

## Interview with Kristin Norderval, Vocalist, Composer, Performer, Oslo 13 April 2021

KRISTIN NORDERVAL is an Oslo based performer, composer and improviser whose career has been two-fold; split between vocal performance and composition. Her performance repertoire spans the renaissance to the avant-garde, and her credits as a soprano soloist include performances with the Oslo Sinfonietta, Philip Glass Ensemble, Pomerium, the Netherlands Dance Theater, and the San Francisco Symphony. She has improvised in a wide range of styles – from free improvisations with Pauline Oliveros to jazz improvisations with composer-vibraphonist Kevin Norton – and has recorded vocal works by numerous prominent American composers, among them Eve Beglarian, David Lang, Tania Leon and Annea Lockwood. Five chamber operas have been composed specifically for Norderval, including *Pope Joan*, a dance-opera by Anne LeBaron, recorded on New World Records, and *She Lost Her Voice That's How We Knew* – a one-woman electro-acoustic opera by Frances White.

She plays with two wireless Wave Rings by Genki, i.e., rings that can be put on like jewellery. Her goal is to use the wireless sensor instruments so that she does not need visual feedback on the computer.

<http://kristinnorderval.org/>

### FROM ME BUT NOT ME

#### Vocal Realm

**Franziska Baumann:** Can you describe your vocal realm? What inspires you? What is your vocal approach in general?

**Kristin Norderval:** I think about my voice very much as a resonator. (She laughs) So I am feeling its own resonance in my body, where it is vibrating in the head, in my bones, on my shoulders, in my skull in my head; how is it feel in my mouth.

I love having the background of a classically trained singer because I feel the register it opens to me opens the biggest power.

The fact that I can explore resonance from lowest to highest and feel it with an open throat and use it as a way to explore to the acoustics of spaces I am in. When I am coming into a space, I ask myself: Do I want to sing here? Is it a space I want I resonate with? Whether it is outside, like in an arena, somewhere where there are resonating reflection surfaces.

**FB:** In which vocal realm do you feel embedded?



*Figure 1: Franziska Baumann & Kristin Norderval in online conversation on Zoom*  
© source: Franziska Baumann

**KN:** I feel like there is a lot of dependence on the microphone, and from that, I feel a bit alienated. Because one of the things I love from my classical background I am not dependent on the microphone.

Wherever you are, you carry the voice with you. On the other side, I am alienated from the classical singer culture because that tradition doesn't involve enough improvisation, generative tools we have as singers to use, so somewhere in between singers with microphones and singers with a classical background.

**FB:** What is the universe of the voice beyond classical singing?

**KN:** Different with every singer and how you use the microphone. Usually, I perform in spaces where I can sing without amplification.

I perform in places like with chamber ensemble, the acoustic and the sampled voice. The sampled voice becomes another instrument from my composer brain and a co-collaborating improviser.

### **The Embodied and The Mediated Voice**

**FB:** How do you experience the mediated voice?

**KN:** "From me but not me". "From me", I know exactly what I can do and how I can control it. And then it is my composer brain that's what I want to do with it. I can control directly with tools to shape it with a frame structure, especially if it is a piece I created, which I can repeat in the same way concerning structure.

With the Embodied Voice, I know exactly what I can do and how I can control it. With the Mediated Voice, my composer brain decides what to do with the "From Me". I can control and shape it directly within the structure of a frame of chosen tools. In the unpredictability and possible randomness of how this Mediated Voice overlaps in time with my embodied live voice, it becomes a collaborator. And from what I can predict, the unpredictable develops because it overlaps in time, and the coincidences become a collaborator. One must react to the unpredictable.



*Figure 2: Kristin Norderval & Franziska Baumann in online conversation on Zoom*  
© source: Franziska Baumann

## Flying Blind<sup>1</sup>

**FB:** Could you give some insight into your new piece Flying Blind? The composition starts with a kind of calling. Is there a text underlined? How did you develop your vocal vocabulary this particular work?

**KN:** The word below is “listen”, first listen only acoustically. The audio input is off. My exploration in the space acoustically is to tune my and the audience’s ears to the space we are all inhabiting. What is the air, and what is the building we are all in.

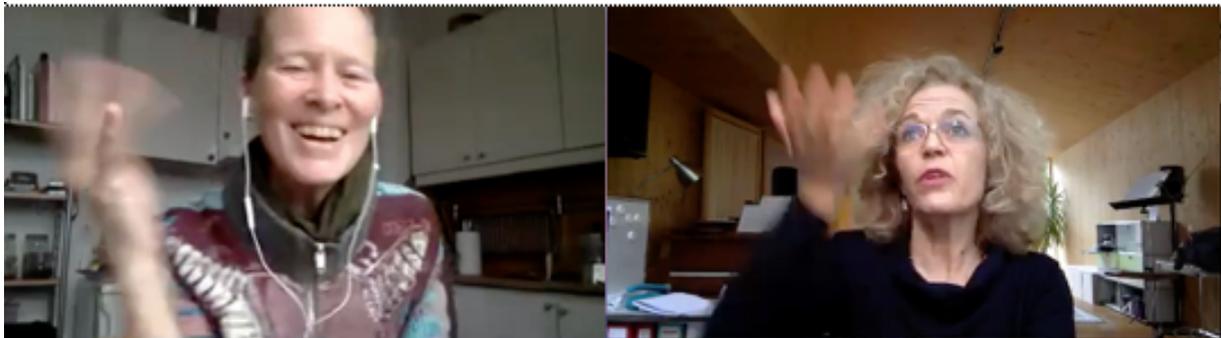
There is a simple structure with three speaker positions, a stereo pair on the side for pitched notes, low drones and more melodic figurations with feedback.

Two hemispherical speakers in the middle of the audience are for the little timbral breath, textural sounds.

**FB:** How do you experience the mediated or disembodied voice in relation to your embodied voice?

**KN:** I experience the Mediated Voice as a collaborator, an improviser with whom I play, the “From Me but Not Me”. Sometimes I can control the “From Me” precisely what I want to do. It is entirely predictable. Especially if it is a piece, sometimes that “From Me” is material that I can’t predict. And those coincidences are the collaborator. “Oh”, I get that. Can I work with it?” It is like in improvisation, where you get unforeseen responses and impulses.

## Designing Ritual Aspects



*Figure 3: Kristin Norderval & Franziska Baumann in online conversation on Zoom  
© source: Franziska Baumann*

**FB:** Who are you on stage as a singer?

**KN:** There is always some connection to the ritual. I think a lot about our function as a singer. You sing a lullaby as a bedtime song. You sing for a wedding, for an opening, for a church service, for a sport celebration. I feel like the ritual elements are very strong are involved in us singers.

It is part of the magic which is taking us out of the everyday experience. I give people a sonic bath.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vimeo.com/471932267>

## Technical Setup

**FB:** Could you describe your technical setup? Phenomenologically, what is the relation between you and your computer?

**KN:** I have a main performing patch that I use. With the Wave Ring<sup>2</sup> I am using only a portion of this main performance patch, at least in Flying Blind. I am using three different delay feedback lines. And each of those feedback has the ability to go from a very short delay to a very long delay, from eighty milliseconds to a minute, but it could be longer or shorter. The Wave Rings are with the continuous controller of my left hand, the roll function of the gyroscope is mapped to delay. So if I am in a sort of palm down position, it is the shortest delay, and if I am in a palm-up position, it is the most extended delay. Any slight little motion gets a significant change. The delay changes are scaled to eight notes within a tempo. It might be jumping from 500 milliseconds to a thousand. But still, slight movements have a big change. And I scaled logarithmically so that the first part of it takes more of a movement to make the little modifications clearer because those changes between, let's say, 80 milliseconds and 122 are so audible. And once you get to the longer changes, we do not recognize the changes in delay length as much. But the exciting thing about the long delay is that I can start sampling a very long phrase and then choose to go to a very short delay, but the long delay is still there because the input of the long delay is still open. So that's where I get the image of the folded time. I might know to bring back some element of that long sampled phrase much later in the piece. I might be on a short delay, but the feedback is still up. And if I go back to the long delay, I can search it out, but of course, it has changed because the motions go all through these different delay times. So that search of what I did in the past getting changed when I am pulling up the memory is interesting to me philosophically. So that very, very simple mapping becomes much more complicated because it means listening all the time, and you get all these coincidental overlays and folding. The other thing in that continuous controller is that it is mapped that if I am not at a hundred percent, it does not take input which is safety. And it also allows me if I find something that I like that I want to have the possibility to do a solo over, then I can put it at a hundred percent do my solo and not sampling that solo. I am just in a soloist function. And then I still can even keep that on a hundred per cent....?

The gyroscope's pitch function with my arm all up is the delay at a hundred per cent, and if I let my arm all the way down, I let go the feedback.

**FB:** I saw this gesture also on your right hand.

**KN:** Yes, with this gesture in the right hand, I empty all the buffers. It is fun to play in two different ways of creating the structural pause with all the feedback down and getting rid of the buffer.

On the right hand, I choose which delay I am sending to, and those delays are also routed to which speakers I can go out. Right hands functions are like a menu object. The only use of the continuous controllers is the gesture.

**FB:** The right hand is the rational side.

**KN:** laughs...yes. The right hand is the functional and structuring conductor. I never actually thought about that. Another interesting thing that was interesting in the development was that it really helped me map the speakers according to the place where the buttons on the Wave

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<sup>2</sup> Genki Wave Ring is a wireless midi-controller: [genkiinstruments.com](http://genkiinstruments.com)

Ring are arranged. So I have a physical relationship to the placement of the speakers in the room.

### Composing an Instrument or an Instrumentation



*Figure 4: Franziska Baumann & Kristin Norderval in online conversation on Zoom  
© source: Franziska Baumann*

**FB:** Do you compose the mapping of your controllers with the physical gesture in mind to get a meta-meaning? For example, your roll function becomes a caressing one when we watch you and listen to your music. Our brain starts to recognize your genuine gestures, and they become meta-meaning within time. Are these meaning levels in your mind when you compose gestures, or is it about tying the music you want to make to gestures most simply?

**KN:** Well, I think it is a bit of both. When I was first exploring this built control of feedback of control and delay, it was with the Hot Hand.<sup>3</sup> With the Hot Hand, I had no Menu. It was just exploring which one I want to use for feedback and which one for the delay. The flat hand up like a cop in traffic was a “stop” for me. At this position, the feedback is going on a hundred per cent, but at the same time, it is stopping taking in my voice, the audio is stopped. And letting the flat hand go down like throwing something away is “let it go”. That felt like a natural way of gesture, and then the feedback is going to zero. On the Hot Hand, the first patch that I have been working with had a different relationship to delay. It was not continuously changing. It was actually a timer: so when I put my hand up, it would start a timer, then I would ok that’s how much I want and close it with my hand putting down. Opening the hand was recording, and closing was stop recording. That was a certain length of the delay, and then I would loop over it and didn’t change the delay. I know in my body exactly how long the delay will be. I don’t know precisely how long the recorded delay will be in the other concept of delay. It is like in an old tape machine where you can’t exactly say where the file starts and stops. It feels like, anyway very physical because I am searching. I love the care and the presence of those body close compositions of gestures.

**FB:** The Wave Ring is not visible. It is not like a prop that I have with the SensorGlove. Is the Wave Ring for you an object, an instrument or a body extension?

**KN:** It is a body extension because I am not thinking of it as an object. I don’t have to hold it. I mean, it is an object. Maybe it feels like jewellery. I put in the program notes that I am

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<sup>3</sup> Hot Hand Motion Expression Controllers <https://www.sourceaudio.net/hot-hand.html>

controlling with the wireless mid-ring. So I am not trying to hide that from the audience, but I like the fact that it is not specific to anything in the high tech world.

**FB:** I feel that your voice, your body and your personality is there first.

**KN:** It feels very free.

### **Metaphorical Aspects of Gestures**

**FB:** What are gestures doing with YOU when you play with the Wave Ring?

**KN:** laughs... Well, there are two aspects I notice in my gestural vocabulary. For certain gestures like “letting everything go” to take everything out of the buffer, I have to be very particular and very strong. Otherwise, the computer doesn’t recognize it. So it gives a certain force to that. You can hear and see it is gone. These gestures feel a bit like a conductor. And then the other gestures like the roll function, which defines the length of the delay, are very mediative in a way. I have to listen to that calm searching.

**FB:** Does the selected software has a pre-determining character on your musical output?

**KN:** It is in MAX MSP, and it is all built. It is not a commercial thing, even if I only use delay and feedback. The thing I am now exploring is the connection of delay length connected to a speaker. That’s one example of pre-programming. I also can shift between live processing and buffers to combine for instance delay live with pre-recorded samples. I am deciding with which elements I am playing with, also presets with different delays.

My main performance patch has stayed the same. So it is building each piece, not building the whole thing if I work with that particular patch. If I work with someone else, then I build it from scratch.

**FB:** Do you compose each time compose an instrument when you compose a piece?

**KN:** I compose each time an instrumentation, not necessarily an instrument. If I am working with the voice alone, then my instrumentation is that. When I play with live gestural live electronic, the way, I program the processing becomes the instrumentation. If I work with pre-recorded files, those become my instrumentation. The patch and the controllers as one unit are an instrument in this particular case. If I am using the WaveRing with another patch, it is a different instrument.



*Figure 5: Kristin Norderval & Franziska Baumann in online conversation on Zoom*  
© source: Franziska Baumann

**FB:** Your speciality as a vocal performer playing with gestural live electronics aims to play with no visual feedback. It obviously needs practice to feel and to listen to what you are doing.

**KN:** The buttons on the Genki Wave Ring miss of touch feeling. There are no real buttons. So sometimes I have to control with the view. There is no feeling of the click. It would be good to have a better distinction between the three buttons. With the left hand, I shape the sound, and with the right hand, I controls functional structures, rational decisions. I have chosen to use the roll function counterclockwise while searching backwards in time, for example.

**FB:** Your gestures do something with us in the sense that we try to perceive meaning. The roll function you describe transforms over time into a gesture of offering. In your piece “Flying Blind”, I experience this offering of something more and more as a ritual gesture. I perceive this gesture combined with a specific sound as a story of its own. You create, so to speak, genuine gestures that are unique to this piece.

Thank you very much for the insight into your inspiring work!

**Link**

*Flying Blind* on vimeo

<https://vimeo.com/471932267>