

Teaching, Travel, and Technology: The Life of a Modern Flutist



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An Interview with Patricia Surman

By: [Brittany Primavera](#)

You are currently Artist Teacher of flute at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Tell me about this unique town and the university. What is your favorite thing about teaching at a small school? How do your students benefit? The semester is ending soon, are you teaching any summer courses?

Where should I even begin? I grew up in Redlands, California, a suburb of Los Angeles, and I would never in a million years have guessed that I would end up in rural Oklahoma! Tahlequah is a special place, it is the capital of the Cherokee Nation and in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains, so it is a place of great natural beauty and very culturally diverse. Geographically, it lies directly between Tulsa, Oklahoma and Fayetteville, Arkansas. Both of these cities have thriving classical music scenes, and I have enjoyed being able to collaborate with the musicians here in many different ways – as an

orchestral musician, chamber music, new music, and through my teaching. I have a studio of 12 undergraduate students; about half of them are performance majors, half music education, and one or two music business majors. The students are so lucky here, they benefit from living in a small town that is free from distractions, which allows them to really focus on their studies. I encourage my students to be very active performers and educators right from the start, so they are playing in recitals, competitions, teaching students, and learning how to develop a career in music as a natural part of their studies here. The students also enjoy working with a number of guests, we have lots of masterclasses and recitals – recent flute guests to our campus include Amy Porter, Mary Karen Clardy, John Bailey and many others.

I knew I wanted to be a professional flutist from the first day I played, and I knew I was meant to teach the flute from an early age. In fact, it has been my vocation since I was 16 years old. I grew up in Southern California and I paid my way through college working as a freelance flutist and flute teacher. When I moved to Texas to attend graduate school, I established a large and successful flute studio through the schools in the Dallas suburbs, and really refined the craft of teaching while carrying a load of about 40 students. I have been very fortunate to work with teachers who not only shaped my playing, but also served as teaching mentors and took the time to help me learn how to be a very good teacher. Thinking back on my education, it seems a little funny...I didn't take very many education courses and all of my degrees are in performance, but I learned so much about teacher by observing my teachers teach and working with them very closely on developing my teaching skills.

I think my students are very lucky to have a flute teacher who is not only passionate about performing and constantly looking to raise the bar and learn more about playing the flute, but also someone who is so dedicated to the art of teaching. It really takes a lot of time and energy to teach and mentor college students. College flute professors are responsible for shaping the student's playing and also for getting the student off on the right foot in their career. No pressure, right? I am happy and proud to say that my graduates are very successful young musicians and entrepreneurs, I really enjoy seeing their careers and lives blossom after they complete their studies with me.

Every summer, I host a masterclass at NSU. It has grown from a 3-day class to a 4-day class. When I created the event, I felt it was very important because there weren't any masterclass options nearby for my students to attend. I created this class with three simple goals in mind: first, great teaching; second, great music making; and third, affordability. I choose a guest artist every year that is not only a great performer, but also an amazing teacher. We work together to present traditional masterclasses and several topical classes that are most relevant to the students. We perform recitals for the students every night and there is a chamber music component to the course. The final concert of the course features student performers and this year it will feature not only the student chamber music performances, but also a soloist will be selected from the masterclasses to perform his or her solo.

This year's guest artist is Nicole Esposito from the University of Iowa, and the students are very excited to work with such a high-energy and talented flutist! We will also have chamber music coaching with pianist Nataliya Sukhina, she is currently a collaborative pianist at Texas Tech University and is known for her expert interpretation of new music and as a collaborative artist. The students will really benefit from being able to coach with a diverse and talented faculty! There are a few spots left, and we will be running a shuttle from the Tulsa Airport for out-of-towners, www.nsufluteworkshop.com.

This semester you are actually in Thessaloniki, Greece as a Fulbright Scholar. Before we talk about your projects, can you tell me a little about the Fulbright Application process and the difference between the Fulbright programs? What did you write your proposal about?

Yes, I am researching and teaching as a Fulbright Scholar to Greece. My research project is exploring contemporary Greek flute repertoire, I have been working with composers here and learning about their flute compositions. I am also teaching the flute studio at the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki. The application process was long; they require recordings, resume, a project statement, letters of recommendation, and a few other things. The application was due by August 1, 2012 and then it goes through several rounds of evaluations before final selection. I found out that I was chosen in April 2013, and left for Greece in February 2014. Looking back it was a long time in the making, but it was worth all of the effort for the wonderful opportunity!

There are several different Fulbright programs, most broadly distinguished between those for current students and those for professors and independent scholars. The Fulbright Foundations sends Americans and hosts students and scholars in the US from around the world. It is a really wonderful program, and if you are interested in applying, you can find out more about the different opportunities at their website for students: <http://www.iie.org/Programs/Fulbright-US-Student-Program> or for scholars: <http://www.cies.org/>.

So, what are your current endeavors at the University of Macedonia in regards to your teaching and research of Greek contemporary techniques and practices?

My project has two components – teaching and research. For the teaching side of things, I'm teaching the flute studio at the University of Macedonia and doing masterclasses at several other institutions in Greece including Ionian University in Corfu and several conservatories in Thessaloniki and Athens. I'm also guest conducting a municipal band on a concert in Thessaloniki.

My research also has two components – first is the presentation of American flute music to the Greeks and second is the exploration of Greek flute literature by contemporary composers. I will be presenting a recital of music by Copland, Burton, Schwantner, Dorff, and Foss and giving some lectures on American flute music and I have been meeting with composers and learning about their music,

collecting their music and I will bring it back to the US and give a series of recitals featuring music by Greek composers.

How is teaching the Greek flute studio different from American studios? Do you know any Greek yet? What is Thessaloniki like- is there an active music scene?

Well, it is the same and different all at the same time! So many things about playing are universal... the laws of physics and acoustics work the same all over the world! But the culture of a studio can be incredibly specific to a teacher, a region, and a country. Some of the biggest differences are the use of vibrato, and tuning to A=442. The tuning was strange for about one day, and now it is the new norm. The students are very nice and very open to learning! They work very hard and are great to work with! I didn't know very much Greek when I arrived, but I am learning new words every day. My students are also so kind...they give me pointers on their favorite restaurants, holiday traditions, and other cultural things.

I have been very happy to find an incredibly vibrant music scene here. Concerts are so well attended! Every concert that I have attended has been completely full, the performers are programming interesting and challenging repertoire, and the audience really appreciates it! That is one of my favorite things about Thessaloniki...my other favorite things are the beautiful sea view and incredibly delicious food!

Your flute and computer chamber group, DuoInteraktiv, recently won a Yamaha Chamber Music Grant. What was your project? How does that work performing with computer? What kind of repertoire and venues do you perform?

Yes, we were selected to be CMS/Yamaha In-Residence Fellowship. The cash award allowed us to purchase some equipment and to present concerts of music for flute and computer. Our concept was to create a chamber music ensemble that views the flutist and computer musician as equals. We perform music for flute and live interactive electronics and we have performed at a variety of venues ranging from the National Flute Association convention, statewide flute conventions, universities, art galleries, and schools. We work very closely with the composers to see their music to fruition and have commissioned several works for this ensemble. It is a really fun and challenging ensemble! The technology that powers the music is extremely experimental and we have a fun time testing it to its limits!

Do you have any advice for flutists trying to make it in the performance or teaching realms?

I can tell you what I advise my own students. I sit them down for a long and serious talk. I encourage them to do a great deal of soul-searching because it is a personal decision. Any teacher can give their best guess at a student's chances of being successful, but at the end of the day it is one's own sense of determination, work ethic, and commitment to the art that determines their own future. I have seen

students who, by all measure, had no chance of being successful overcome the odds through countless hours of hard work and dedication. On the flipside, I'm sure we all know musicians that have enough raw talent to be on the greatest stages of the world, but can't seem to get their own head together to do what it takes. So, talent is not enough. It sure helps, but not as much as work ethic, commitment, openness to learning, organization, and generally keeping your personal life under control. These things all take maturity and patience, two character traits that are not so easily come by in a person. If you want to be great, but these are some of your weaknesses, address them sooner rather than later. These kinds of things can be overcome, and when they are, you will find that your musicality and technical prowess will improve exponentially.

It is very important to learn how to deal with frustration – a normal part of the learning process – and with disappointment. It isn't possible for everything to come as easily as we would like and it isn't possible that we will win every audition or competition. The true test is how we learn to push past frustration and how we learn to deal with disappointment in a way that is healthy and ensures future success. We all have to learn these lessons in life; the difference between musicians and non-musicians is that we musicians have to work through these things very publicly, which makes us incredibly vulnerable. Learn how to be gracious about defeat, learn how to be patient with yourself, and learn how to be an open and flexible musician. These skills will carry you far in life, on stage and off!

Dr. Patricia Surman is Artist Teacher of Flute at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. As a Fulbright Scholar to Greece, she is currently serving as a guest faculty member at the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki, Greece and researching contemporary Greek flute music. Dr. Surman balances a number of projects including her flute and computer ensemble, DuoInteraktiv, and the recording of her upcoming CD of American Music for flute and piano. She also hosts the NSU Flute Workshop each summer and maintains an active touring schedule in the United States and abroad. www.patriciasurman.com