

An Interview with Laura Osterlund

Musician for the Chicago Shakespeare Theater's Production of **Nell Gwynn**

Interview date: October 15-16, 2018



<https://youtu.be/jQdVaf5-GZE> Here's a trailer for Nell Gwynn

TC: My premise in writing these articles is that there are different kinds of practice to meet different goals. What different goals did you have, working in theater?

LO: I wanted my music to help tell the story. I wanted to collaborate with my fellow-musicians, so that we really gelled. I also wanted to showcase the recorder and what it could do, because so many unfamiliar audiences would get to hear it. That third goal was behind my reason for throwing in and then planning out ornaments. I wanted people to hear how the recorder could be an exciting, expressive, virtuoso instrument, and I realized that each listener would, for the most part, be hearing my ornaments for the first time. It occurred to me that, one of the most delightful things about performing in a play that takes place in the 17th century, is that, in the reality of the play, it's the closest I can come to being a 17th-century recorder player--a sort of dream come true, an embodiment of the past.

I find that when playing live music in a theatrical production, it's not enough to learn just the notes. Other things are important--adjusting your timing on the fly, changing the pacing of the music depending on variations in the acting, going with sudden improvisations of the cast, etc. If you're moving on stage, it's even more complicated.

I agree 100%. For Nell Gwynn, I perform with three other musicians. Our official title is the "actors who play instruments," and I've never studied acting or been employed as an actor before. Fortunately, we are all about the same age (mid-twenties to early thirties) and have a good rapport because, honestly, it's physically demanding work, and we remain on the set--sometimes hidden, sometimes visible—and play music throughout the whole two-and-a-half hours of the show.

Each one of us wears a beautiful period costume; many of the challenges come from doing one's work, whether acting or playing music, with the addition of costume, makeup, and stage directions. I've been wearing my costume for shows since our previews started on September 20th, and I have just had my dress refitted so that I have full range of motion in my arms and am no longer experiencing back pain. Other musicians and actors have had to perform at the highest level in pain as well, but fortunately we have stellar costume and wig departments that we can come to if we need help, and I think everyone is managing.

What about your costume gives you pain?

The dress itself is much heavier than the modern-day clothing I'm used to wearing, and the material isn't stretchy. At first, the dress was simply too tight in the bodice and sewn in a way that didn't allow me to lift my arms any higher than a 45-degree angle or move my upper body flexibly and naturally. Sitting on set throughout the 2 1/2 hours of the play was simply too much for my back, but fortunately, once the costume department let the dress out, my back pain went away. The men in the company have complained of leg and back pain from their period heeled shoes. The actor who plays King Charles II wears a wig of curly, brown hair almost down to his waist, and says that the wig is pinned so tightly to his short hair that, by the end of Act I, his head is throbbing. The actor who plays Edward Kynaston (an acclaimed player in Restoration England famous for portraying women) has to act in heels, a corset, and a woman's wig.

I was wondering what skills you had to have for this work, and how they're different from playing a concert?

Memorization, to start. Technically, we weren't required to memorize all of the thirty-five musical cues in *Nell Gwynn*, but I did so fairly early in our rehearsal process, before tech week, because we didn't know all of our blocking until we started working on the set. That really paid off, because there were some cues we knew would have to be memorized right from the start, and then there were others we were asked to memorize later on. I am just now starting to read music again when I'm not visible to the audience, to relieve some of the stress and mental fatigue from performance.

You also have to be able to multi-task, not just playing the music and thinking about accuracy and sound, but doing it while acting, moving, emoting in a scene. The music we perform doesn't exist for its own sake; it has a purpose in the play. Understanding that is very important, because it adds an additional layer of interpretation, beyond deciding how best to render the notes on the page and play in an ensemble. In a play, with underscoring (dialogue and music at the same time), we may have to make different choices to assure a good balance between the spoken word, the music, and the emotional tenor of the scene. Having excellent sound designers at Chicago Shakespeare Theater helps, but we also have to make and stick to decisions about dynamics as well.

How long did it take to work it out?

We started musical rehearsals just after Labor Day and just worked on the music for a couple of weeks before joining the actors. Then, after running the musical numbers with the full cast, then whole acts, then the whole play, we moved onto the set, where we added lighting, sound, and costumes. Previews started the last week of September and the play opened on September 28th. It was an additive process in which different elements were added piecemeal... I remember when it dawned on me that the audience--their reactions, how it affected timing--was the final and most critical element, and that was why we had previews the week before opening night.

CST's music director, Jermaine Hill, and the composer for *Nell Gwynn*, Nigel Hess, helped us make decisions regarding the music such as instrumentation and voicing and then held us to those decisions we'd made throughout the rehearsal process.

What style of music did Nigel write? Is it early-sounding or more modern and technically challenging? Idiomatic?

It was both. About half of the music, particularly the big musical numbers sounded like period music. Other cues didn't necessarily sound like 17th-century music; their purpose was more to aid the emotional trajectory of a scene. I was delighted to discover that Nigel had borrowed the tune of "Fie, Nay, Prithee John" and set it to playwright Jessica Swale's lyrics for "One Week to Go." My recorder parts are technically challenging. For example, one particular piece, where *Nell Gwynn* mocks the king's French mistress, Louise de Kerouaille, is in B Major. At the end of it, I play a high C in the third octave of the alto recorder, and I've never had to play a pitch that high in performance before. Other passages are difficult

simply because of the key or because they're not idiomatic for the recorder. The music is all gorgeous, however, and intimately linked to each scene; it never feels out of place. Nell Gwynn isn't a musical per se, but it has music and underscoring throughout, and the big musical numbers are critical to the story and develop Nell as a character.

One thing I appreciated was that they didn't tell us how to play our primary instruments. The four of us play violin, recorder, guitar, and bassoon, respectively, but, in addition, we all play an assortment of percussion instruments (and I also play shawm). I decided that I wanted to ornament the music for Nell Gwynn just as if it were actual music from the 17th-century or earlier. I experimented with throwing in ornaments on the fly in rehearsal and then chose the ornaments I would play consistently during the show. While I might throw in more on any given night, for the most part I stick with the ornaments I've memorized. I find that approach a good defense against stage fright, tiredness, having an "off-night," and anything else that could go wrong. It is a variable I can control among the many I cannot from performance to performance.

It sounds as if things go wrong pretty often for a variety of reasons. Was it hard to accept that you weren't able to control all the variables?

Yes, it is true. There are so many things that can go wrong every night--with the actors, with the various instruments we play, with timing. Plus, I think that all of us are striving to make every performance the best we can do, which keeps the pressure on. In this type of performance situation, the easiest musical passages seem incredibly difficult to play, because of the amount of pressure and the high level of the production. This is wonderful, actually, in my opinion, as I would rather strive for the best every single performance under that pressure than become bored and complacent. Our wonderful associate music director and violinist Allison Selby Cook pointed out to me that it's when we start to go on "autopilot" that memory lapses and technical mistakes most commonly occur, which is very true! Sometimes the actors make mistakes and have memory lapses as well, and we always have to listen carefully for our cues to come in. Basically, I make mistakes every performance, but fortunately they are different mistakes each time, and I just have to make my peace with that. I actually find it more exciting doing my job amid countless variables; it keeps me on my toes. It's so much about the energy you bring each time, and **the best performance isn't one that's "perfect," but rather one that comes the most to life.**

Did new things come up as the rehearsals went on that you had to learn how to do?

The shawm. I'm basically borrowing an old soprano shawm from a colleague in Chicago, and the reeds are very old. Fortunately, I was able to order a new reed from Europe, and I've also figured out (fingers crossed) which reed is good for certain cues and which reed is good for others. It seems to be sorted out now. No more stress.

I've also learned to hear subdivisions in my head the whole time I'm playing, to keep the tempo steady. Both the music we play for scene transitions, and the music we play during the scenes themselves need to happen in a certain amount of time and be very tight. Maintaining a steady beat by subdividing is an incredibly helpful skill, which, again, was required because the music had a purpose in the play; it has really helped my musicianship.

Another reason to say "Subdivide and conquer!"

Indeed. I'm glad you think so, too.

Let's get back to practicing. Did you only learn by full cast rehearsals, or could you practice on your own? Were your practice sessions the same length and structure as they usually are?

At first, we had at least one six-hour musical rehearsal a day, six days a week. When we joined the full cast, our group rehearsals were the same length or more. In order to memorize the music, I also set aside time to practice the music, think through it, drill it until I could confidently, consistently play all of it from memory. I didn't really stop. I would play through all of the music by myself on the set before runs. As time

went on, I would just practice the music we played when visible on stage. I still touch base with pieces and practice them when I make a mistake in performance; it's a healthy thing to do, I think, and backstage during the play, I finger all the musical cues at least once before we play them. The reason I practice so much is because I'm human: again, it's a fail-safe against nervousness, fatigue, pain, bad memory days, potential sickness. It also helps to keep me solid, so that the other musicians and the actors can rely on me, even when they're having "off" days as well.

In my own life, for various reasons, I haven't yet developed a practice routine (I think my practice in past has always varied according to the music and occasion), but I think I may as a result of being in Nell Gwynn. The schedule of rehearsals and then performances is so rigorous (and I work day jobs on top of that) that you really have to learn how to care for yourself as a physical entity and as an artist. For nearly a month, I really only practiced music from the play (something I'd never done before), and it really helped me to internalize the music, as well as teaching me lessons about discipline. Now that the play has opened, I'm practicing other repertoire as part of my pre-show warm-up. It's incredibly refreshing! If I were to develop my own practice routine following the show, I would take into account the physical demands of practicing the same passages over and over again and vary my approach to incorporate scales, long tones, etudes, other exercises, and a variety of repertoire--sight-reading, reading music I've learned, and playing from memory. All of this, I think, helps to keep the body and mind limber and avoid injuries to one's body, morale, and creativity.

And then, finally, what do you want to make sure you share about this experience? Can you summarize what you learned? Will it help/change your concert playing?

Playing music for the theater, specifically for a long run, is physically demanding work; it's a marathon. For Nell Gwynn, we gave a total of fifty-one shows over a six-week period. Everyone involved--the actors, singers, and multi-instrumentalists--has to make adjustments to how they prepare for performances and how they take care of themselves compared with a shorter run or a once-off performance. I can't say whether performing once or performing forty times is harder; they're just different. But it's wonderful, because it elevates your practice to meet the demands of schedule. I can't say I'm bored, and I don't think I ever will be, mostly because I suffer from nerves, but also because each show is different. Nell Gwynn at Chicago Shakespeare Theater is special to me, because of the excellent colleagues I have, and because I love the story I'm privileged to help tell, but I would totally do something like this again, because of its potential to raise your level of playing and to reach people.

<https://youtu.be/jQdVaf5-GZE>

Chicago Shakespeare Theater's Nell Gwynn ran from September 20 to November 4, 2018.

Musicians:

Allison Selby Cook - violin, alto recorder, tenor recorder, bass recorder, bell, field drum, midi keyboard, tubular bell, wood block, singing

Justin LaForte - guitar, bass recorder, snare drum, bass drum

Nicholas Ober - bassoon, alto recorder, bass recorder, mark tree, field drum, snare drum, bass drum, nightingale

Laura Osterlund - sopranino recorder, soprano recorder, alto recorder, tenor recorder, soprano shawm, snare drum, glockenspiel, singing