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Musical arts at Dartington

Developing from classes taught by people like Imogen Holst since the 1930s, by the 1980s music teaching at Dartington was a contemporary amalgam of a conservatoire and community heritage, vividly coloured by a long tradition of music from countries such as Indonesia, India and Japan, often with resident indigenous tutors. College tutors had considerable freedom to initiate and design a variety of music courses. If approaches to music in higher education were typified by the ‘conservatoire’ approach at one end (a focus on technical accomplishment and the performance of an established repertoire), and the university academic ‘musicology’ course that studied musical structures and the history of its creators at the other, then music at Dartington was like studying in an art school. Performing or creating without a researched discourse made no sense, and neither did its converse. Through evolutionary changes in national education priorities, to which Dartington was not immune, some of this freedom was lost as the college moved into the 1990s.

The 1990s saw a more integrated approach to the study of the arts, initially in response to public funding constraints, which in turn became a driver for creative change. The College adopted a uniform structure for arts degrees shared across all arts disciplines, which necessitate having some shared teaching and times when students could work in alternative forms of performance art, but with parallel modes of enquiry and production. This brought benefits through dialogues and interactions for staff and students, and proved valuable in challenging traditional views of performance as scripted by most music courses at that time (whether focussing on classical or popular genres). Of course, there were inevitable challenges as we struggled to reconcile the needs of different areas for certain types of facilities and resources, but the result witnessed some memorable occasions when assessed work was shared across the campus through end-of-year arts events. If a student presented a standard musical recital – a predictable selection of entirely canonical repertoire, presented with no apparent awareness of other possible approaches and no critical attention to critical matters of context and presentation – staff considered this a failure to confront the significant questions of our time, however ‘good’ the playing. Members of staff were frequently performing alongside students and many other musicians from beyond the College campus joined in allowing an engagement with the widest range of styles and genres.

The approach to education became far more about learning than teaching – meaning that we were looking for a student body that would engage in a variety of creative activities with enthusiasm, so that accepting applicants without interview merely on the basis of A-level points was inappropriate. We needed to communicate what the course was about, so as to enable the selection of music at Dartington to be a positive choice. This resulted in a highly diverse student body: diverse in areas of interest, skills, age, and even academic achievement, when measured

by school exam grades. Per capita funding meant pressure to increase student numbers as this brought a larger budget, not only offering more flexibility and the provision of a wider variety of events, but also accompanying tensions. How to decide if a student had the baseline skills to engage with and benefit from the course? Was it essential for a student to have basic music notation skills? Somewhere between the level of student enthusiasm and staff responses to a student at interview, we took risks – generally, but not always, with happy results. For tutors, this was a challenge as they could not assume a common background and purpose in the students. Equally, our aim was not to train students for a defined goal in the music profession, but to see each individual as an unknown quantity to be supported through self-exploration and the development of a greater degree of creative autonomy and flexibility supported by critical thinking. This approach, we believed, would fit them better for the changing nature of the wider music profession (and also enable them to change that profession through their practice). Academic staff came to see their new role as no longer one of instruction – although students sometimes felt they wanted this. In its place there developed a system of mentoring and collaborative work to help students realise the possibilities available by seeing themselves and other students as a major resource.

Additional support was provided by a team of expert technicians; and as well as access to music facilities (practice rooms, soundproof, recording and performance spaces), they could also utilise high quality video facilities, spaces with different attributes (black box, resonant, dirty, sprung floor), and hard and soft 3D construction areas – a veritable sweetshop that existed in few if any music departments across the country. Students also encountered the work, successes and failures of other arts students on a daily basis, and so learned to offer and accept critical support.

Exploring the context of work was always paramount. Dartington as a centre of learning and performance with its historical heritage in the Elmhursts' vision and its country location on a 1500acre estate offered students a variety of (but not unlimited) contexts to make and site their work. A 'musicians' tour with the same material performed in the same way in different venues was not tenable. Students initially found this difficult to understand, but through a series of projects became more aware of possibilities, more adaptable and evinced more understanding of what they had set out to do and achieved. We encouraged students to take risks – in a positive way, recognising on occasions an achievement we called 'intelligent failure', where work was carefully researched and planned but didn't produce the expected result. This was always carefully evaluated in the context of learning rather than teaching. Another key element of the Dartington ethos and pedagogy was the (complex) presence of the 'other', represented by fellow students, diverse staff, music from different cultures (music and instruments from Bali, Ghana, South America, Japan and India were almost permanently represented), and a range of visitors with an international profile who not only talked to the students but played music with them. So, at the end of a music degree at Dartington, you were unique. Arguably better prepared for a musical life than a life in music, at some distance from where you began but not necessarily in the direction you thought, and having frequently both delighted and disappointed yourself. An education?

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