

# Performing on the Nagahara Full Concert Model: A Conversation with Dr. Jonathan Keeble

by Jeremy McEntire

**W**E WERE ATTENDING THE 2019 NFA CONVENTION in Salt Lake City, filing in to hear the annual Saturday night concerto performances. The program featured headliner performers, known the world over. But those of us on the Nagahara team were there primarily to hear Dr. Jonathan Keeble, Professor of Flute at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Keeble is one of the premier performers whose instrument of choice is the Nagahara Full Concert model flute. One of the early adopters of the Full Concert model (FC), Dr. Keeble has spent nearly two decades exploring the musical potential of this instrument.



Nagahara Flutes released the groundbreaking Full Concert model in 2001. The brainchild of master craftsman, Kanichi Nagahara, the FC model, with its larger bore diameter and improved scale, offers flutists greater tone and projection possibilities than its standard counterpart. Ever since Theobald Boehm invented the modern-system flute in 1847, the bore size of 19 millimeters has remained the standard diameter of the flute. This typical bore size remained relatively unchallenged until the release of the FC model ushered in a new world of expressive opportunities.

For the 2019 NFA performance, Dr. Keeble commissioned an “epic concerto” from the pen of composer, Richard Prior. Under Prior’s own baton, Dr. Keeble used every lyrical and technical trick in the book to produce a performance of majestic proportions. But what stood out to me, as a listener, was how Dr. Keeble was able to not only create but also communicate every nuance, every breathed inflection, across the stage even to those of us in the audience at the back of the concert hall. The performances before and after Dr. Keeble’s concerto were quite good, maybe even great. But the significant distinction between these lauded performers and the unpretentious professor from the Midwest was in the fact that only he was able to project from the stage expressive elements and dynamic details in every context. The others, despite their obvious skill and pedigree, would at times have their sound swallowed up by grand orchestral flourishes.

AS A NAGAHARA REPRESENTATIVE, I initially attributed my own excitement over Dr. Keeble’s performance to my personal bias in favor of my company’s instrument. I found out recently, however, that other, more disinterested parties shared my appraisal of the performance that from the audience, only Dr. Keeble’s playing contained the power to transmit every gradation in dynamic and still be heard by all. In light of the high level of performers involved, the instrument models used in the performance must be considered as a significant factor contributing to the difference in the audience’s perception.

***I recently had the opportunity to speak to Dr. Keeble, both to record the account of his history with Nagahara Flutes and to get his assessment of the differences between standard flutes and the Full Concert model. Here are the results of our conversation:***

## **How were you initially connected with the Full Concert model? Was there anything in particular you were looking for?**

My good friend Shannon Finney (Associate Principal Flute of the Kansas City Symphony) and I were both looking for a new instrument, and hit all the instrument makers in the Boston area, trying flutes for each other over about a week's time. Neither of us knew an immense amount about the Full Concert model, but we both instantly fell in love with it when trying it in the Nagahara shop. Some 17 years later, we're both still playing the same FC's we ordered during that visit ... she has a 10k gold one, and I've got a silver body, 14k headjoint, and an extended Nagahara riser.

I was looking for a new set of problems with a new set of solutions. I had been playing a flute bequeathed to me by a beloved teacher for about 15 years at the time I discovered the FC. The flute I had been playing is a marvelous instrument, and means a lot to me personally to this day, but I was looking for a flute with a greater color range, more dynamic flexibility and improved articulation. I found that and more with the Nagahara FC.

## **What drew you to the FC model versus other standard instruments?**

I really appreciate Kanichi's superb artistry and craftsmanship as a flute maker, and his attention to detail. I suppose that's not unique to the FC, as all the flutes in the Nagahara line share this, but there's something about Kanichi's attention to detail -- from the fit of the headjoint, to the wearless mechanism, the extended riser, experimentation with different metals, and beyond that make all his flutes kind of special. Regarding the FC, I love the flexibility of dynamic and color it offers. I feel it gives me the opportunity to say what I need to through the flute and through the music in ways no other instruments I've tried. I absolutely love the fact that the flute is so tonally flexible.

## **How has your playing changed since performing on the FC model?**

It's not so much my practice routine has changed, but my artistic vision and voice has expanded since playing the FC. I felt like as I got to know the FC, I was being handed the equivalent of a whole new painter's palette -- one that had a whole lot of colors, dynamics, and options I never even knew existed! As a result, my practicing became more enjoyable and inspiring, finding new ways to say things that I thought I was already saying pretty well, musically.

## **How do you think the Boehm-system flute can continue to improve in the future?**

I have to admit I don't think I'm qualified to answer this question, as beyond the basics, I'm embarrassingly ignorant about flute acoustics and mechanics. I can say that the FC is the most tonally flexible, dynamic flute I've ever tried. I would love to drop Theobald in a time machine and bring him by the Nagahara shop sometime. I'm betting he'd be impressed.

