

---

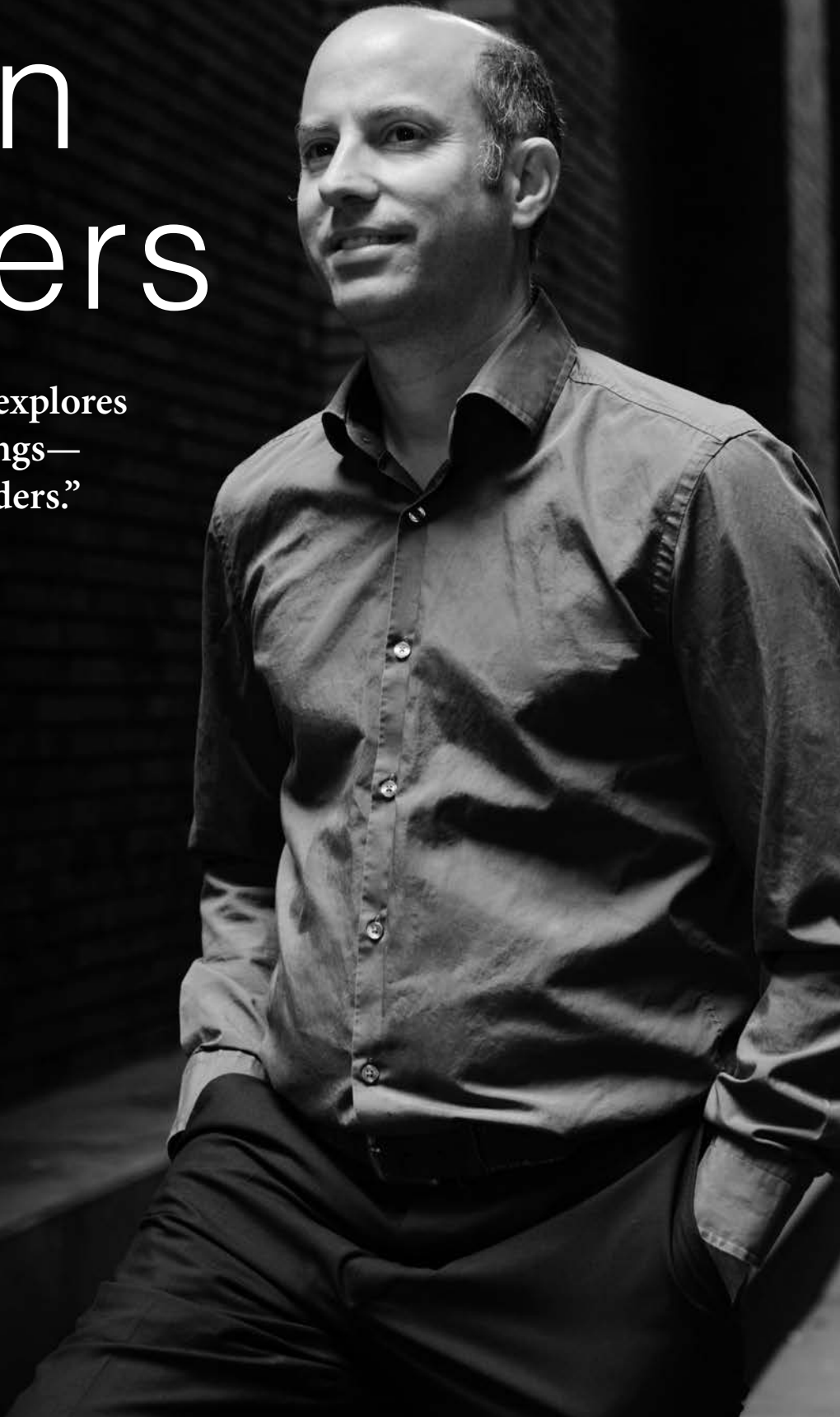
# EXPLORING

---

## Seven Borders

A composer and flutist explores  
the multifaceted meanings—  
and questions—of “borders.”

by Ned McGowan



# What types of borders do we encounter as musicians? When is a border a limit and when is it a door? Can we know where a border truly is until we've crossed it? What lies behind borders: fringe or frontier?

## Border One: Reading or Improvising?

*Can we learn both at a young age?*

When I started playing the flute at age 9, my teacher Gary Stotz taught me both to read music and to improvise. Becoming familiar with these approaches at a young age was perhaps the single most important activity determining who I became as a musician, leading to new possibilities at every stage of my development.

As I witness my son learning Dutch, English, and Japanese, I make the connection that improvising is like speaking a language: one mostly learns by doing. Yes, there is theory and knowledge, but it is only through continuous action that a new language becomes fluid. Like multilingualism, being able to improvise can provide a doorway to new worlds. And with both skills, learning at a young age enables one to more easily take on new ones later in life. The creativity, flexibility, and learning ability I exercised while improvising helped me to discover new expressions, and that continues to this day.

## Border Two: Classical, New Music, or Jazz?

*Do we have to specialize?*

We are all multifaceted people. When we are young, our focuses are separate, but as we get older we learn to put them together, and this combining process—one that is common among artists—gives us individuality.

While maintaining a priority on classical during my musical education, I never stopped learning and playing jazz. It turns out that having a strong classical technique is a good springboard to playing other styles of music. A solid technical foundation combined with theory and a lot of listening enables much.

In college I gigged in cafes and jazz clubs at night while practicing Debussy and Bach during the day. During lessons with Jeff Khaner, I would discuss the differing roles of the interpreter and the composer—a border I continue to explore today. One summer, I had a five-nights-a-week gig in an Italian restaurant and, besides fully supporting myself for the first time, that's where I began to cultivate my voice as an improviser. Improvising is about being in the moment, interacting with the music, being aware of the audience and what you are feeling, thinking, creating, and expressing within the flow of time. Just like kids who begin to speak faster as they achieve better command of all the tools of conversation, I learned to improvise in front of people largely as a result of the sheer number of hours spent on it. The opportunity to play night after night after night, unlocking ideas

that were inside of me and trying out new ones, was irreplaceable. These days, each time I perform improvisation, I conjure up the feeling developed from that time.

One problem from my study time was that I often felt constricted performing classical music. It was too rigid and static, as if there were only one correct way to play it. After joining the new music ensemble in college, I experienced a feeling of freedom and individuality in music for the first time, and slowly I learned to apply that freedom to classical music. I went on after that, together with my classical and jazz upbringing, to specialize in contemporary music and extended flute techniques. The question of what style to focus on was never fully answered; I regularly, happily cross stylistic borders.

## Border Three: U.S. or the Netherlands?

*What makes us feel at home? When do we feel the need for home, and when do we feel the need to go somewhere new?*

For my final masters recital at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, I performed a mixed program of works by Widor, Bach, rock guitar legend Steve Vai, and myself. After earning my diploma, though, I didn't feel ready to jump into the professional world; it was clear by that point that an orchestral job was not my musical truth, and further, the entertainment gigs and weddings were killing my musical creativity. I wanted to get serious with contemporary music and flute techniques, so I came to Amsterdam to study with Anne La Berge.

That period was the golden age in my life: living off a small amount of money borrowed from my parents, I practiced the flute as hard as I could, read books, and went to lots of concerts. It was time for me to take control of my musical direction and to do it the best I could with no compromises. I dictated the lessons, starting each with something similar to, "I will play this piece and this piece, I have this and this question, and I want to know what you think about this."

I also began to study South Indian music theory at the Conservatory of Amsterdam. This gave me tools to interpret complexities in European music, particularly rhythms, microtones, and ornamentations.

After several years I decided to stay in the Netherlands to continue learning. There was little professional work, but I was exhilarated over the direction I was growing, and that was more important than work. I believe we should study as long as possible before entering the professional world; being able to learn full time is one of the most amazing activities. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever."

After eight years, the moment of decision matured: should I stay or should I go? Despite the offer of a full scholarship to do a DMA at a major American university, I could only think of coming back to Amsterdam afterwards, so I decided to not even leave. Twenty-five years later, I have never regretted that decision. Khaner once said to me, "There are no wrong decisions in life; whichever decision you take, you make it the right one."

Living on a different continent has meant many sacrifices. I'm far away from my family, and in many ways I am an outsider here. For example, Dutch was a very difficult language for me and took a long time to learn. The better I became at speaking it,

the more success I had. When you speak the local language, you are able to communicate and collaborate, and it's a lot more fun to live as the culture's full richness opens up.

I have discovered that one doesn't learn a language and then stop. You just get on the pathway of learning and keep continuing on it, getting better and better. I am still learning English, for that matter. This concept also applies to flute and other aspects in music: intonation, rhythm, breathing, listening, Bach. There will always be those who know more than you and those who know less than you, just as there will also be people with more (or less) money, work, or technique. Wherever you are, that will always be the case. So comparisons don't offer insights, they just point out trivial locations on a scale we all are on. The only comparison that matters is how much you have improved and that you are moving forward on the scale.

### **Border Four: European or Indian flutist?**

*What would it be like to go to India? How do Indian rhythms work? How do they make all those incredible ornamentations? What would it take to become an Indian flutist? How do the musical structures work in their compositions? What could I really understand about Indian music? Is music local or universal?*

It took many trips to India to find meaningful answers to my questions. Since 1999, I have traveled there approximately 30 times to perform, collaborate, and study, and I am lucky to have worked with top musical artists in Bangalore and Mysore. Violinist Mysore Manjunath, for example, can convey the full depth of human expression in a single note. Percussionist B.C. Manjunath has taught me the power of Indian rhythmic structures.

At one point, I was awarded a scholarship in the Netherlands to study flute and composition in Bangalore for several months, and I learned important things: how the structures of new works were composed and how to play several traditional compositions on Carnatic flute, complete with the customary ornamentations and phrasing. After this experience, I realized that becoming a specialist in Indian music would be similar to climbing the tallest mountain. Since I had already scaled two large ranges as a performer and composer, and because it is not my personal truth to become an authentic practitioner of a tradition foreign to my native culture, I decided that I would return to India not as a student but as a European artist. After I experienced an essence of the music, I was able to let the tradition go and come back as who I am and not who I'm not.

At that point I began to work professionally with Indian musicians in fusion concerts, in which we play tunes and improvise on them following both Indian and European improvisational methods. While I play the same pitches as the Indian musicians, I play them in different ways, with slightly different musical logics and sometimes extended flute techniques. For the Indian audiences, as an *exotic* musician, I am free to follow or break rules as my own musicality dictates, and, further, this foreign manner of expressing familiar music is often appreciated, perhaps in a similar way that foreign accents can be very interesting.

Imagine being celebrated for your differences.

One aspect I truly value in Indian music is how it combines

composition and improvisation. The music is built of strong structures that leave plenty of room for personal expression. There are many facets to Indian music that can be amazing to learn—such as the approach to long phrases, use of tension and resolution in melodies, and refined approach to pitch (microtonal in our equal-tempered system)—but the rhythm has been the richest source for me. The system of rhythmic syllables (tha ka di mi) is a robust system to learn, practice, and analyze rhythm, and it forms the basic material I teach in my Advanced Rhythm and Pulse courses at the Utrecht Conservatory. Further, the way Indian musicians apply mathematical logic to a practical approach to create rhythms enables a complexity that is far more advanced than typically utilized in Western classical music.

While the country India can be very confronting in many ways, for me the experiences with the music and musicians have been transcendental, and the influence of Indian music on my compositions is hard to overstate. I often employ a process I call “Found in Translation” through which I create new music (contemporary classical or contemporary jazz) based on Indian models. The benefit of this process is that one can take advantage of an already-proven quality in new combinations—for example, by composing a piece for Western classical musicians in a form that would normally be improvised in India (my *Chamundi Hill*), using common Indian rhythmic cadences with atonal modes (my *Wood Burn*), or applying a typical Indian rhythmical frame technique to a new composition (my *Garden of Iniquitous Creatures*). None of these pieces quotes Indian music in all their musical parameters. So it is not copying but rather utilizing the creative technique of blending to create new music.

(See *FQ Plus* for my published essay, “Is music universal?”)

### **Border Five: Performer or Composer?**

*Is composing a natural development for performers, or is it reserved for special types? Does improvising eventually lead one to composing? Is improvising simply composing in real time? Is composing simply improvising slowly? Does good composition sound like improvisation? Does good improvisation sound like composition?*

I began to compose at one moment (at age 23). For me, improvising does lead to composition, since it exercises your voice as a creator, and composing is simply fixing your ideas into structures. In concerts at the time, audiences liked my first composition (*Why?* for solo flute) better than my interpretations of Widor or Debussy. This was tough for me to hear, because at the time my dream was to become an orchestral flutist—principal of the New York Philharmonic, of course.

For years after that moment, I focused mostly on flute playing, but the composition seedling grew steadily in parallel. Eventually, I studied composition at the Royal Conservatory The Hague, and big questions of my late 20s became, “Am I a performer or a composer? Could I quit the flute and become only a composer after all that hard work?” It took perhaps 10 years for me to fully make the internal identity switch to composer, but I am now 49, and I realize that I never did make the switch. I perform and compose regularly. Skills are only added as time goes on.



In Ned McGowan's musical evolution, the border between "composer" and "performer" blurred, and today he is active in both art forms, his skills in both continually growing.

As we explore our inspirations, we encounter signals—opportunities, successes, and failures—all of which are important indicators of where we can go in life. For me, and perhaps for many, sometimes those indicators are not welcome at first. They might tell us things that we do not agree with or are not ready to hear. There is always something to learn from feedback, and what we do with it can define who we become. In my case, I eventually learned to accept that the feedback was positive toward my compositions instead of negative toward my playing, and I then continued to water both plants.

One elevating aspect to composing is how it is an exercise in honesty, first discovering, then accepting what you love in music—and then learning to trust in it. Once I developed that degree of conviction, I could apply it to other people's compositions, too, because I could relate to the process of creation. Suddenly, I had no problem playing Bach, Prokofiev, or Ferneyhough. I know what I think about their pieces and now feel the freedom to express it. Further, as a composer, I also know that the performer's ideas are essential for a piece to live on stage, and I am clearly aware of that when I perform other composers' music. Composing taught me about listening to my inner voice, self-respect, and respect for composers.

Interestingly, being on both sides of the composing-and-playing fence has also taught me much about the possibilities and limits of interpretation. When I perform my own works, I sometimes give myself license to alter them for musical or even technical reasons, for example, with different tempos, octaves, articulations, or orna-

mentations. I make those decisions all the time as a composer, so why not when I am playing too, since music lives differently in an instrument on stage than in the composition studio?

However, my practice to alter music, sometimes even on the spot, goes against our performance practice tradition to enshrine the composer's wishes. We have learned to honor the score as if it is carved in stone like the 10 Commandments! I work *extremely* hard to notate my intentions in a composition, but I do believe that live music is a duet between composer and performer, both giving essential input into what the music is. That means that the ideas of the performer are also very important for the composer and the audience.

Further, I believe that music is quite flexible, and if there is a strong vision from the interpreter to recast things, the composition can almost always handle it. I am curious for new interpretations of my works and greatly appreciate when performers put in the work to create them. Of course, a lack of either preparation or respect to the intentions can also be simply wrong, as a performer might completely miss the point. On the other hand, often there are instances where I have gained new insights into my own works.

Pieces are like children: they go out into the world and have their own interactions with others and become influenced by those interactions. Seeing a performance of a work that I composed years ago can be like seeing a child or family member after many years. They have changed, and it is exciting for me to experience this.





McGowan is active in the National Flute Association, both as a member of the New Music Advisory committee and playing his contrabass flute in convention low flute ensembles.

## Border Six: Artist or Researcher?

*What's the quickest, smartest, most rewarding way to become our best? What is research? Are you engaged in research every time you play a concert? How does one become an artist?*

Picasso said that he was not creating art but conducting research. I have been working on an artistic research PhD from the University of Leiden, and rarely have I been this happy. At my perhaps rather late age to start on a PhD, it provides a structure to codify questions that occupied me for many years and to go deeper and more comprehensively into them.

My recent reading has been focused on neurobiological literature about how we keep track of time in the brain and body, and it is very exciting to learn the scientific reasons for things I already know as a musician, such as how movement is essential for us to accurately keep track of time. That scientific perspective then informs my art in new ways—for example, to explore those physiological limits in a piece of new music.

Recently having judged an artistic research competition for masters students, I clearly saw its catalytic power to grow one's musicianship, and I believe that artistic research is the process that turns craftsmen into artists. Forming a question, carrying out a methodology, and drawing conclusions that are disseminated is an incredible tool for rapid growth. Writing is a helpful

way to clarify and crystalize ideas, and text always plays an important role in my compositional process. With artistic research, though, writing isn't the only way to communicate. Often images, recordings, videos, or websites can be much more effective.

While many may distinguish artists from researchers, artists *are*, in fact, researchers. For example, we often research the identity of the music we play—the history and context from when it was created—and also our opinions about it. Even when we are playing music on stage or at home, we are also engaging with questions in real time, such as how to play in tune, use correct timing, make a beautiful diminuendo, or communicate the composer's ideas. During performances, I also like to pay attention to goals less directly related to music, such as my posture, my oxygen intake, or the audience's attention span. Often those observances create a context for me to better achieve all my musical goals.

Importantly, though, I believe that music is not a passive activity that we just sit back and enjoy. Music is active participation, learning, analyzing, feeling, thinking, exploring, and always improving. This perspective can help us to continuously unlock new levels of enjoyment.

## Border Seven: Routine or Inventive?

*How can you expand your borders with improvisation? Do we experience time differently when we improvise? How do we learn to improvise? How can it be fun?*

Improvising takes many forms and exists in many genres. I started out improvising in blues and jazz but now use it as a way to exercise my musical creativity instead of playing a particular style.

One easy way I exercise improvisation is to incorporate it into my daily warm-ups. I do an arpeggio/scale/articulation/long-tone exercise in all 12 keys. It takes one to two minutes per key, and after each I improvise one phrase lasting one breath. It can be anything: a melody, a rhythm, a sound, or something else. It doesn't matter what; the most important activity is that you play something not fixed. Since it's only one breath, it is very short, but still you've done an action that uses your brain and imagination in a completely other way than a written exercise.

One of the reasons I like this exercise is that we are a different person each day, with different moods, ideas, and inspirations, and it allows for the expression of that variation. Through prolonged playing of the exercise, you get to better know yourself and your improvising voice, and inevitably ideas start to materialize that lead to new things.

I created this easy improvisation exercise to work on my creative thinking. It shows what I believe is a simple process for a lifetime of learning: (1) decide out what you want to learn; (2) design a daily exercise to work on it; (3) take years to practice it. This three-step plan may seem obvious, but the one point about it that was a game changer for me was to practice for the long term, not for tomorrow or next week. Taking this perspective allowed me to do a small amount of solid work each day, avoiding the pitfall of over-practicing something until it breaks down and useful learning has stopped. Small amounts of regular work over longer periods of time is how you turn a weakness into a strength.

### ***What is the pathway to borders?***

The pathway to and over borders is simple: ask questions. Lots of them, all the time. Break each one up into more questions and break those up, too. Research, read, and write. Discuss them with others. Go deep. Fill journals with questions from beginning to end. (I have many.) Occasionally, answers will present themselves, but those become trivial in the end. Our identity comes from the questions we ask, the experiences we have, and the borders we cross; and, as Robert Frost might say, that makes all the difference.

*Ned McGowan, born in the United States and now living in the Netherlands, is a flutist and contemporary classical music composer. His music has won awards and been performed at Carnegie Hall, the Concertgebouw, and other halls and festivals around the world by orchestras, ensembles, and soloists. As a flutist, he plays classical, contemporary, and improvisation concerts internationally, and he has a special love for the contrabass flute. Email nedmcgowan@gmail.com or visit nedmcgowan.com.*

## **Find it at FQ Plus**

Visit FQ Plus for more information about improvisation and creativity in music, including a manifesto for teaching undergraduate students. Find them in the Publications section at [nfaonline.org](http://nfaonline.org).

## **Now online:**

the complete collection of all issues of *The Flutist Quarterly*, dating back more than 40 years to the publication's beginnings in 1976.

Find *The Flutist Quarterly* under the Publications tab, then scroll down to the "past issues" section. To help in your perusal, indexes citing all major articles in the magazine are posted on the same page.

**Visit [nfaonline.org](http://nfaonline.org)**



# **KOTATO FLUTE**

## **Official Dealer**

**Highest quality Bass & Contrabass**

**Sales & Repair for Pro-flutes**

**OGURA FLUTE WORKS**

E-mail: [oguraflute@gmail.com](mailto:oguraflute@gmail.com)

[www.oguraflute.com](http://www.oguraflute.com)

(310) 532-1164



**Shozo Ogura**