

## **A brief history of MUSICON and the ‘culture of composition’ in the Durham University Music Department during the 1970s**

MUSICON is a professional concert series that has existed at Durham University since its foundation in 1971. The name derives from the *contemporary* music slant that underpinned its early gestation, and understanding this angle is crucial for understanding the motivations behind the series’ formation and the culture of composition that was born in Durham in the 1970s.

In the late 1960s the Music department at Durham University lagged behind in its approach to contemporary composition compared to other universities in the UK such as York, East Anglia, Reading, and Surrey. The arrival of composer David Lumsdaine in Durham in 1970 kickstarted a culture of composition at the university that would help define the department’s identity throughout the rest of the decade. On Lumsdaine’s arrival at Durham he had intentions to setup a PhD program for compositional studies, and essential to this would be opportunities for doctoral students to hear contemporary music. There had already existed a 20<sup>th</sup>-century music festival in the late 1960s that was organised by department member of staff John Wilks, but despite hosting some big names – veteran dodecaphonist Luigi Dallapiccola attended one of his last ever concerts in Durham, during which visit he received a heart bypass at the nearby Dryburn Hospital – the festival was only annual. Therefore, one of the first things David did at Durham was to set up a regular concert series, MUSICON, which was to host a wide variety of individual artists and ensembles in Durham for the performance of contemporary music, funded by diverting funds from a composition summer school the department ran. Early recipients of this culture, and pivotal members in MUSICON’s foundation were Durham’s first compositional PhD students Peter Manning and Peter Wiegold; but to understand the nature of their involvement a word needs to be said about a major cultural institution in the promotion of contemporary music in the UK.

Crucial to the development of the compositional scene at Durham was the Society for the Promotion of New Music (SPNM, absorbed into ‘Sound and Music’ in 2008). Every year SPNM would organise 4 or 5 day-long ‘composers’ weekends’ whereby composers could submit their compositions to a panel for them to be performed by professional musicians. These yearly events took place at various universities throughout the country: York, Goldsmiths, and, on David Lumsdaine’s invitation, Durham in 1972. It was a composers’ weekend at Goldsmiths at which Peter Wiegold met David Lumsdaine on the stairs, and was encouraged by David to take

up a PhD here at Durham. By 1973 Wiegold was chair of MUSICON and the concert series became fully established as a professional concert series promoting contemporary music in the North East. He recalls the time when he met perhaps one of MUSICON's most prestigious guests:

“So we put Steve Reich on, and he was being produced by Michael Nyman, so Michael Nyman was taking him around the country and they did ‘Drumming’ and I thought - I remember this was my big thing - I thought, well, students all love Drumming. And I thought we'd pack it and we didn't pack it, but he did Drumming in that ballroom [the SU Fonteyn ballroom].

But then we put him in Trevelyan [college accommodation]. And I was stood outside Trevelyan with Steve Reich - who's, you know, New York and no nonsense - raging at Michael Nyman as to why he'd been put into a student's hall of residence and demanded to be taken to a hotel.”

To this day, Durham has never seen Steve Reich again. But Reich wasn't the only famous face MUSICON saw in this period. Liz Manning – widow of the late Peter Manning – recalls seeing renowned English tenor Peter Pears perform at Trevelyan College, and several people have memories of the legendary ‘Scratch Orchestra’ performing in the courtyard of Durham Castle. It was this luxury of having renowned performers of contemporary music from all over the country that established MUSICON as unique from the other live performance settings in Durham, and this was largely facilitated by two key organisations – the Contemporary Music Network, and Northern Arts.

Northern Arts was an organisation that came out of decisions by Local Authorities in the North East and Cumbria to pool resources and promote cultural events in the North of England – resulting from questions of funding for the Northern Sinfonia. This allowed for more mobility of performers within the North East region, allowing classical music to get out to places like Middlesbrough, Hexham, and Cumbria – and not just centre upon regional metropolises such as Newcastle. Durham city, and by extension MUSICON, would heavily benefit from this, and MUSICON especially so given the enthusiasm of Northern Arts Music Officer Kevin Stephens for contemporary music. Kevin was involved with the foundation of the Contemporary Music Network (CNM) that was setup by Arts Council worker Annette Morreau (Herself a graduate of the Durham Music Department in 1968). The *raison d'être* of the CNM was to solve the dilemma that contemporary music was too London-

centric, despite there being appetite for it in the regions. The original funding streams of MUSICON mentioned earlier provided a small pot of money for infrequent events to get performers up from London. The Contemporary Music Network on the other hand provided opportunities for these performers to travel around the country and thus cut costs for individual performances in the regions. Through the network, contemporary music flourished in the United Kingdom throughout the 70s, cutting costs for promoters by increasing the amount of performance opportunities available on the touring concert. Through David Lumsdaine's role on the Northern Arts Music Panel, and fellow panellist Kevin Stephens' connections with the CNM – MUSICON was able to reap the benefits of this and so too did contemporary music in Durham.

MUSICON even courted interest from the BBC, and another funding stream arose from BBC commissions throughout the 1970s. This allowed MUSICON to finally establish itself as a regular concert series with 2 concerts per term and thus 6 a year. However, MUSICON was only one side of David Lumsdaine's 'culture of composition' created in the 1970s, and was complemented by a series of weekend performances by Durham's New Music Ensemble. These saw various student performers, composers, and department members of staff experiment with the production and performance of contemporary music on a grassroots level in Room 6 of the music department (the Concert Room as its known today). A considerable archive of reel-to-reel tapes still exists in the basement of the music department today as a testament to the rich experimentation in composition that was going on in the department at the time – and it didn't stop there. Joined with this archive was one of the UK's first academic recording studios (behind York by a few years) that was setup by David Lumsdaine and his PhD student Peter Manning. This studio attracted the likes of various composers in the 1970s such as Michael Clarke, Nicola LeFanu, and Kevin Stephens – synthesisers such as the two VSC3's were at the cutting edge of electro-acoustic music and could be harnessed by the department's 8-track tape recording desk. Perhaps the most poignant composition to come out of this studio was David Lumsdaine's 'Big Meeting' - an 'electronic fantasy' combining sounds from the Durham Miners' Gala with electro-acoustic work from the synthesisers of the studio. The result is a gargantuan, almost transcendental collage of one of the most moving events in the Durham city calendar. It was an ongoing compositional project within the electronic music studio throughout the 1970s and summed up the atmosphere of the department – one of collegiality, innovation, and the flourishing of the new.

As for MUSICON, the series would run throughout the 1970s as a bastion of contemporary music in the North East, attracting audiences from within the university and around the local area. The series would go from strength to strength in the following decades with David Lumsdaine's departure in 1981 signalling a shift away from contemporary music towards a more eclectic programme that broadly mirrors its current form today. In the process, it would see it expand from venues such as Trevelyan College, Van Mildert College and the Students Union, to the grandeur of Durham Cathedral, hosting the world premiere of a new Arvo Pärt work, *Most Holy Mother of God*, in his presence in 2003 when he received an Honorary Doctorate from the University. It would end up attracting audiences in their thousands from throughout the local area and continues to be a vibrant part of the Durham community to this day – a long way from its small-scale origins as a contemporary music series in the 1970s!

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