

It's difficult to say which is more breathtaking – the mountain bike climb to Bridget Douglas' home perched on Brooklyn's steep hills, high above Wellington – or her long and sure ascendancy to the top ranks of New Zealand's wind players

When we meet the NZSO's principal flautist has just biked four kilometres from rehearsals to the exposed, eyrie-like home she shares with designer husband, Matthew Savage.

Tall, flamboyant with wild, spiralling auburn hair, Douglas, at 32, is one of the orchestra's youngest principals and highest profile players. She leads the orchestra's three flautists, plays the main solos, liaises with three other woodwind section principals and is deputy chairman of the player's committee.

In her spare time she teaches flute at Victoria University, performs around the country as flute/harp duo, Flight, with NZSO principal harpist Carolyn Mills, and plays in Stroma, a 20-strong orchestral group she co-founded and now co-manages, which premieres chamber works by modern New Zealand composers. And if that isn't enough, Trust Records is about to release her first CD, *Syrinx*.

Douglas has music flowing through her genes. Growing up in Dunedin where her mother was a keen pianist and church organist and her grandmother taught theory and piano, she began playing at primary school.

"I wanted to play the clarinet," she recalls, but all the instruments had been hired out and all that was left was a flute."

Serendipitous perhaps as the young Douglas quickly took to the flute and by 14 had won honours in Grade 8 flute exams. At 16 she'd achieved a Diploma In Flute through the Trinity College of Music in London.

Finishing school, Douglas competed a BSc in microbiology at Otago University as "a back-up if music didn't work out for me," played netball for Otago and then headed north for a Bachelor of Music at Victoria University. She was quickly bumped into second year classes, studying performance flute with New Zealand's doyenne Alexa Still (NZSO's principal flautist until 2000).

**By cross-crediting units from Otago, Douglas gained her Bachelor of Music in two years all the while playing in chamber music groups and orchestras, most notably as principal flute in both the Wellington Youth Orchestra and the National Youth Orchestra.. "I was even in the Wellington Air Force Band playing flute and piccolo at ceremonial occasions and for visits by foreign leaders."**

Boosted by a Fulbright Scholarship and an International Peace Scholarship she headed for America, enrolling at the State University of New York at Stony Brook – a former Manhattan whaling village – to study for a Masters in music with renowned American flautist, the late Samuel Baron. Playing for her supper on the local competition circuit she won the New York Flute Club Young Artist's Competition in 1994 and the Young Artist's International Competition, which led to a recital at Carnegie's Weill Hall with New Zealand pianist Sarah Watkins.

Life in America was an ongoing financial struggle and when the NZSO began searching for an associate principal flute, Douglas applied and landed the job, coming Every day after a five to six hour NZSO rehearsal, she bikes home – unless it's raining heavily – and spends two more hours rehearsing in her living room with to-die-for vediews out over Wellington Harbour. "I try not to get distracted," she laughs.

Most practice sessions begin with a Pilates routine – a method of muscle stretching and strengthening – to lessen the tension caused by hours of holding a flute asymmetrically to the body. After that there are scales and tone studies – warm up exercises on the flute to loosen

lips and mouth so she can make “a beautiful, warm, rich sound.” Hours slip away as she goes over and over difficult pieces.

But practising's only half the story. There are nights performing in Wellington and then 70 each year – on average – out of town. Understandable then, that when Douglas does get a chance to relax, flute music is the last thing on her mind.

“I don't listen to flute music,” she says emphatically. “I much prefer to relax at Blondinis in downtown Wellington, listening to good live jazz.”

She also loves tramping, running or mountain biking with husband Matthew who she married at Easter (2003).

The NZSO pays a good living wage and Douglas says her commitment to the 90-person orchestra is long term. Children are “a possibility at some stage” but right now she's exploring ways to tour 'Flight' to China., Hongkong and Taiwan next year and Stroma to a contemporary music festival in Europe in 2005.

One thing – above all – is clear; Douglas' 'magic flute' is destined to keep her in tune with life and living for the foreseeable future.