

“ I started to notice the huge difference yoga made to my clarinet playing. My breathing got much better ”

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Annelien Van Wauwe



The Belgian clarinettist's love of yoga is the inspiration for a new album of Mozart and Henderickx, recorded just days before the birth of her son, as she tells **Kate Wakeling**

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOELLE VAN AUTREVE

‘**T**here’s this huge cliché that people think you just sit on a mat, say “om” and forget about everything, but a huge part of yoga is actually about life force,’ explains the clarinettist Annelien Van Wauwe. Life force is certainly not something this dynamic musician is short of. A sought-after concerto soloist and former BBC New Generation Artist, Van Wauwe also runs two acclaimed chamber ensembles and is the recipient of numerous accolades, including the prestigious Opus Klassik Award for best young artist in 2020. But the way she ‘keeps two feet on the floor’ is through a decade’s experience of yoga, something her new album *Flow* explores to beautiful effect.

Born in Hamme, Belgium, Van Wauwe wasn’t brought up in a musical family –

her father was a lawyer and her mother a writer. But her aptitude was soon clear (‘apparently I was always singing to myself’), so her parents sent her to music school where her talent quickly blossomed. Van Wauwe laughs that her attraction to the clarinet as a child was largely down to its appearance: ‘I just liked how it looked, the silvery keys especially.’ Now the instrument feels special to her because ‘you can copy your own voice. That has always been my approach, at first unconsciously and now very consciously. Whatever you feel inside, you can express through your voice, and the clarinet can imitate that.’

Nurturing the connection between one’s inner life, physicality and creative expression is key to Van Wauwe’s music making, not least through the links she has discovered between clarinet playing and yoga practice. She first encountered yoga while studying at the Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler Berlin: ‘The conservatory offered all kinds of physical courses like Alexander technique and yoga, and I tried the whole range.’ She soon realised that there were special benefits to combining her rigorous practice







During a 1963, very yoga guru and teacher performs stretches while Yehudi Menuhin (centre) and David Attenborough discuss BBC television special *Yehudi Menuhin and His Guru*, 1963

And breathe...

Musicians and yoga

Annelien Van Wauwe is not the first musician to extol the benefits of yoga. Most famously, violinist **Yehudi Menuhin** took to the ancient Indian discipline upon visiting the country in 1952 at the age of 36, where he first met the sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar. At the time Menuhin was suffering from severe muscular tension, but his first lesson with BKS Iyengar led to a lifelong dedication to the practice – and to Iyengar’s introduction to students, including cellist **Jacqueline du Pré**, in the UK, France and Switzerland. While in India on that 1952 trip, Menuhin dined with the prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and demonstrated his newly acquired yoga skills by standing on his head.

Various composers have also felt an affinity with the practice and its mystical associations, including **Alexander Scriabin**, whose unfinished *Mysterium* was influenced by Sanskrit and yoga studies, and **Gustav Holst**, whose interests included meditation and Hinduism.

More recently, **Philip Glass** has spoken of the importance of breathing and mediation for musicians, following his introduction to yoga aged 20 in 1957. At the time, the New York based composer had only vaguely heard of the practice, but found an instructor by looking under ‘Y’ in the telephone book. Glass now credits that first tutor not only for instilling in him the physical discipline needed to maintain his long career, but also for his introduction to vegetarianism, which he has kept up for over 60 years.

schedule with yoga: ‘I started to notice the huge difference it made to my clarinet playing. My breathing got better, my air support – all the things that clarinet teachers try to explain using complicated words – but through yoga you start to feel this body consciousness for yourself.’

Flow, Van Wauwe’s new album recorded with the NDR Radiophilharmonie and conducted by Andrew Manze, offers a summation of this holistic approach to the clarinet. Released on 31 March on Pentatone, the disc pairs Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto with a substantial new work, *Sutra*, by Flemish composer Wim Henderickx – a co-commission by the Borletti-Buitoni Trust and BBC Radio 3 for solo clarinet, orchestra and electronics, exploring the principles of yoga.

Aptly enough, Van Wauwe had the idea for *Sutra* during a yoga class: ‘I was resting at the end of a session and there was music playing – some beautiful mantras. There was something about listening to this while the body slowed down that felt very special. I thought, “Wow, we need a new piece!”’ It didn’t take Van Wauwe long to decide that Henderickx was the right composer for the task. Well known for his works drawing on Eastern philosophies, including his substantial *Tantric Cycle* (2004-2010), Henderickx has often incorporated other art forms into his music, and his works share an affinity with Ligeti, not least in their use of complex polyrhythms and innovative musical textures.

Sutra is inspired by the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, a collection of some 200 short texts on the theory and practice of yoga dating from the early centuries CE. Van Wauwe selected four Sutras (‘threads’) from the collection, which Henderickx in turn used to shape and colour his composition’s four movements, and the resulting score is by turns luminously meditative and ferociously energetic. The work manages to circumvent some of the thornier questions of musical appropriation by exploring these yogic principles through Western contemporary classical idioms rather than an Orientalist ‘recreation’ of Indian sound worlds. *Sutra* is also a far cry from Western ‘new age’ background music. ‘I wasn’t looking for a piece of 15-minute background music for a meditation session,’ confirms Van Wauwe.



Star quality: Van Wauwe receives her 2020 Opus Klassik award; (top right) demonstrating her flexibility in yoga exercises

‘The first movement, “Pranayama”, is all about the breath waking up, so after a quiet introduction the score has these explosive outbursts – and then the third movement is also extremely rhythmic. At points it feels like playing *The Rite of Spring*.’

As well as being virtuosically demanding for both soloist and ensemble, the score (at Van Wauwe’s request) requires each player to breathe audibly and chant in Sanskrit. It took a little while, she recalls, for the orchestra to warm up to this idea: ‘When we did the recording, I played from the middle of the woodwind section, so I could hear them saying, “Gosh, prana – what? How do you pronounce that?” It was a bit awkward, but I had to sing in the piece too, and I felt the orchestra start to think, “This is our soloist but she’s also a human being.”’ Everyone began to loosen up and, by the end, the orchestral musicians had become very convincing mantra speakers.’

Van Wauwe talks warmly of how her yoga practice also shaped her approach to learning *Sutra*, not least as she began working on it when already six months pregnant and, somewhat staggeringly,



finished recording the piece just four days before her son was born. 'It was crazy, but I think that made it even more special because I couldn't practise for hours a day. I had to work with my body, so the piece became a kind of companion throughout the last three months of the pregnancy. Every day I'd think: "OK, good morning! How are we going to do this?" If I had a moment to play, I was forced to use as little energy as possible to really get it right.'

Van Wauwe performs both *Sutra* and the Mozart on the basset clarinet – similar to the standard B flat clarinet, but with additional keys that allow it to play extra lower notes. The basset clarinet is closely associated with Anton Stadler, the virtuoso for whom Mozart's Clarinet Concerto was composed. Van Wauwe is thrilled Henderickx scored *Sutra* for the basset clarinet too: 'I think it is so important to have more pieces for the instrument – and, of course, it's a connector to the Mozart. I really like that we have the old and the very modern on one album.'

Van Wauwe's lyrical interpretation of the Mozart conveys both effortless elegance

'The sound my ensembles make isn't black and white; it's all the colours'

and emotional depth, and the concerto's blend of simplicity and complexity strongly appeals to her: 'It's the concerto you grow up with as a clarinettist, so I always used to think, "Oh my goodness, soloists who play it for their entire life surely get bored of it!" But actually, it's the opposite. It's such a challenging piece because you can always go further in terms of detail – it invites a perfectionist approach. There's not one note that doesn't have a meaning.'

Van Wauwe takes this 'perfectionist approach' into every aspect of her professional life. As the founder of the Brussels-based Carousel chamber ensemble and Breeze quintet, she has considered all facets of their concert presentation, and both groups now perform



in gorgeously tailored, vividly coordinated outfits from top to toe: 'I don't really know where it came from that musicians are supposed to wear black and white, or the same clothes you see in *Downton Abbey* – especially if you want to attract younger audiences. The sound my ensembles make isn't black and white; it's all the colours! So, I told the players we wouldn't wear black and white, not even socks. And somehow I ended up ordering colourful socks for everybody. That's the perfectionist in me.'

In turn, the energy and drive that Van Wauwe brings to every side of her career is inspiring. 'People say I'm organised, but I only do what I love. I wouldn't be happy if I didn't have enough variation.' In the face of Covid lockdowns, she has arranged numerous streamed performances for her ensembles, recorded a hit series of YouTube yoga-inspired warm-up videos for clarinettists, and 'I kept practising. I missed the connection to the audience, but this wasn't a reason to stop playing.'

Yoga has been vital in helping her 'keep connected, at least to myself' despite the world turning upside down, and working on *Sutra* 'was like a light'. Indeed, while Van Wauwe is a warmly down-to-earth in person, she wonders about the almost mystic good fortune that allowed *Flow* to be recorded amid numerous challenges. 'We had to change so many dates, and when we came to the last part of the recording, it was the very last chance – both for me in terms of the pregnancy but also for the orchestra. Two days after we finished recording there was a lockdown in Germany. I'm not very spiritual, but I thought, "This cannot be a coincidence." Somehow it all just fell into place.' ●