

## **MUSIC GENERATION CONFERENCE October 13<sup>th</sup> 2014**

### **“Unlocking the Bandboxes”**

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As we set out over the next two days to reflect upon and to discuss the role of music education and the exciting directions it may take, I thought it might be useful to begin my address by bringing you on a short journey through my own experience of music education.

I grew up in Limerick. I was educated at the Jesuit Crescent College which was then situated in the heart of the city. There was no music programme in the school although there was a school church choir for mass and benediction. Occasionally we put on a school operetta, but the only route to formal music education was via a small group of private teachers situated around the city.

My parents first sent me for piano privately and then later to the newly opened Limerick School of Music - for piano and violin. Reflecting back on that time, I must confess to feeling an overbearing sense of impatience with it all. I was mostly fond of my teachers, did reasonably well in exams, but had great difficulty in linking what I was being taught to the great noise that I was starting to hear out in the wider world. That world included my father's record collection which contained everything from trad music to Opera, from Glen Miller to Theolonius Monk. But the outside world also had other, newer excitements - the Beatles had appeared and from the American west coast we were starting to hear anarchic voices like Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention as well as the thoughtful, poetic and complex songwriting of Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon, Jimmy Webb, Laura Nyro and others. In my enthusiastic myopia and exuberance, I saw very little connection between the music I was being taught and the kind of music that was exciting something elemental within myself. While struggling with the fingering of scales and contrary motion exercises, I couldn't wait to be free to delve in Brian Wilson's chords for "Pet Sounds" or try to learn by ear the harpsichord intro to the Beatles "Fixing a Hole".

So, by the age of 14 or so, I abandoned the Grades, put my violin back in its case for the last time (to the relief of our neighbours, and possibly my parents as well), and embarked on the map-less route of the self-taught musician. That route involved endless consumption of music, constant listening and engagement with friends and older guys who knew more chords than I did, perpetual invention and experimentation, and regular pauses to pick up the pieces, fill in the gaps and patches, and then move on.

“Moving on” meant trying to make music my career. Now in the 1960s everybody’s parents wanted them to have a “proper job”. Unfortunately, music was not considered a proper job unless you were a music teacher, and I didn’t think I would be any good at that. So I was packed off to UCD where over the next four years I studied law, and finally graduated in 1973. All of this time I was still hungry to immerse myself in music, I was writing and recording songs, trying to meet people in the music business, sending demos to anyone who would listen to them, (and to many of those who wouldn’t!) and generally keeping my eyes peeled for any opening in the apparently impenetrable fortification that surrounded a career in music. Without going into too much detail, eventually the break came – I was spotted by a music publisher and given the money to go into a recording studio to professionally demo my songs. This singular break opened up the world of recording, arranging, producing and session-playing to me and soon I was doing exactly what I had dreamed of – living in, and making a living – well, nearly- from a life in music.

But what of my music education? There were, as I explained earlier, massive gaps. Whatever about my keyboard playing, I knew little of arranging, orchestration or any of those other skills that I knew I would need to have a sustainable career in music. I had no interest in being a “star”, but I did really want to continue the composing and arranging that I had begun back in Limerick as a teenager. So it was the world I worked in that became my college, the musical directors I worked under became my lecturers, my colleagues who taught me to write for various orchestral instruments became my tutors, and I sat my exams when I brought one of my arrangements into the orchestra. I was filled with as much terror during these performances as any student handing up his paper for correction.

Looking back at my early school years, there is no doubt that music education was seen very much as a thing of secondary importance. It could only be accessed if the parents thought it was a good idea and could afford it, and as far as most schools were concerned it was very much an extra-curricular or leisure activity, not to be discouraged unless it came into conflict with what was seen as the essential subjects.

Things have not changed all that much - which is why Music Generation is very important to me personally. In my day, the kind of panic that might have appeared on the faces of parents when they realized that their child was considering a career in music is less evident these days. In fact there is now a plethora of education options for young people keen on entering into the music business. Whether that is a good thing or not will perhaps arise in the discussions over this conference. Customer-driven education does not always produce the best results.

In my own case, I do not consider that my wavering route to a career in music was necessarily caused by my lack of access to a formal music education. I believe that I was going to find my way there no matter what. However, what was sadly missing from our curricular life was a regular and focused engagement with a form of human expression as important as literature, and as stimulating to young minds and imaginations as mathematics or any of the other sciences.

For educators, it is something of a cliché to say that we are living in challenging times. Every day is challenging. However, there is no doubt that the position of music in our cultural life has shifted enormously in recent decades. I do not propose to say much about the sustainability of a career in the music business. However, I would like to briefly express my personal despair at the reduction of the value of music brought about by the almost universal acceptance that it should be “free”. As we have seen, artists are now being forced to allow their music to be used as promotional tools for products that have nothing to do with music. This invasion by the marketing world is both ugly and destructive and also reveals a resigned acknowledgment by artists that the old ways of making a living have all but disappeared. The challenge to music educators is to equip their students with the tools to critique this change in the cultural economy, to interrogate it in order to discern if this is the kind of corporate behavior or creative environment they wish to accept or endure. And perhaps the best way to express their criticism is through their music. The challenge to the corporate world is to engage with the arts in a way that is respectful of their value and sensitive to their needs for nourishment and not for exploitation. The long-term payoff will far exceed the quick bang for the buck.

In its short life, there is no doubt that Music Generation is having a powerful effect – probably greater even than the originators imagined. As a board member I have had many joyful, and indeed often emotional visits to the centres where Music Generation has initiated its partnership programmes. What immediately strikes you is the unbounded enthusiasm that shines from both students and teachers alike. What takes a little longer to notice is the more subtle but nonetheless profound effect that engaging in music-making together has had on both the young students and the musicians who are brought in to work with them. Recently in Cork I attended a performance by some young Music Generation students and their musician/facilitators. They had been working on some rap songs together. Many of the young guys had been at risk, or had come from difficult social circumstances. One of them rapped:

“Through every song every disgrace I hold all this shame  
People say I’m addicted, they don’t know why I’m conflicted  
They don’t know what’s inside my mind, no  
They don’t understand  
I’m trying to be a man  
And they don’t understand  
That I’m trying to be a man.”

The raw honesty of these lyrics touched everyone in the room in a way that thousands of other rap songs might struggle to do. Here was a young man, in collaboration with others of similar background, expressing his frustrations in a creative rather than a destructive way, and the effect on both himself and his facilitators was potentially transformative. I spoke to the musician from Music Generation who was mentoring this process, and he clearly found this as affecting and inspiring as the young rapper himself.

These kinds of experiences are to be had whenever those of us on the board of Music Generation are invited to visit one of the programme centres. We often travel on a small bus which is like the Magical Mystery Tour. We nearly always know where we are going, so there's no mystery there. The real Mystery is how playing music together can open up young hearts and minds, help them access their dreams, unleash their young imaginations and connect them to each other in a way that few other disciplines can.

We are living at a time where our ubiquitous "social media" can be seen as largely "anti-social". In a world of selfies, tweets, blogs and postings, the traffic seems to be predominantly outward into a global echo-chamber of cyberbabble. In this turbulent, incoherent and often isolating landscape, Music offers the opportunity to engage with each other in meaningful and expressive ways. It is the aim of Music Generation to equip every young person in Ireland with these valuable tools and, from early age onwards, to embark on a road of self-discovery and social enrichment which Music has the unique power to supply.

Before we head into what looks like a fascinating two days of discussion, debate and music-making, I would like on behalf of my board, to acknowledge a few essential figures in the life of Music Generation.

I have served on a number of boards over my career, but I can safely say that I have rarely experienced a CEO that can compare in focus, energy, work-rate, leadership, experience and sound judgment as the young woman who is also great fun to be with – our esteemed and much admired National Director, Rosaleen Molloy. Our principal job on the board of Music Generation is to keep poachers at bay.

I would like to acknowledge our superb Music Generation staff who live here at the NCH, Eithne Egan and Anita Kwint.

The Local Education Partners throughout the country have been the essential conduits and providers of the ignition at all the local centres and at a National level we are so pleased that the Department of Education and Skills will be our long-term and very welcome partners.

And of course, we wouldn't be here at all today without the vision and support of U2, the American Ireland Fund and Music Network who have more recently been joined as generous supporters by the Bank of America Charitable Foundation.

We would like to acknowledge and thank our conference partner – the National Concert Hall.

I know that I speak for all the Board when I acknowledge the wonderful leadership of our retired Chairman, Tony ODalaigh, whose guidance from vision to reality was essential to the success of Music Generation.

As a U2 nominee on the board I would like to close with two reflections – one is the statement by Bono at the start of Music Generation. He said “What we want to do is really simple, we want to make sure that everyone, whatever their background, gets access to music tuition. That's the idea.”

Finally, I would like to finish with a personal reflection. I spoke at the beginning of my early music education experiences. I did not tell you that I went to the Presentation nuns at 4 years of age. I will carry with me forever the memory of when the bandbox was rolled into the classroom every Wednesday. Sister Stanislaus turned the key, unlocked the bandbox and spilled out on the floor all the musical instruments – tambourines, whistles, drums, triangles, recorders and bells. For me, that was the start of a journey.

Thank you to Music Generation for unlocking the bandboxes all over Ireland.