

Professor Helena Gaunt S2E7: THE MUSICIAN AS MAKERS IN SOCIETY

31st of January. 2022.

And it's a new year! And we're going back to the second half of Declassify Season 2. We're straight into the grit of unpacking the classical music industry and where this is all headed in terms of strategizing change, contemplating collaboration in conservatoires and educational models as well having a think about broader funding models. There is no better person to consider that the prolific performer, director, researcher and now Principal at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, the National Conservatoire of Wales, Professor Helena Gaunt. Helena was A professional oboist for many years and founding member of the Britten Sinfonia, her career in higher education has spanned teaching, academic development, research and enterprise. This episode unpacks the notion of the social role of the musician in society and how classical music education, funding and models can rise to this contemporary challenge.

Victoria Pham

Hello hello! Happy new year to everyone and thank you to all for tuning back into Declassify for 2022. As we head straight into the second half of Season 2. I'm very excited for today's episode as We're straight into the grit of unpacking the classical music industry and where this is all headed in terms of strategizing change, contemplating collaboration in conservatoires and educational models as well having a think about broader funding models. There is no better person to consider than the prolific performer, director, researcher and now Principal at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, the National Conservatoire of Wales, Professor Helena Gaunt. Helena was a professional oboist for many years and founding member of the Britten Sinfonia, her career in higher education has spanned teaching, academic development, research and enterprise. Before joining RWCMD in 2018, she was Vice Principal and Director of Innovation at Guildhall School of Music & Drama. She currently has a leading role in the European Association of Conservatoires' (AEC) project 'Strengthening Music in Society' funded by Creative Europe and is a member of the Peer Review College for the AHRC. Her career has spanned leadership and lectorship positions around the world as a performer, academic and chair. And I've been very much looking forward to this conversation so thank you very much for joining me today, Professor Gaunt!

Professor Helena Gaunt

It's my pleasure, thank you for the invitation, it's been really interesting to have a listen to some of the episodes that you've got, and to just start to see some of the conversations that you're having. G

Victoria Pham

Thank you again for coming along to the podcast and being so willing to be a guest. Well, as a first question, what I'm always really curious about, especially when I'm speaking to someone like you, who has had such a big and wide range of Korea, and had quite a big impact upon education and classical music, I always wonder if you always knew that you were going to be a musician when you first started out?

Professor Helena Gaunt

It's that it's a really good question. I, I don't think I can say I always knew I wanted to be a musician. What I can say is that I loved making music, I loved being in music and making music. And, you know, like, like, lots of people, I started with singing. And then I started to play the piano, which I actually didn't like, at all. I'm a terrible pianist, coordinate my hands at all. And it was only actually I came to the recorder. And then later the day that I kind of found a place of like, concert misfields like me, but I loved playing music. That didn't necessarily make me think I need to be a professional musician. And I was interested in many, many things and interested in many things. And my first degree is actually in English literature. So I had, I had a long tussle with actually, what do I want to do professionally, and I suppose it just kind of grew on me, being a professional musician, I just became a moment when I had to, I couldn't not to do this, it became so burning inside me that I just had to, and then it kind of grew from there. But I would say that, you know, I had lots of other interests along the way, and still really do.

Victoria Pham

Do you think or this evolution towards you choosing them to be a professional musician, as well as maintaining all the other interests is something core to your vision of being a classical musician?

Professor Helena Gaunt

Yes, quite possibly, I think, you know, one of the things that, that I'm really deeply invested in now, is a feeling that classical music and music as a whole is not just an abstract entity. But it's something that happens in the world, we make music, it's a social thing. It is something that happens between people. And that, that that is as important to classical music, as the music the scores themselves. They go together, they belong together. And it's it's the belonging together that makes them present now or makes this a live practice. And I think that that whole thing of the social nature of music making is incredibly multi layered it it has huge different angles, different perspectives and different interests that can come into this from a psychological point of view or sociology. points of view, a physical and spatial points of view, things of human geography, things of the economic foundations of our society, as soon as you open up the social nature of music making you open a Pandora's box. And I certainly feel at the moment, one of the things that we're called to do in the classical music world, but but in music making as a whole, and perhaps particularly So, as we're coming out pandemic is actually what is the social basis for our music making, and therefore kind of diving into some of these other areas of interest can be really, really exciting. So so maybe that's where this is coming from, in my own background? I don't know. But, but Yeah, certainly I, I feel that one of the things that is absolutely critical is that for young people training, they have absolutely the opportunities to focus deeply on a craft and to focus on their their abilities as a singer, as an instrumentalist. And what needs to go with this is a profound exploration of who are you as a human being? And what matters to you? Where are your interests? And how did these interests and who you are as a human being? How do they connect to the music that you're making? And the music itself? Where are those connecting points? And how can you explore those connecting points? I find that

Victoria Pham

really hopeful because when I was studying at a conservatory, which wasn't that long ago, it was in 2014, when I started my classical music studies, I was doing my Bachelor's of Music in Australia, those conversations were happening between students, but there was no kind of formal layout where we were encouraged to have those constructive conversations or critical conversations that involved other disciplines, like psychology or sociology, as part of the curriculum. So is that something you're planning to integrate? At the Royal Welsh college?

Professor Helena Gaunt

Yes, I think so in lots of different ways. I mean, one of the things that's influenced me here in Wales quite a lot is Raymond Williams, the Great, the great philosopher, and he, I was just, I just love what you're saying about his being hopeful. And it reminded me of, of something he talks about a lot, which are in culture, resources, of hope, resources, of hope. And I think, if we're anywhere in the world, right now, in terms of music, I want music to be a resource of hope, for people. And, and that does mean really kind of digging into this whole social question of how does music making take place? And who gets to do it? And, and how does the experience of this becomes something that feeds you, and feeds you on your journey into the future? Whoever you are? So So yes, we are thinking about this kind of

way of working out the road while to college. For example, we are just now in the early stages of taking on a new building, in the very centre of Cardiff, it's a new building for us, but not a new building in itself. It's called the old library, a hand left to guess. And it's, it's a it's a wonderful period building. And as we start to work in that building, and take on responsibility for it, which will happen over several years, we're starting to work with an architecture school, the architecture school in in Cardiff, but also their whole human geography, aspects of, of the architecture department. So the whole the whole set of interests around how do people use spaces? What, what do they really need it for? And trust to be in dialogue with that kind of expertise as we think about how can we create spaces for music making spaces for making art and feels really, really powerful? So that's just one kind of tiny example. But yes. And we've had, we've had some of our members of staff working with bio scientists in the university as well. And I think, you know, it's becomes really important that a those sorts of projects are visible, but secondly, that students are really invited into these worlds. So you know, one of the principles of our new Beemers course, is that students will spend time really working on music in society. And what this means. Now they'll do that, of course by looking historically at some issues and diving into what's been happening before. But also they will be very much tasked with taking their work into the world, and connecting with communities and connecting beyond the college. And we'll be doing that particularly with them in small ensembles. So as they form their chamber groups as they form their small ensembles, they'll be starting to work out in the real world, starting with, you know, small projects, but then I really hoped building into more significant residencies. And therefore, the opportunities to really think about CO curating co creating interesting and disruptive new work alongside more traditional performance work.

Victoria Pham

When you say residency, do you mean the ensembles will be working around the city in other locations, and given the opportunity to kind of hone in on their craft? Or is the residency held within within the school itself?

Professor Helena Gaunt

I really mean, residency is outside of the school. So residences, in schools, residences, in community venues, residences, in other small performance venues, residencies, in businesses, residences, in all kinds of places, I don't want to limit where those kinds of residences could take place. So we're busy kind of forming partnerships and relationships to be able to post and propose such residencies. And my hope is that, of course, we'll be starting in Cardiff. But over time, we'll develop this across Wales. And in fact, we're already working in north Wales and have piloted a residency for some of our students that fear to fluid up in north Wales.

Victoria Pham

That sounds very exciting. It's, it's a word I associate a little bit more with the contemporary art world to have a residency in a gallery or residency with a group of other artists that share studios. And it's been in those moments where I feel like I have learned the most about my own practice. And it's something that was kind of missing from my composition world, because either you get a commission or you will occasionally work with a group. But having a block of time or studio space that set aside in a residency format is something I think the classical music world would cherish, especially students.

Professor Helena Gaunt

I'd love to hear more about kind of what did you learn what was the different what were the different things that you learned that you weren't learning as a as a composer

Victoria Pham

in the art residencies as opposed to what the art residency is gave me. And in fact, I just finished one last week, it gave me a solid chunk of time to work in a space that was physically close to other artists, or physically close to curators, or people who worked in the contemporary art space, who simply just knew more than I did, and will probably always know a little bit more than me. And they would, it just gave me a physical space where people would pop their heads through their door and look at what I was working at and give me feedback. And it was this constant sense of being in an open community where I could work on aspects of my craft and presentation and think about things that I hadn't come across simply because that was an environment with other people who were encouraging me to use the space to try out ideas and in essence, in sometimes to try out ideas that would fail. But to have the space to do that and to grow. And in composition, I had less of that opportunity. A lot of my experiences, composition wise, we're working very closely with the teacher through the Conservatorium and a little bit afterwards and showing them work back and forth. But it was kind of very formal, I would have a lesson as you would in classical music. And in terms of a space when I was working, it was a little bit more isolated. So I would have loved perhaps I should have had the forethought to create it myself, but to have a studio where there were other composers around me. And a space where we could just speak to each other in the way that I could in my undergraduate degree that sort of disappeared after I left the Conservatory in space. So, you know, musicians go on and do work with their ensembles and tour and as a composer, you're a little bit more isolated from that constant contact with other musicians.

Professor Helena Gaunt

You're so right, that thing of being in contact with your with your peers and having, you know, establishing a bit of a community where you're all you're travelling together and discovering things together. And that's, you know, one of the things that feeds us, I found that hugely in my life, but all kinds of stages, those are the things that have really fed me and inspires me, but also have supported me when the going got tough. You know, it's, it's, it's both those things. And I think there's something about a classical musician, given how much we have to practice or as a composer, you're, you're often writing by yourself, there is a lot of solitary time, which is, you know, often wonderful, wonderful to have that solitary time. And yet, we also really need that sense of connection, I feel. And the other thing that really resonated for me, and what you said was just that thing about, you know, having a long stretch of time. The, one of the things that sort of brought me away eventually from, you know, playing as a as an orchestral musician, and I haven't done that for about 10 years. But one of the things that I ended up feeling really dissatisfied about was going into a place and performing a concert and coming away again, and then the next day, it's another place, and then you come away again, and the next day, it's another place and then you come away again, and, and just really not having that extended time, as you said, either to experiment as part of the practice and get things wrong sometimes, or equally to get to know get to know a context, get to know the people and build relationships and actually be in a, in a longer term dialogue with people and communities, which in a concert hall is a relatively difficult thing to

do. So that thing of residencies for me holds exactly as you say this, this stretch of time, and depth of connection, that feels really, really important right now.

Victoria Pham

Yes, especially as we're, I suppose, moving through the pandemic, would you say you're thinking of including more aspects of digital interfaces and digital connection as part of this change in the Bemis programme?

Professor Helena Gaunt

Absolutely, yes. Without question. I mean, I think all of all of us and conservatives have been on an incredibly steep learning curve through the pandemic, in terms of digital. And I've actually, you know, it's helped us to do things that might otherwise have taken us 10 years to do. And so there's been a great step change in terms of our engagement with digital short, of course, lots of that's been about the learning and teaching, and how do we, how do we facilitate good teaching online when we've had to do that. But of course, it goes much further than that, because it comes to be about access through recorded media. And then it comes to be about actual work that's made for a digital world, that, of course, opens up huge creative opportunities. So yeah, into our new but be mousewheel, we've we've hardwired the fundamentals of digital skills, that that everybody needs to have. And then the opportunities for exploring the world of creative music technologies further, and the opportunities to collaborate across our disciplines. And that includes a design programme, which is, you know, one of the great advantages of a place like this college because we have got, we've got design students who, of course, come with that art school mindset and bring a really exciting, creative devising set of skills and perspectives on the world that are really exciting from musicians to engagement. That sounds

Victoria Pham

really exciting. And that you mentioned collaboration, which is one of my favourite ways to work, because that's, that's how you come up with new ideas and get challenged by new by new ways of sound making and music making, and conversations about how to connect with the community and society often arise from those collaborations.

Professor Helena Gaunt

Is that isn't that interesting? I think you're 100%. Right. And one of the things very much on my mind at the moment is how we actually really developed the skills of collaboration, because collaboration comes in many, many, many, many, many, many different forms, doesn't it? I mean, you of course, very expert in it by now, but what you know, collaborating without losing your own specificity of of discipline is something that's, I think, really important and how people start to, in the first instance, maybe kind of share some of their skills with others, which is so exciting. But then how do you move from that into actually making work in an interdisciplinary way? And what are the kind of creative processes that allow, you know, musicians with composers and designers and actors and directors actually to to make new work in exciting ways. There's a, you know, there's a whole set of processes and skills and a discipline of collaboration, if you like, that I think people need to start to learn. And so it's one of the things that, you know, is really at the forefront of my mind at the moment is how do we do that in in an effective ways?

INTERMISSION I

VP: For our first intermission is a work chosen by Helena and one that is very close to her as a performing musician. In fact, there is a story that accompanies this choice which I shall not spoil here as she will touch on this experience later in the podcast. This excerpt is taken from none other than Mahler's 'Resurrection' symphony, Symphony No.2. This recording is from the third movement performed by the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orcehstra of Venezuela conducted by Gustavo Dudamel as part of the 2011 BBC Proms.

Victoria Pham

I like that you called it a discipline of interdisciplinary collaborations. Yeah, kind of looping back to talk about all this interdisciplinary work was is always a part of your practice when you began directing and founding groups earlier on in your career, such as Britten Sinfonia?

Professor Helena Gaunt

Well, I mean, I was a founding member of the Britten Sinfonia, it wasn't my idea. I can't claim to her, you know, being one of the founders, it from that perspective, but I wasn't founding member of the ensemble, and it is one of the ensemble I think that was very much pioneering new new ways, new ways of working at the time. And I and now I think, I think I it's really interesting as as an as a player, I was quite traditional in a way in that, you know, I grew up having over lessons I played in ensembles at school, I played in the orchestra played in the National Youth Orchestra, I played in the European Youth Orchestra, and kind of really was was in quite a channel with all of that. And then I went on a pioneering postgraduate course at the Guildhall School, which was then called performance and communications skills. And I think I went on that because I was really thirsting for something, to give me a both a more creative approach into music making than I was getting in my orchestral playing, and one that was more socially connected. So we did do, we did do lots of improvising. And we did do lots of placement work in a range of schools and community venues, and working with people with disabilities, and, and so on, which is all completely eye opening. And we also did some interdisciplinary work. So we we did some work with dancers, which I absolutely love. And and I think I really had a big thirst for that kind of work and would love to have rode some more skills and gone further with it. I did a little bit of composing myself, I but, you know, I didn't have much confidence, I really, you know, hadn't studied composition in any way. And I think one of the things that that was quite important for me was that I was doing all of this alongside quite a lot of straightforward classical playing. And it it felt at the time, as though they were like, quite separate worlds. They were really separate worlds. And I think I found that quite confusing. I found the separation between those worlds. difficult to navigate. There's no question when I was improvising. When I was making my work, I felt much freer. And yet in the classical world, I felt as though I knew more. Okay, this is what I'm doing, and it's clear This is what's required. And I think I think I probably just didn't ever quite build myself enough confidence with all that creative work really to take it. For a word in terms of making lots of public work, I've done lots of that myself and in various other guises, but not in terms of public performance.

Victoria Pham

Perhaps Do you think there's a way that we could balance those two aspects of music making, so that I don't know how to explain this, but so that the experience of classical music isn't limited to what the traditional version is, because that was also my experience of it always being in a concert hall and very

being very formal and set out in a certain, almost ritualistic way? Yeah, improvisation was kind of this separate thing that happened elsewhere in the jazz department?

Professor Helena Gaunt

Absolutely. And I think, you know, this is this is, I think it's exactly what the journey we need to go on is. So that, so that they don't feel like totally separate worlds. And also, it doesn't feel as though there's a problematic hierarchy between things. So one thing is better than the other, you know, for some people, I think quite a lot of people will have experienced a sense of Western classical music being the kind of pinnacle of music forms. And, you know, why should that be? Why should that be? What is the what's the rationale behind that? I think we're in a time now, where we want to think much less about hierarchies of value between different types of music, but just think about music. And people will have different perspectives, you know, your tastes will differ from mine more different from the next person, it's not about one thing is better than than another. It is, these are different different types of music, and all of them very exciting in their different ways. It seems to me that, you know, we've we've struggled a bit with feeling that one, one type of music matters more than another type of music. And actually, what we need with students now is to enable them to develop some really serious strong skills, and then to utilise those skills in multiple different ways and ways that hadn't been thought of yet. And that's why for me, this whole idea of music making is so important. And for our emerging professional musicians to be able to think I, what I'm here to do is to make performance. And that means the making of performance can be developed in all sorts of different ways. I don't just have to think about the concert being a traditional concert in a concert hall, done in the ways that it has been done for many, many years. I can shape concerts in different ways I can bring concepts to different venues, I can have audiences and participants engaging with me in different ways through a performance, you can start to shift and disrupt what how we think about what a concert is, or what performing is or what music making is. And I think, of course, you know, there are lots of individuals and groups who are really doing this. Now you've only got to look at what a group like the Manchester Collective is doing and how they're making performance or the Hermes experiment Summit. Some of these brilliant, brilliant ensembles are what they're doing, to see, start to see the different ways that people are thinking about this. So how do we bring those kinds of mindsets into conservatoire practice and into the training and into what students are really experiencing as they develop their skills?

Victoria Pham

And you mentioned that the Manchester collective and immediately linked up with what you mentioned before about having a new building and the impact of just having different venues and then spaces that aren't traditional concert halls are really having a difference with the kind of audience that feels comfortable entering those spaces, or might be more willing to experience something that they perhaps would have felt traditionally excluded from, I think This is all very exciting

Professor Helena Gaunt

that one of the lovely things for us when this is the old library, where where we're starting to use the spaces is about a 10 minute walk from where I am now in our in our building or North Road, and there are at least three different routes for taking that journey. So what we're starting to explore is not just the the buildings themselves, but actually the spaces in between the buildings, and what how might those come alive as a as cultural spaces as cultural journeys. And, you know, I think there are lots of spaces

along the way that we can start to animate and think of as gathering places for culture and for music. And so it's not just about coming into a building of culture, but culture being a part of the infrastructure of the city, if you like, and actually on the streets and in the spaces in the parks and so on, as well as inside.

Victoria Pham

Well, actually, this brings me to one of the questions from I read your the summary of one of the conferences you held called strengthening music in society. And you've answered it a few times already, where you and I really love it the idea of the musician, as makers and society. And I wanted to ask you, how, how this is a foundation that conservatoire models and other educational training programmes that happen outside of the Conservatory, for example, the residencies might help with the training of, of new musicians and understanding of a classical musician or whatever term we want to use for that kind of musician, not just being a member of an ensemble, kind of like, as an individual, they have a voice to make change to make to to express their creative practice, with society and with communities.

Professor Helena Gaunt

It's that are several elements to this. And I think the first one to say is, I think conservatoire practice involves people developing a strong craft. So you as a composer, me as an instrumentalist, someone else's, as a singer, someone else is a jazz musician. There's a craft there, and the, you know, for a musician, to be a maker of society, they, they need a craft, and in twined, with that craft, I think they need to understand their own sense of identity, and or identities. And that can be multi layered and complex in terms of where they come from, in the world, where they feel they belong in the world, to identities of artistic taste, and so on. But that sense of who you are and who you are in relation to the craft. And how these two come together means that I think, for a foundation to concern to our practice, people, people really do need to develop their skills as improvisers as me, because of performances of advisors of performance. And indeed, as devices of new work. So they need to be involved in new work as well as a chronic transit tradition. And to explore, you know, a range of music within and around, they're the core of their tradition. So I think in conservatives that no, we're all we're all very busy with this idea of decolonizing the curriculum and what that might mean and it will mean different things to different people but, but that sense that you know, this is a life vision, so you need to make work as well as perform work and to be exploring a range of work outside of the ordinary. And I for me, it's one of the joys of being being a musician is that you, you can just go on and on discovering more and more music, it's it's one of the things that I I love to do more than anything else is kind of come across the music that I didn't know and, and delve into it and and you know, one of the one of the uses that I sent you as a music choice this is just an example of our that the the Not surprisingly, in Wales, the music of Wales is is really important. And when I first came here, I knew very, very, very little about watch music. But I'd been particularly thrilled to see that whole direction come into contact with a wonderful direction of of women in music and absolutely promoting the work of female composers. And there was a beautiful concert here. Not so long ago, championing songs Songs of off by female composers. And I came across this wonderful one by Denis Elwin, Edwards cloths of heaven, which is just a gorgeous, little, little piece. And you know, when you find things, when you find new pieces of music, or new composers or people doing interesting things, it's just one of the delights so. So for me, it's like, alongside your craft, you need to be making new music. So that's one thing, then the second thing is about, and think

being an ensemble musician, as well as an individual musician, and to be working all the time, all the time, in ensemble in small ensembles, in larger ensembles, and to be exploring the possibilities of different sorts of ensemble. And then that last piece is about being out in the world. It's about being in society, which can take so many different forms, but having the experiences the placements of going out, out of the conservatoire and making music in the real world, with communities, in communities and so on, I think is credibly important as a part of a learning process now.

Victoria Pham

I certainly agree, is a lot of that was I'd love that, that you're making sure that there's instruction for that. And there's guidance for that as part of the course because that was something that was missing for me. So so when I left, it was kind of like, Oh, my God, what do I do? I'm not a strong musician. I don't know what the, you know, I don't audition to do roles. So there was a lot of a lot of the work that I still do now in that world has come out of collaborations that I was very fortunate to make with other young musicians when I came out of the Conservatoire. So yes, it means a lot that you're, you're making this new theme, I think it's going to make a real difference in how these young musicians will be trained and, and preparing them for a very creative and fulfilling professional life as part of the community.

Professor Helena Gaunt

Yeah, yeah, it's, it's going to be a really interesting journey. And that's an exciting one for us to be going on it. I think there's something also about learning that craft of collaboration through small ensembles, when you're just working. In a, in a small group. Lots of people have said to me, the best training you can have to be an orchestral musician is to work as a chamber musician. Because, you know, so many of the, the core skills of being a chamber musician, and transfer to the orchestra and then amplified, you know, your best ability to listen and respond in an orchestra might have to stretch over a bigger physical distance. But it's, and with more people, but and so I think there's something about learning to really working through small ensembles, and having a big focus on those. That means you can, you can really start to make work quickly. And both you could you make, you can make work quickly, but also, it's much easier if you're in a small group to get out and about to, to physically move, move yourself and, and make things happen. And, you know, that's maybe one of the things for musicians at the moment that people are really experiencing it. Musicians are having to get out there and make things happen. Rather than wait for the phone to ring for somebody else to ask you to come do stuff. You need to get on the front foot and get out there. And I think small, small ensemble, small collaborations are often the sort of most agile. And therefore, I think we've got a big emphasis on that without saying an orchestra orchestral works, not important. It's really but you can learn so much through through the small ensemble and sovereigns. I was just, it was just reminding me actually of, you know, my time in both the National Youth Orchestra and European Youth Orchestra. Both of which, of course, a huge orchestras, and it's one of their most exciting dimensions is, you know, just the scale of the forces that gather together to make this music. But my goodness, when you're on tour and moving, it takes a really long time to get everyone checked in and out of hotels, and to make sure you've got all the luggage and stuff. It's an absolute operation. It's, it's not agile at all.

Victoria Pham

No, not at all, especially for the percussionists who have to wheel their instruments around.

Professor Helena Gaunt

Yeah, absolutely.

Victoria Pham

I suppose coming off the back of you talking about the physical agility, as well as probably other forms of agility when you're a small collaboration or an ensemble being able to move around, have a series of more practical questions that have to do with funding. And for me, with the support, working with smaller groups, or watching close friends who are in small ensembles, they've been able to acquire funding more easily and, you know, sustain their practice, because it's just been easier for them to support financial things, rather than some of my friends who direct very large chamber orchestras. It's been a much bigger struggle to keep that going. In terms of funding, is there any advice you have coming off your work with the HRC and create Europe, in terms of music sustainability?

Professor Helena Gaunt

Yeah, I particularly works with the AEC, which is the European Association of conservatoires. In some of this, I mean, I, I think one of the things that I would say, with bridge funding is it's so important actually, just to start and make even really small things happen. Even if you haven't got funding, even without resources, there are still things that you can do. And the great thing about just getting out and making something happen, starting a little collaboration, making a small performance, whatever it is, is, first of all, you learn from that, and you do something and usually, in my experience, it brings huge satisfaction, even if it's not a massive success in and of itself, the doing of it brings satisfaction, but also huge learning. That's how you learn what's really worked, what hasn't worked, what might you want to adapt and change next time around. So it's brilliant from that perspective. But equally, it provides you with some evidence of what you're doing to put forward to funding beds, and there's nothing as powerful as evidence and to put behind a bench to the next, an expander, whether that's philanthropy or it's a trust, or it's the Arts Council or whatever it is. So I would just say, Get out and make something happen. However Rough and Ready, however, uninformed, it might feel. Doing something and learning by doing is really, really, really valuable. And I particularly say it because I, one of the things I've experienced in myself and in others in the classical music world is that we have a tendency to want to plan something. So that it's absolutely perfect. And we'll plan a plan plan, we'll think about it and, and, but we won't realise it until we've got it perfect. And that's the perfectionism of classical music, working to its own disadvantage. And I think we have to try and learn to say to ourselves, okay, that bit of perfectionism isn't appropriate right now. If that's not, that's not right, for this context. You need to get out and make something happen and learn from that. And then I would say, find your collaborators, you know, just work with other people, probably as you're saying to not too many people, but find some collaborators so you're not alone. And lastly, I'd say really, listen, make contact with funders understand what they're looking for. So so that you can find the best fit whereas the fit between what people want what's needed, what's fundable and what you're wanting to do, because it's where you find that meeting of minds, that meeting of objectives that things will work. And, you know, when I say that, what I'm essentially saying is, it's all about relationship. It's all about finding the relationships that are actually going to work that will help to unlock funding. So I think those, those are the main things for me.

INTERMISSION II

For our second intermission is a second selection by Helena. This work is the vocal piece that Helena mentions during the podcast as emblematic of the joy of discovering new music and the possibility of always finding or re-finding the new and exploring new creative spaces and sounds. This excerpt is of Dilys Elwyn-Edwards' work 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven,' performed here by Bryn Terfel with Malcom Martineau on piano.

Victoria Pham

Thank you, that's giving me a lot to think about, I'm sure to anyone who's listening a lot to think about one of those challenges early on, figure out how to how to put a grant together and how to help you or who to ask for funding from. Yeah, yeah,

Professor Helena Gaunt

I think that the last thing I would say is, if you possibly can find someone who's been successful, or who understands the, the body that you're applying to, and so can give you some insight into what's likely to land and what isn't.

Victoria Pham

Those kinds of insights are just invaluable. And again, about building relationships within and outside of your community is totally Sorry, I was interrupted you. Well, I think one thing you said that resonated just then as that idea of perfectionism, so I remember studying piano was a child, you just practice and practice and practice until it got to the peak, I suppose, of how good it could get before you present it to anybody, whether it's family or friends, or in a masterclass or for the examination. And that was a very difficult thing to kind of, on Unbreak, the break those chains between being comfortable with experimenting with your practice, or like I mentioned before, and the the art residency, being very willing to make a lot of mistakes, or things that don't work, being able to learn how to do that, within the classical context took me quite some time. And I like, yeah, and I like the idea of collaborating, because that's when you build a comfortable set of relationships with collaborators, and where you begin to feel comfortable showing things that aren't totally perfect yet, or aren't to whatever standard that you were expecting of yourself within the classical music context before that point.

Professor Helena Gaunt

Yeah. And I think it's, it's also so important. Do you know, in saying something like this, to say, that doesn't mean to, that doesn't mean to say we're going to throw perfectionism out of the window or together as though it doesn't, it doesn't matter. Of course, it you know, all those aspirations to make something as beautiful as perfect as you can have their place. It's, it's about finding a balance and allowing that perfectionism to to coexist within and embrace that other worlds of creating and making and experimenting and not being you know, being fearless have a go, just be fearless, have a have a go, what's the worst that can happen? It doesn't work very well. And then you can learn from it.

Victoria Pham

It's all the processes suppose.

Professor Helena Gaunt

It is a process and creative processes are really, really important. aspect for me, whether that's, you know, in terms of practising What's your what, what did your practising look like? Is that a creative process in and of itself? Through to what's the process of a collaboration from beginning to end? Is that is that a creative process? Yeah, really important.

Victoria Pham

You know what I've actually never thought of practice as a creative process, which probably says something about me. I always thought of it as I've set this time aside, I'm gonna schedule how to break apart my time, which now that I'm saying it out loud, does sound like a process.

Professor Helena Gaunt

It is a process. It is a process. But it's, I think, for me, it seems I started to think of it more as the creative process, it kind of blew open, how I could think about it and the sorts of things that I might do. And, you know, for example, if just just as a as a as an instrumentalist, I've done quite a lot of yoga and Alexander Technique and Tai Chi in my life, I've had to to keep myself sufficiently supple to be to play. You know, for a long time, I would never have thought of that as part of my practising. But actually, it's so totally can be a part of your whole practising show. Joe, doesn't mean to say I don't need to spend time with the oboe as well, but But actually, the ways in which those kinds of practices start to get you into a particular mindset, they prepare you in terms of mind body for the work that you want to do. Or they kind of just give you a window of time to step back from that intensive work that you were doing and and re connect yourself in a different way with your mind body, you know, becomes really important because one of the difficulties about playing an instrument, for example, is you get into one fixed position. And that's one of the that's one of the things we all have to work with this, how do you how do you keep mobile? How do you keep flexible while still retaining the specificity that you need? Today?

Victoria Pham

I often am reminded of one of the previous guests, I spoke to Jessica Cottise for the podcast a couple of months ago. And right at the end, she said something that I haven't forgotten, which is about how music is just a part of our life. It's a part of everyday breathing about everyday listening, about engaging with sociology and psychology for her specifically about the communities and the individuals that you'll meet every day. So you've also reminded me about the creative process being a practice that involves other practices like yoga and meditation.

Professor Helena Gaunt

Yeah, I mean, you know, lots of lots of students, and I think also musicians who kind of will will say how difficult it feels to start practising, you know, to get to that place where you're actually going to pick up the instruments and start and it makes me feel, you know, what if we actually thought we'd catch sing, from the moment we start the day to the moment we finished the day, if you thought of all of that as practising what would start to change and how much more connected might you feel between your instrumental your music making, and actually what's happening in your life. And those two things, you

know, to come back to the, the idea that music is, music making is central to what we're doing. It's about music making, rather than news, just music. It needs it needs to connect into our lives, it needs to be fundamentally present in our lives all the time.

Victoria Pham

I suppose you've led into a very lovely, final question that I have for you, which is what I've been asking everyone, actually. And it's quite interesting, asking you this because you're both an instrumentalist, or researcher, you've done a lot of work from funding all the way through leadership, as you are now, with the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. I was wondering if you had any advice for anyone who is starting up in music, or maybe not even starting up in the classical music world who was interested in making a broader impact in their, in their teaching and in their engagement with their communities?

Professor Helena Gaunt

Think I think the best thing that I can say is just do it. Just do it and start now that there is something about it being fearless and just saying, Okay, if this is important to me, I'm just going to start I might not even know quite how, but making that commitment and saying, Okay, I'm starting, and then seeking out opportunities, being open to opportunities, seeking them out, and seeing where they take you because they will just take you on a journey. You know, when I, when I think about my own journey I could never have predicted what would I be doing now? It wouldn't have occurred to me. And, and I, I think that's true for a remarkable number of musicians that, you know, we, we sort of, it's not like you just you decide, right, I'm going to do this, and then you just do that. For an awful lot of people you've got a sense of, I love doing this, and I love doing that. And this means a lot to me, and you just find your way and it's a little bit windy, and they're different points in your road where there are possibilities and you make choices, but you don't. You don't sort of have a very clear end goal in mind Other than that kind of broader sense of I need to be in this kind of world. So I would just say take take those opportunities. And I was just also thinking, as I said that how in taking the opportunities they, so often they make a lasting impact on you. And I know that quite a lot of things that happened to me earlier in my life, the opportunities that I have, had have, are still with me, and they're still informing me.

So I was thinking also about, you know, I was thinking about the other piece of music that I sent you, which was, Marla to, which might seem a bit random. But I sent you that because I suddenly remembered and very particular manner to that, that I was involved in, when I was younger in the European Youth Orchestra. And it was Claudio Abbado, conducting. And we were doing a tour in Europe. And we also went to Japan that year. It was the 40th anniversary of Hiroshima. And we played in Hiroshima, actually with Leonard Bernstein, not not with the barder. And we played across Europe. And there was a very strong sense of music making as something that would connect people and bring conciliation and bring possibilities for people to be together on on that particular tour. And with Mulatu I, I will never ever forget one particular performance which was at the Munich Olympic Stadium. So we were semi outdoors in the Olympic Stadium. And this was I think it was 1985. And so it was not so many years after the massacre at that the Olympic Stadium. And that was very kind of higher in people's minds still. And we made this performance with huge forces, absolutely huge forces, a huge orchestra and huge choir. And Jesse Norman and keratin, Atala and then this absolutely vast audience. And it was totally electric. And I don't remember what time of day we started, but But at what time of the evening, we started. But as we got to the earth left, Jesse Norman started to sing. And in the audience,

people started to light, tiny little nightlights and all these lights came on all these candle lights came on. And it was the most extraordinary experience for me of music making, making an experience making a moment of connection. And I can only describe it as something, it was quite spiritual between people. And you know that that kind of experience is still with me, there's no question and it still informs who I am and what I'm doing now. So I think there's something I think there's something about being open to possibilities, and just going for them whatever they are, and then taking them with you, learning from them and taking them with you. I think that's really beautiful.

Victoria Pham

Both your your well, your reflection on that moment. And that you've you've kept that reflection with you all these years. Thank you so much for sharing that. I feel really moved to hearing about a little light coming opening up and connecting the whole audience with the with the orchestra.

Professor Helena Gaunt

Yeah, it was, it was an astonishing badminton and a huge privilege to be there, I think. And yeah, I think it's almost certainly part of what has made me feel that music making is about connecting people, it's about people, as well as the music itself. And it's about making a difference through that music and finding the ways to make That difference to happen, it doesn't just happen of its own the court

Victoria Pham

and making Union together,

Professor Helena Gaunt

making meaning together, that's a beautiful way of saying it. There was a, there was a very clear sense in that performance of everybody participating actively, you know, that's so special, isn't it?

Victoria Pham

It's electric, what happens?

Professor Helena Gaunt

Yeah, there's that sense of making me new together, doing things together and doing something important together, which is at the heart of music making, I think. And, you know, in terms of conservatoire practice to come right back to that, I think one of the things that's really informing us at the college at the moment is, is a principle of within the community, people are fellow travellers. Together, they are travelling together, and to discover and continue to create music and theatre. And the community has some extraordinary experienced professionals in it, and it has some extraordinary younger people with less experience, but it's fellow travelling. And people will offer their expertise and insights on all sides. And that's a shift from what I would describe more as a gatekeeper mode, where there's a kind of set of, there's a canon, there's a Canon tradition and a common set of skills, and it's rests in one place, and then is delivered to another place or was given to another group of people. I think that, you know, being more in a frame of travelling together means that actually you get, you get more of that flow of expertise and experience. And people can actually learn more from that experience and skill. Rather than feel, okay. They just got to wait to be given this expertise and skill, or there's an issue about whether they're going to be worthy to receive and, and take on that skill and expertise for

the next generation. So, yeah, that sense of making meaning together, I think, is a very core principle for conservative practice in the future. And, you know, when I talk about fellow travelling, and gatekeeping, that's, again, that those ideas have come from my research world, you know, that's a framework that's been developed in education, by by Jones to create a framework, but one that's really, really useful. And also quite beautiful. The idea of moving, moving fluidly together as a group. Again, much more hopeful. Yes, yes, yes, indeed, indeed. And I really must,

Victoria Pham

thank you so much, so much for speaking with me. That's brought up a lot of ideas and illuminated my thoughts and where, where classical music is going. And I'm really excited to see where the V mass is going to go. So thank you for speaking with me.

Professor Helena Gaunt

Oh, thank you, Victoria. I've really enjoyed it. It's been a real pleasure to talk to you. And I really hope the podcast goes well. It's lovely to hear the episodes.

Victoria Pham

Thank you so much. And I hope you have an excellent day. And thank you so much for doing this recording with me.

Professor Helena Gaunt

And thank you for your programme. Take care. See you soon.

Victoria Pham

A big thank you again to Professor Helena Gaunt for her time and what has been a thought provoking and, once more, very hopeful conversation. As usual, I'll make sure to pop any information we touched on available to you all below. Particulaly if you are interested in the upcoming BMus programme at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, I encourage you to check that out and even send it to young musicians looking to further their collaborative education of music. I hope you find all of this as fascinating as I do! Thank you again for listening and catch you all next time.

RESOURCES

Biography: <https://www.rwcmd.ac.uk/staff/helena-gaunt>

Articles about the BMus program:

[BMus \(Hons\) Music - Instrumental and Vocal | Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama \(rwcmd.ac.uk\)](#)

[Paving the way: RWCMD's BMus | Music Teacher \(musicteachermagazine.co.uk\)](#)