

# ITEA Journal

SUMMER 2018

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*Beth McDonald*



Beth McDonald. Photo credit: Adam DeTour

>> **BETH MCDONALD** is, in her own words, a “classically trained tubist gone awry.” Along with having degrees in tuba performance from the University of Kentucky and the New England Conservatory, Beth has long been an advocate for the tuba as a vehicle for electroacoustic music and free improvisation. She is a fixture of the Chicago new music scene and has been active as an educator and proponent of electroacoustic performance at several ITEA conferences. You can learn more about Beth and listen to her music at her website, [bethtuba.com](http://bethtuba.com).

The following is a discussion that Beth and I conducted over Skype in late 2017.

## Can you tell me a little bit about your current musical projects?

Right now I'm playing in Korean Jeans, a duo with Neal Markowski. It's drums and amplified tuba, so I use various guitar pedals and I run them through a bass amp. Also, just generally, I play free improv with various groups. Recently I performed with Neal and our friend Mabel Kwan (Chicago-area pianist and member of Ensemble Dal Niente). I've also been working with a couple of artists from different genres on and off—most recently would be Nathanael Lee Jones, who's actually a writer. He writes a lot of texts for us, and we've been working on various sonic interpretations of those texts, and that kind of thing.

## I looked at your bio, and one question comes immediately to mind: how did you get from the New England Conservatory to playing free improv shows?

I think the seeds were sown at NEC, for sure. Despite the fact that I was at NEC as a classical tuba performance major, the degree program is actually pretty open, and NEC has a really incredible jazz and contemporary improvisation program. I met a lot of people from those programs, and since there are many electives in the master's program, I would take CI classes about different forms of improvisation and different musics that I hadn't been exposed to. Those connections kept going after school. Meeting Neal in grad school was how I started playing with electronics, and that was a new thing that kind of grew in its own way. It was like a slow build, just from meeting people in grad school and finding it more interesting than playing classical tuba.

## You said that you enjoy using electronics in your work—what was it that interested you in electronics in the first place, and that kept that interest going forward?

One thing that really drove me into electronics was the limitation that tuba playing has based on the breath. I was watching guitar players and string players play these notes that would go on forever, and I was like, "This is a fundamental limitation of the tuba." I can't circular breathe, and even if I could, I don't think it would solve the problem given the nose/sniff sound. So much of the time, that sniff is integrated into the sound, and it distracts from the tone of the tuba. It sounds like a note with a bunch of sniffs over it. Electronics was a way to deal with breaking through that limitation. The Electro-Harmonix Freeze pedal was one

of my favorites—it's just...freeze a note, take a breath, and keep going. It's awesome.

## So, you see it as a way of extending your instrument?

Yes, exactly.

## The last few years, you have become known not only for playing with electronics, but also for teaching them at workshops during various tuba/euphonium conferences. Do you have any suggestions for anyone who might not have attended those workshops, but are interested in working with electronics?

Well, first I'll say that the PowerPoint presentation I give during the workshop is available online (<http://www.authorstream.com/Presentation/bethtuba-2169826-itec-2014-friendly-beginner-guide-electronics-tuba/>). You can also contact me via my website (<https://bethtuba.com/contact/>). More practically, I really think that using a piece like Jonathan Harvey's *Still* is a good way to introduce oneself to working with electronics. I have the electronics, and I can email it directly to whoever wants to use it. The electronics are in a standalone application. The music itself isn't technically challenging, the challenge is how to use the electronics. It

allows you to really focus on figuring out how the electronics work.

## In that vein, what are some purely technical things that someone should learn about when first using electronics?

First of all, when you're working with tuba and electronics, you're working with two different instruments. You have to know the tuba part, and you have to put in the time to really understand the electronics. Whether that is just knowing the fixed media part you're hitting play on, or if you're using live electronics, knowing the answers to questions like what does this patch do, what happens if there is feedback, how do I mic the tuba, etc.

## So, you suggest the performer gain a general familiarity with how electronics work, separate from the tuba/euphonium?

Yes! I think sometimes people approach it thinking "Well, now I don't have to hire an accompanist, so that will save me money and time." But really, it does require an investment of time. You don't want to find out a week before your recital that you don't know how the electronics work.

## Do you have any suggestions for people wanting to get into free improvisation?

I got into it by being around improvisers at NEC—they have an improv ensemble they call "Improv for Non-Majors," with a totally open instrumentation. I personally find it really hard to do improv solo; that's something I really don't do. I really enjoy the group dynamic, it



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If you're talking about what tuba players can actually do, I think it's important to highlight female professional tuba players, and to show younger students that it's normal for women to play the tuba.



Left: Two Speakers, Piano, Tuba. Right: Korean Jeans. Photo credit: Zach Hench.

so I'd suggest finding some friends and start that way. It is also important to listen to a lot of different performers and improvisers. The ideas you'll have in your own improv sessions won't just magically appear in your brain—you have to build up that vocabulary by listening.

**I'm going to switch topics a little here. You currently make your living split between musical activities and a "day job"—do you feel that this split career path was adequately promoted during your studies as a tubist?**

It's tricky—not to the detriment of my teachers, but I went into school thinking "I don't want to be a band director or college professor, so I'm going to just play—that will be my career." I had an idea that if I practiced a lot, prepared my materials, and showed up on time to gigs, I'd magically get a full-time playing job. There was also a lot of stigma to having a day job, especially having a day job that you actually enjoy.

**So, do you think there is still a stigma associated with being a so-called "part-time" musician?**

I think there is, but really, with the music I like to play, I don't want it to be the basis for the way I make my living. I don't want the music to suffer because of commercial pressures. I love paying for shows and paying musicians for their

work, but for my personal preferences, I don't want to follow that path.

**How might current educators prepare their students to get involved with the world outside of the concert hall and practice room?**

I think there's a lot to be said for generating self-awareness in students and asking them questions like "What's important to you?" or "Where do you see your life heading from here?" You know, there are musicians that, say, want to have a family, or live in a certain area of the country, and if you follow those paths, your life will look a lot different from what is happening in school. Also, at NEC there was an entrepreneurial program that asked a lot of these questions, and I think that that's helpful. That, and showing different examples of what a career in music could be, is important. When you're 18 and going into college, you're not thinking "Where do I want to be when I'm 40," you're thinking "Where do I want to be at the end of Fall semester." Asking those questions and showing the possibilities in music would help a lot.

**To shift again, I'd like to get your opinion on the historical gender imbalance within the tuba/euphonium community.**

I think it happens in the band recruitment stage—there's still this idea that you need

a big guy to play the tuba. It has a lot to do with reinforced gender roles, but if you have progressive, open-minded band directors, then those ideas can be counteracted from an early age. I've met a lot of college-aged female tuba players, and they're all awesome, but I feel like they had to be a little tough just to get past those stereotypes.

If you're talking about what tuba players can actually do, I think it's important to highlight female professional tuba players, and to show younger students that it's normal for women to play the tuba. Again, it's important to talk about these ideas—women can play the tuba, it's okay to have a day job, and so on.

**One last question: what can be done to encourage the performance of contemporary music in the tuba/euphonium community?**

A lot of my repertoire as I was growing up came from competition lists. So, it would be great to see a lot of competitions adopt contemporary music. The competition repertoire stands to be an agent of change. As a younger performer, you're also looking at the CDs that professionals release, and what they play at conferences, so if we can find a way to incorporate more adventurous music into those areas, we can really change things from within. Without that drive to change, we'll end up playing the same repertoire over and over again.