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The Newsletter of the School of Music at the University of British Columbia

UBC High Notes

Hildegard Westerkamp

The pioneering sound ecologist and producer (BMus'72) talks technology, gender, and trusting your own inner voice.



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Photo courtesy the artist.

→ Kiran Bhumber performing in the RUBS suit.

A STUDIO OF ONE'S OWN



Photo Credit: Takumi Hayashi/UBC

Pioneering producer-composers Hildegard Westerkamp (BMus'72) and Kiran Bhumber (BMus'14) talk about technology, gender, and trusting your inner voice.

By Aryn Strickland

When Hildegard Westerkamp (BMus'72) looks back on her decades-long career as an experimental composer and sound ecologist, she marvels at how much music production has changed. During her student days, there were no computer screens,

“ I am interested in fusing not just music but also emerging technologies, dance, interaction and visual arts together.”

— Kiran Bhumber (BMus'14)

no visualizers, no such thing as 'digital.' Everything was analogue and you relied solely on your ear as you edited. She remembers working in her studio, surrounded by pieces of audio reel that she had cut, marked, and hung up for quick reference until they could be spliced—literally taped together—into ambitious compositions that embraced unpredictability, merging music, found sounds, and field recordings.

Her chosen instrument—the sounds of the environment—and the limitations of the technology available at the time necessitated deep listening and spurred creativity: “I tried to find the musicality in the sounds that I had recorded,” Westerkamp says. She experimented with painstaking production techniques like pitchshifting (that is, slowing down

and speeding up the recordings), filtering and equalizing, and delay feedback among others, to achieve the effects she wanted.

Westerkamp and the other composers and producers of her generation—she cites R. Murray Schafer and Barry Truax as important influences—developed ideas and techniques that during the shift to computer-based production became standard tools in the producer's repertoire.

“Working in the studio totally aurally then as opposed to now, where soundfiles are displayed visually on computer screens, makes an absolute world of a difference,” she says.

Indeed, new technologies have both democratized music production and made new things possible: “Anyone can be a bedroom producer nowadays, and that is a very powerful thing in itself,” says Kiran Bhumber (BMus'14), a graduate of the School of Music's Music Technology program.

The up-and-coming composer, producer, and performer cut her teeth on software like Cubase and Garage Band while still in high school. At UBC she created work that wouldn't have been possible even a decade ago, blending cutting-edge technology, visuals, and using some of the same compositional techniques Westerkamp helped to develop. In the Digital Performance Systems class (SUBCLASS) at UBC, Bhumber developed RUBS, the 'Responsive User Body Suit,' which melds composition and performance.

“I was thinking, I wonder if there is a way we can look at contact improv and use technology as a bridge between triggering a music sample or changing a visual on screen,” she says.

The RUBS suit allows performers to compose music as they move and dance on stage, touching or stroking different sensors sewn into the fabric to trigger sounds and sequences. Her innovative suit has brought her recognition from within the electronic music world with an invitation to present her work at the New Interfaces for Musical Expression Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark last year and a coveted spot at the University of Michigan to continue her work in the Masters of Media Art program there.

“I am interested in fusing not just music but also emerging technologies, dance, interaction and visual arts together,” Bhumber says.

Read the **whole story** on the *High Notes* blog.

ALUMNI MAKING WAVES

“You don’t have to fit in a box”

Singer, producer, and arts entrepreneur Debi Wong (BMus’08) on opera’s potential to create spaces for underrepresented voices

By Aryn Strickland



Photo courtesy Debi Wong.

Debi Wong (left) as Acis.

Mezzo soprano Debi Wong (BMus’08) believes that opera has the potential to create dialogue about underrepresented groups that too often goes unrealized. Even at major houses like the Metropolitan Opera, modern productions are still trapped in traditions and tropes which she says can have consequences for our society.

“If we are always telling the story about the woman in distress and the man who saves her, does that affect our cultural values?” she asks. Wong’s adaptation of *Acis and Galatea*, the classic Handel opera, brought that question directly to Vancouver audiences last September.

In the production Wong played the character Acis, who in the original opera is a shepherd in love with Galatea, a nymph, and the two are persecuted for their love by the god Polyphemus. By changing one character’s gender and the mythical elements of the pastoral opera, Wong sought to create a space for the LGBTQ community in opera and make it more accessible to modern audiences.

“I think someone who produces opera can have an influence on the way people think about relationships. By putting two women who fall in love we can give voice to underrepresented people that we don’t traditionally see on an operatic stage.”

But it was no easy feat.

To change the character of Acis, Wong had to make significant changes to the libretto. It meant rewriting some of the text, adapting the 18th century language, pulling some songs from different places and then piecing the score together. To make her changes Wong also looked at all three of Handel’s different written versions of the opera. Using these different versions she lined up the story points and when something was missing she had more source material to draw on. For the story’s emotional climax, she adapted a passionate duet from *Roselinda*, another Handel opera.

Read the **whole story** on the *High Notes* blog.

OUR DONORS

THE GIFT OF MUSIC

This March, the School of Music unveiled one of the jewels of our instrument collection: a newly renovated double-manual harpsichord modeled on an 18th-century German original. Harpsichordist Alexander Weimann, along with violinist Chloe Meyers and viola da gamba player Natalie Mackie, showcased the new addition with a special concert at Roy Barnett Recital Hall featuring the works of German Baroque composers.

“Bach, Muffat, Buxtehude and Schmeltzer—it was the perfect repertoire, I think, to demonstrate what makes the instrument such an important and beautiful addition to the School,” says Professor Alex Fisher, who helped organize the renovation and the concert.

Craftsman Craig Tomlinson built the harpsichord by hand in the 1980s, based on the original German design by Christian Zell (1728) that is preserved today in the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Hamburg. Celebrated for its rich sound and variety of different tone colours, Tomlinson’s masterful replica had

begun to show its age and needed some significant improvements.

A generous donation by Marlene Yemchuk, in honour of her son David Yemchuk (BSc’10), made the renovation possible.

“In the fall of 2016 Marlene and I began discussing a donation in the memory of David, an alumnus of the UBC Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, who was an avid and talented musician in his own right,” Fisher says.

“After consulting with a variety of local performers and experts, we decided that the donation’s greatest impact would be to fully renovate the Zell harpsichord, which over the years had fallen into disrepair.”

In addition, the generous donation also made possible some improvements to a second harpsichord by Ken Bakeman that is heavily used by students and faculty.

Read the **whole story** on the *High Notes* blog.



Photo Credit: Takumi Hayashi/UBC

IDEAS

Rethinking the canon

Women composers represent only a small part of the Western musical canon, in spite of important contributions that date back to at least the Middle Ages. A new project by UBC faculty and alumni is helping to change that. **By Graham MacDonald**

Read the **full Q & A** ← on the *High Notes* blog.

CATCHING UP WITH OUR STUDENTS

PhD candidate **Antares Boyle** won the Society for Music Theory's prestigious SMT-40 Dissertation Fellowship for her dissertation project, "Formation and Process in Repetitive Post-Tonal Music," which theorizes how musical segments, processes, and larger forms arise in recent post-tonal works that feature extensive varied repetition.

DMA student **Benjamin Hopkins** won the grand prize at the inaugural Robert and Ellen Silverman Piano Concerto Competition in March! Nine students competed in a thrilling evening of piano concertos at Roy Barnett Recital Hall, with second prize going to DMA student **Evgenia Rabinovich**, third prize to BMus student **Ayunia Saputro**, and fourth prize to BMus student **Aydan Con**.

BA (Music) student **Chantelle Ko** received the Interdisciplinary Award at the recent UBC Multidisciplinary Undergraduate Research Conference for her innovative Touch Responsive Augmented Violin Interface System (TRAVIS), the capstone project for her minor in Applied Music Technology.

UBC sessional instructor Dr. Laurel Parsons (MA'91, PhD'03) and Dr. Brenda Ravenscroft (PhD'93), of McGill University, are the editors of *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers*, a four-volume series of essays devoted to the study of music written by women composers. The first volume, which features essays on concert music composed between 1960 and 2000, recently won the Society for Music Theory's 2018 award for Outstanding Multi-Authored Publication. With the release of the second volume fast approaching, we sat down with Parsons to discuss the project.

How did the project come about?

I did my dissertation on the music of Elisabeth Lutyens, who was a British composer. I started reading about how influential she was on British music of the time, but I couldn't find anything more specific about how she was influential. So, I decided I would explore her music for my dissertation. At the same time, I started noticing how few papers there were on music by women. After tracking this for many years, it became clear to me that we had to do something to improve the representation of composers who were women in our discipline.

When complete, there will be four volumes of essays on approximately 35 composers from the middle ages, with Hildegard of Bingen, up to 2014. The four volumes will be mostly 20th and 21st century music, but the volume that we have coming up will be music from the Middle Ages to 1900. Our final volume will be electro acoustic, experimental, and multimedia music.

In the first volume you write that, between 1994 and 2013, only 23 out of 1524 papers published in eight peer-reviewed journals were about music composed by women. How did you interpret these numbers?

We weren't surprised at all because we've been tracking them informally for years. This confirmed



Laurel Parsons (right) and Brenda Ravenscroft (left)

what we already knew. Although it's rather stark when you start looking at numbers like this—even 23 seemed like more than we expected.

What kinds of music tend to make up the classical canon?

There's so much wonderful music that you learn as a student and there's so much wonderful music that you learn in university. Not to take anything away from that, but once you start looking for music by women, or people who are not men, white men in particular because classical music is such a Eurocentric discipline, it really becomes shocking to see how narrow that representation of composers really is. It wasn't that women weren't composing; there is a long history of women composing from the Middle Ages until now. But they definitely were composing less frequently than men, and they didn't have the same opportunities.

How important is biography to this project, and what role does it play in how we listen to this music?

Many people have not heard of these composers, so it was necessary to provide a little bit of background on who these women were. The more we did this, the more we have seen how extraordinary these women were, and are.

For example, when we go through music school, we're often taught about Clara [Schumann, *nee*] Wieck as a young woman having this domineering father—Friedrich Wieck—and the influence he had on her relationship with Robert Schumann. But we never hear about her mother. In reading Nancy Reich's book on Clara Schumann, I discovered that Clara's mother was a concert pianist, like Clara was later. It had been an abusive marriage and she had left the family, but Clara's mother was an extraordinary musician in her own right. It's a remarkable part of the story that we never hear.