

## An Interview with Breaking Winds Bassoon Quartet

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Clockwise from bottom left: Brittany Harrington, Yuki Katayama, Kara LaMoure, and Lauren Yu

**W**hen the Breaking Winds Bassoon Quartet's video, *Lady Gaga Saga*, went viral on YouTube in May of 2010, bassoonists worldwide were inundated with emailed links and Facebook shares from friends, relatives, and colleagues. And for good reason—these four undergraduates had become pop parody icons while playing the most unlikely of instruments very well. In the years since their initial breakthrough, the Breaking Winds Bassoon Quartet has produced numerous other successful YouTube videos and parlayed their Internet fame into a series of live concerts and outreach engagements all over the country. Always looking to broaden the scope of their work, their recent projects include their first professional album (due out this June) as well as a commissioned work for bassoon quartet and wind ensemble.

Assuredly, they have been plenty busy. If concertizing, commissioning, composing and arranging their own music, rehearsing, making reeds, recording, and maintaining their studies weren't enough work, they also actively feed their web presence through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WordPress, and their group's website. All of this is simply par for the course, as the Internet is the new landscape for any musical ensemble vying for attention in today's supersaturated entertainment industry.

However, the Breaking Winds are about more than entertainment. They also strive to convey that music is meant to be interacted with and that it doesn't need to be confined to one genre or another. I was able to talk to the Breaking Winds about being a chamber ensemble in a constantly changing music industry while they were together in New Haven, Connecticut



rehearsing for an upcoming performance. The quartet—currently comprised of **Brittany Harrington**, **Yuki Katayama**, **Kara LaMoure**, and **Lauren Yu**—joined me over video chat.

**IDRS:** *The Breaking Winds Bassoon Quartet formed in 2008 while you were all undergraduates at the Eastman School of Music. How or for what reason did you all start playing together?*

**Kara:** It began when we were sophomores. We were very fortunate to have a very large studio; there were five of us in our sophomore class. For whatever reason that year, sophomores didn't have a spring jury they had it in the winter instead. While everyone around us was really stressing out, we decided to do a fun project. We started playing music by the Bubonic Bassoon Quartet and we put on a recital for our friends around jury time as a stress-relief thing. Since then, we just started playing more and more because we enjoyed it so much. That's when we started generating more original material and becoming more of what we are now.

**IDRS:** *If anyone is familiar with the Breaking Winds it is most likely because of a YouTube video called "The Lady Gaga Saga" which garnered a fair amount of media attention. How did the quartet change after that in terms of how you use social media or just your general goals as an ensemble?*

**Lauren:** We definitely became a more serious group. Up until that point we really enjoyed rehearsing together but we realized that there was a wider audience that enjoyed our music that we could reach through social media. We started a website, a Facebook page, a Twitter account. Yuki has also started a newsletter, and we've just been trying to use every online outlet we can to get our music out there.

**IDRS:** *You've been together for four years now and although you're all presently together [for this interview], that's not true all year long. You actually live all over the country as you work on your respective Masters degrees. How and under what circumstances do you get together to collaborate?*

**Yuki:** Brittany is studying in Dallas and Kara is at Northwestern in Chicago and Lauren and I are roommates here at Yale. We just think of it as a long-distance relationship. We try to communicate with each other through phone conferences or video chat every week or so and also through a lot of email chains. When we do get together it's usually during somebody's break in the school year and we'll try to schedule a bunch of gigs through schools, a performance at a university, do rehearsals, or maybe try to make a YouTube video.

**IDRS:** *One of your biggest collaborative projects, your first recording, started with a Kickstarter campaign. Kickstarter is a private, for-profit company that provides tools to raise funds for creative projects via online crowd funding. Anyone from anywhere in the world can donate money to "back" a project on Kickstarter's website. How it works is that a project creator chooses a goal minimum and a deadline. If the goal is not reached then no funds are collected. Not only did you all meet your goal, but you also exceeded it by a huge amount. When did you start your Kickstarter campaign and how did it end up being so successful?*

**Brittany:** We started the Kickstarter with a proposal in December [of 2011], made our video in May [2012], and got our Kickstarter up in June.

**Yuki:** The Kickstarter was 45 days and in that 45 days we were able to successfully reach our original goal.

**Lauren:** It was really exciting to watch because at first our goal was \$5000. We were just hoping "please just let us make it to \$5000 so we can get the full amount!" Our friends and family and even some fans were really great supporters and they got us to that amount. Every

time someone backs you on Kickstarter you get an email saying, “you have a new backer”. We were watching our group’s e-mail account and we would be getting a new e-mail every two or three minutes, sometimes at the same time and this went on for a period of 24 hours. We didn’t know what was going on until we realized that they had put us in a newsletter that circulated to all the Kickstarter subscribers. In that one-day alone we received \$15,000.

**IDRS:** *How did Kickstarter find you to put your project in this newsletter and why did they choose to feature you?*

**Kara:** It was such a stroke of luck for us that someone in the Kickstarter office had played bassoon in high school. When they looking through the projects for something to feature I think that they pick out ones that they personally enjoy. We were just lucky that way.

**IDRS:** *You then have all of this funding that you didn’t anticipate having to do a recording. Where did all the money go?*

**Brittany:** Most of it went to legal rights. We play a lot of pop music and in order to record it we had to pay fees because it is copyrighted material. A lot of the money went to that and also the actual recording [process]. We were fortunate enough to use Yale’s facilities, a producer that is one of our friends, and also one of their sound engineers. We also have a drummer who plays a huge role on the album. That’s where a lot of the money went.

**Yuki:** And the incentives. We have different award categories for our backers who will be receiving different kinds of prizes depending on how much they donated.

**IDRS:** *Many people have never recorded an album before. What is the recording process like?*

**Kara:** It’s long. And it is hard. And it’s tiring, especially when you’re a wind player. We ended up recording over a span of three days and we did about 16 or 17 hours of recording each of those days. Our producer is a bassoonist himself so he could hear when we were getting tired and he would order us to take a break. But it’s so hard to know [how fatigued you are] because you become very focused when you record. All you’re thinking about is “how does this sound?” and “how can I change that?” There is a little bit of pressure because you do want to sound at your best. In the end we just had a whole lot of fun. By the last day we were just recording things thinking, “Oh, this can be a bonus track!” and “let’s tell jokes!”

**IDRS:** *As you’ve all studied more and matured as musicians, has that had any impact on your output as far as what goes on YouTube or how you arrange music?*

**Kara:** We’re getting better in terms of being familiar with what kinds of lines work with each other. Part writing, we took care of that in sophomore [music] theory but it’s putting it all into practice that helps us understand what sounds good. And as players we’ve improved so much, and I can say this with lots of confidence, especially since we’re in this long-distance chamber music relationship. There was a time when we went off to our own schools and started studying in our own ways after having been at the same school for a long time and living near each other. But, then when we returned to play with each other again, each individual had improved so much and I was so proud of how everyone was sounding. I think that we’re getting much better as an ensemble and we have much clearer ideas of what it takes to be good artists.

**IDRS:** *Besides YouTube and your recording, there’s another audience that you interact with in a totally different way and that is through outreach. What are your outreach engagements like and who is your audience?*



**Yuki:** Our audiences are mostly from preschool to high school level students. We'll go to a school and within their class period we would perform a set of popular and classical music and anything in between depending on what their music teacher asked us to talk about. We will incorporate what they are currently working on in their curriculum in our presentation such as arranging music or chamber music. Hopefully we inspire these kids to continue playing their instruments in band through middle school and into high school and to have fun playing music in different kinds of genres. Most recently, last March, we went to Lauren's hometown in Buffalo [New York] and they had all their high school bands in the district play a wind ensemble festival. We got to rehearse and perform with the four different ensembles. After our rehearsals we would do a mini-workshop, master class type of thing with the bassoonists from each school. We would perform in a solo type situation where we got to play with the bands and that was a really unique experience for them. That was a really different approach to educational outreach, to perform with the kids not just for the kids.

**Lauren:** We also have a friend who just finished composing a piece for us, a bassoon quartet concerto with wind ensemble.

**Brittany:** The piece is also something that high schools could play so we're hoping we can continue to play with [students], not just for them.

**IDRS:** *Is there any sort of broader message that you try to convey when you do outreach, besides what the instructor asks you to cover?*

**Kara:** We are four bassoonists; it's kind of unusual. It's unavoidable that that is something we need to address. We talk about the bassoon and we have a skit that demonstrates the necessity of having a good reed. When you go to a middle school the whole saxophone section thinks it's hilarious and they're all, "reeds are so terrible! I get that!" which connects us to other sections as well. We also want to familiarize people with the many different ways that music can manifest itself in someone's life. When we play movie music for little kids it's exciting for them because they never realized they could recognize music outside of its original context. It's also about thinking about music as a great communicative device. We have lots of comedic elements in our music and that's something people don't know what to think about. So often we go to a school and the teacher will give a speech before we play about audience etiquette, "please don't touch your neighbor and please don't speak during the performance". When that's the training people receive they forget that music can cover a broad range of emotions including the kind of emotions that make you want to laugh out loud. The other thing that we're introducing to younger students is the idea of having your own creative control. It's really important to have ensemble experience, school band programs are amazing in so many ways but kids can also take what they learn in the band room outside and make it their own.

**IDRS:** *How did your personal experiences or experiences as an ensemble change the way you approach younger students, the idea of more relaxed concert etiquette, and inspiring them to take music into their own hands?*

**Lauren:** In high school I really enjoyed all of the music programs I was in. We were taught that music was a lot of hard work but also to enjoy it. There's a huge reward to working on something and it turning out well. We all went into music because we were doing what we loved. We all love playing in orchestras and orchestral playing but this is just a different kind of playing. It's much more creative and freeing to be able to play whatever we want. Because we enjoy it so much, when we go out to audiences we want them understand that the bassoon can do more than play classical music. We want them to know that we play music, not one small subgenre of music.

**Brittany:** Having been on both sides of the spectrum as a performer and an audience member, it makes you realize how much you want to engage the audience. You want your performance to be accessible and entertaining but you also want the audience to come out feeling great after a performance.

The quartet's debut album is slated to include web favorites such as "Lady Gaga Saga," "Disney Princess Party," "Barnum and Bailey's Favorite," "Paradise" by Coldplay, "15 Step" by Radiohead, and many more. It should be available at some point this June on iTunes, CDBaby, Amazon, and the BWBQ Website (<http://www.thebreakingwinds.com>).



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