathing, and cultivate an efficient embouchure with an instrument that guzzles air.

When you are practicing difficult techniques or passages, remember to set your metronome, and breath in time before playing. Breath in 1-beat, 2-beat or more inhalations, in smooth and metrically proportionate cycles. This will really help with multiphonics, singing/playing etc. and other cranky techniques, especially with the air volume of low flutes. Breathing in time, (wherever possible) in proportion to the upcoming phrase, makes for intelligible phrasing, calmer thinking, and better groove.

Some people don't enjoy playing low flutes because of the haptics and sound of the headjoint. Low flute head joints are not as prolific and diverse as high flute headjoints. I had Eva Kingma add an extra weight at the cork of my bass flute headjoint to help the sound. It took extra work to learn to play my upright Kingma system bass flute, because of the relationship of my head to the embouchure plate on a flute that has an end-pin, finding what motion worked with the best possible sound.

Take an online coaching or two if you want to focus on an aspect of your low flute playing. You have your pick of great online classes. Veteran online teachers can tell what's going on even through crappy microphones and camera limitations. You can also commission a Zoom lesson as a group (DIY masterclass), which saves dollars and creates community.

Learning counters isolation, and reminds us that we matter. Whether you play concerts or play in a closet, your contributions to the musical "canon" are important. More about that next time.

Next time -

Low Flutes in the Time of Locusts

Part Two: Recreating the Canon - Identity, Repertoire, Commissions and Curations



New Zealand flutist **Tessa Brinckman** has been described by critics as a “flutist of chameleon-like gifts” and “virtuoso elegance” (*Gramophone*), an “excellent... flutist” (*Willamette Week*) and “highlight of Portland” (*New Music Box*), who “play(s) her instrument with great beauty and eloquence” (*Music Matters New Zealand*). As an interdisciplinary flutist/composer she has premiered over a hundred (and commissioned more than twenty) new works, within many classical music ensembles and concert series in the United States, South Africa, France and New Zealand.

Ms. Brinckman has served on the music faculties of various Oregon universities and colleges, and now teaches workshops and masterclasses in the USA and abroad. Recent solo projects include a commission by the Oregon Fringe Festival to complete and premiere *Box | Grown Men Sing* (bass flute, waterphone, fixed audio + video) on the subject of solitary confinement (2019); a residency at Atlantic Center for the Arts (2019), creating animation and music for *Blazing World*, about 17th Century science fiction writer Margaret Cavendish, and ongoing preparations for an upcoming album, singles, residencies, commissions and animation projects (2021-23). www.tessabrinckman.com



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