

On creating your own space and setting your own metrics for success



Composer Paola Prestini discusses the origins of National Sawdust, how she balances her work as a classical composer, and her approach to staying creatively stimulated.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3085 words.

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You wear many hats—composer, curator, artistic director. How do you organize your work/creative life?

I'm very much a project-oriented person, as I think many artists are, so I see my work at National Sawdust as just another part of my creative output. I try and balance the different sides of myself with the projects that I choose. For me, Sawdust represents the activist side, the side that contributes to the community at large. Setting it up was definitely a lot harder than I ever imagined. I don't think I would have probably done it at this stage of my career if I had known how long it would take or how complicated it would actually be.

Now I think I have a pretty balanced outlook on how to navigate these things and how to find an artistic flow, but finding that required years and years of practice. Now I'm able to have the time to write and to go into these different creative worlds without any of them collapsing. There was a time when I was less organized, when I'd be navigating all of these different things simultaneously. Now it's like—no, *this* is my Sawdust time, when I'm really using my creative energy to fix things that are happening more on an institutional level, things that are very different from my artistic processes but also happen to involve deep, creative processes as well. And then, on the days that I'm writing music, I just kind of shut off and segment my brain that way. In doing that, I find my creative space.

Part of what makes National Sawdust such a dynamic space has to do with the fact that there are so many artists working behind the scenes. Art and performance spaces would generally be better if they'd been created and programmed by people who were also performers. As an artist, you have an understanding of the needs of a space that perhaps people who are coming at it purely from an academic or an administrative background might not understand.

Or a business background, which is so often the case. What drives me—and it's going to sound perhaps a little cheesy—is that I love musicians in a way that is so profound and so deep that it motivates me to try to make a space that is *really* for the artist, and of course, for the audience. It's driven by this desire to make a better space for our community. It's so hard to be a practicing artist. It's so complicated to make a living. There's so much sacrifice involved. And there's so much beauty as well. That has always motivated me. Actually having the brick and mortar space and the ability to support artists in the way that we try to, it's incredibly inspiring.

It's also a sacrifice that I'm willing to make in terms of what time I don't spend writing. I find it incredibly fulfilling to see the impact that a space like ours can make. While I do think it's extremely exciting to have a space that's run by a practicing artist—and I do think that it makes a difference—at the same time I also interact with the team that is here every day to make sure that *all* the different aspects are being covered.

There's a diversity of programming at National Sawdust—unique pairings and combinations clearly not based solely on ticket sales or marketing, but more about the artistic possibilities of the space itself.

With Sawdust we have a very real reality to face at all times, which is that we have a small space to fill. The real mission is to bring new music into the world and to build the audiences for that kind of music. From day one we really wanted to try and do the unexpected. My attraction to that kind of thinking comes from my own background. I was raised on the border between Mexico and Arizona and had a constant window into these different realities that were always rubbing up against each other.

We literally lived a stone's throw from the wall. You had these two languages, these disparate realities, and you could see things like the McDonald's arches from the Arizona side, this sort of false promise of something, and that always led me to try and find things, whether in my own work or at Sawdust, to join things that perhaps from the outside don't seem to belong together...but they really do.

It also just reflects the way that most people listen to music today, which is so radically varied. It can seem like there is no rhyme or reason to it, but it's a reflection of the way people's ears are opening and how people create. There's a vast array of influences at our disposal and you channel that through your own voice or your own curatorial choices—like a giant sieve.

I wanted to ask you some sort of naive questions about composing. Are you someone who is generally working from commission to commission? What does your own creative practice look like?

I started a company when I was very young and the company was meant to commission myself and others to work in a deprocessed multimedia setting. That set up a system to be able to commission my own work. I bring that up because now it's an interesting moment where I am getting large commissions that are very exciting, but I'm not chasing my collaborators and I'm not choosing my themes. I find that I can't just do that. Because if I *only* do that, then that whole side of me that has spent the last 20 years of nurturing the community, choosing the collaborators, and choosing the themes gets ignored. I can't abandon that. And even though that route is much more complicated—because then I have to find the funding and I'm producing at the same time as composing—what I found is if I only have the things that are commissioned, I lose a huge part of my artistic voice. I'm really grateful to have both.

I'm very driven by theme. So there are themes that burn in me that, if I don't create around them, I know I won't be happy. So for example, *The Old Man and the Sea* was a work that I wanted to do forever. I knew I wanted to do it and I just had to find the right way to do it, but it took me about four years to assemble the team. Now it's finally happening, but it was almost five years in the making. That's an incredibly long time to keep a thread going. You change a lot in five years. Maintaining the integrity of the piece can be complicated, but the rewards are so huge because then you've done something where you've assembled the team that you want to grow with. You build a family.

That work balances out with the commissions I have, which now go on until around 2022. Those are large-scale operatic commissions that are completely chosen for me. The theme is chosen, the collaborators are chosen, and the genesis is not coming from me.

Is working on those large-scale commissions like putting together an elaborate puzzle? Here is the space, here are the people, these are the parameters. Now take this and come up with something?

Sometimes, yes, it's definitely a puzzle. But you don't take on a commission unless you're going to fall in love with the project and fall in love with the collaborators, or because there's a certain collaborator involved. You have to fall in love with it, otherwise, I personally couldn't do it. All of these different scenarios refine the art of

collaboration and that is the most exciting part of the puzzle for me. How do you learn to collaborate with people? How do you learn to have a dialogue? How do you get the best out of someone? Developing those skills in my commission work has also made me a better communicator at National Sawdust. I'm dealing with the board, and with business people, and it's a different kind of collaboration—but all of those same interpersonal skills still apply. It's people skills.

No matter how talented you are as a musician, or how good you are at business, if you don't have good people skills—if you can't communicate well and put people at ease, and know how to read a room—it's kind of all for naught.

Right. It's such a delicate dance. One thing that I find really interesting about the time we're living in is that I started in a field that was primarily male-dominated. I was very aware of the "parameters"—put quotes around that because at the end of the day, I don't feel like I created within those parameters—but I was aware of them and aware of the complexities and the problems that surrounded women in composition. I see now that I'm coming from a different vantage point, and that the decisions I make will hopefully help make it a little easier for the next generation of women creating in this world. I think that's a really exciting change.

For people who are classical composers, is school generally the most common entry point into that world? Into getting your music heard and, hopefully, performed?

Totally. Essentially, Juilliard is like a trade school. By nature of it being situated in New York City, it's really teaching you how to function in a place that's very complicated and competitive. It introduced me to an entire community of musicians that I'm still working with today. And that is priceless. I went to school with Nico Muhly and Nadia Sirota and my husband, who ended up being one of my biggest collaborators. I think the richest aspect of having studied there was the community we created. I think what's complex about it is there was not a lot of in-depth mentorship, so it really did feel like the kind of place where you came and you were essentially learning your craft as quickly as you could... and then you were just kind of shoved out into the world.

That was a huge reason why I started the company I did. I didn't yet understand what it would mean for me to have a career as a composer. I knew that the route that my teachers had taken was not the route that I could take, for many reasons. And so it became, *How do I have a career as a composer? How are my colleagues going to survive?* Like, how do you survive the first 15 to 20 years in a field where you're not making money? Do you take other jobs? How do you find your creativity when you're working a 12- to 14-hour day?

How did you survive?

I had a lot of different jobs. At first I was waitressing and then I taught composition to young kids in inner-city schools. Then I started the nonprofit that I ran and merged into National Sawdust. I never took a salary, but it allowed me to have a space where I could create. I poured all of my money into that. I had *many* different jobs. I didn't actually start making money from writing music until my mid-30s. I finally started having a "career"—put quotes around that—in my mid-30s and that was the time that I met Kevin, who was the founder of National Sawdust.

So it was a really intense question to ask myself in my 30s: "Is this the moment to be focusing on a whole different kind of legacy? Something that would take so much of my time at this age when I'm not famous, and I'm still trying to make a name for myself?" I always imagined that I'd be much older and successful and I would start a school and it would be a circular learning thing, where everyone would be learning from each other. That is not exactly how things have gone, but I feel good about my choices.

As with anything, community is key. Those are the people who are ultimately going to hold you up.

An artistic community is built on generosity. Being an artist is tough. We all go into it for different reasons, but a huge part of it is that you have something to say, right? You have something that you can't keep in. You need to share. You need to bring that out. At the same time, if you're not worried about the context that you're living in, it's going to be very hard for you. I'm always of the opinion that, yes, you need to nurture your voice, but you also need to be thinking about things like: *What is the world around you? How do you nurture that world around you?* The other big thing that people don't talk about enough is mental health. For a lot of writers, you go into it because it's a type of therapy. It's a space that you can go in and breathe.

As you get older, you have to make sure to find a community that supports you, find the voices that hear you, and identify the reasons for why you're doing what you're doing. You've also got to be very careful, because in the arts it's always about what's next. There's a competitive edge and there's the critical edge, which is very difficult to process sometimes. You really need to find a healthy way to survive, because it's a challenging mental landscape. It's a very vulnerable mental landscape.

Often when I'm giving any advice to younger composers, I talk a lot about investing in the people around them to create a safe space so that they can continue to be vulnerable. I faced—and still face—a lot of challenges in my life. From creating my own work, to family, to balancing family and business, and I always say that my teams and my collaborators know that I'll never make a decision if I'm not ready. That's a skill I've learned.

What are your other coping mechanisms?

I'll actually go to bed early if I'm really down. I'll go to bed at like 7:00 pm. I'm very aware of what my limitations are, and when I don't see a solution, I don't actually make any decisions. I found that sometimes waiting things out creates the solutions you need. That kind of patience translates very much into the kind of patience you need when you are creating something out of nothing. If you try to make it into something before it's ready, or if you're not patient with the material, it won't be the best that it can be. I found that that has translated very well into my everyday life.

All creative people have to come up with their own metrics for what success means and looks like. If you're a composer, that must be a complicated metric.

Yeah, absolutely. We all have different metrics of success. Once you start creating work and you're being commissioned for it, that's a metric of success because you're getting paid. It's very simple. Someone is paying you to create something that technically the world doesn't need. And that's a huge thing. But there's got to be more to success than that.

Then, of course there's the work that I do when I commission myself and others to make something. The metric of success there is: *Have I created the work that I wanted to create? Have I brought it to life somewhere? Have I learned something from the collaborators that I've worked with?* I often work with people who I have huge esteem for and I really see it as a school beyond school. Asking myself what techniques I can learn from this person, aside from the friendship and the life experience of being with them, is the most important part. *How does this person think? How do they make decisions? How do they refine their process? And how does that all become a part of your toolset after you work with them?*

Those are all metrics of success that are pretty infinite. For me, those are the reasons why you do things. Then there's the intense reality that, once you achieve a certain level of success, everything you do gets critiqued. And that's very complicated because some of the works I've loved the most have gotten decimated in the press. Meanwhile, other work has received rave reviews—and I don't always understand the difference. So what I learned is that while I think criticism is incredibly important—that's why we have an entire wing of it at National Sawdust—I personally can't create and read reviews. So I protect myself that way. It's not that it wouldn't teach me something to read criticism, but it stops me from writing. And anything that stops me from writing is not a good thing.

I'm also aware that when I get really good reviews, more people will see a piece and maybe say nice things about me, but it doesn't—or shouldn't—change my own value of myself. Also, who knows how those pieces will be judged eventually? Some of the pieces that have been the most successful—that have been performed to literally tens of thousands of people—have been the worst reviewed. So, metrics of success are tough. You have to find them out for yourself. Most importantly, you have to figure out what it is that will keep you creating. That is a true measure of success.

Paola Prestini recommends:

I love listening to the [Éthiopiques](#) series. My favorite is Mulatu Astatke's "[Tezeta](#)"

[Joseph Cornell](#)

[The Labyrinth of Solitude](#) by Octavio Paz

I love to read the back page of [National Geographic Magazine](#) because there's always some little story that sets me thinking. I remember one was about a bird that was blind and only sang at midnight

[Julian Crouch](#). He's a puppeteer and his work is just exquisite. He has [this amazing video](#) where he shows how to make a mask and it's just the most poetic, unbelievably human thing

[Claudio Monteverdi](#). To me, that music is like a sanctuary. It's like cleaning your mind.

Name

Paola Prestini

Vocation

Composer, Artistic Director



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