



# AGAR TRUST

Supporting young musicians  
in rural Scotland

**Report No 3**

**Student experiences of innovation in online music tuition.**

**Janet Macdonald, November 2021**



The Agar Trust supports young people (8-21) resident in rural Scotland who demonstrate exceptional musical ability and potential and wish to further their musical education beyond their local area. It was established in 2014, since when it has made 350 awards.

Dr Janet Macdonald, who founded the Trust, worked previously for the OU in Scotland and has a research background in the use of online media for learning and teaching. She has applied this interest to her discussion of the appropriate use of online for learning and teaching in music.

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## **Student experiences of innovation in online music tuition.**

Over the last four years, the Agar Trust has produced three reports which chart the development of online learning in music, with particular reference to its potential for youngsters from rural Scotland. We began with a review of existing initiatives and current challenges (Agar Report 1, 2017). It was followed by a case study of Agar award holders' experiences of attending educational opportunities, and the development of a framework for planning blended learning in the future (Macdonald 2020; Agar Report 2, 2020). Now, in response to a rapidly changing environment driven by the pandemic, and a growing understanding of what can be feasible, the current report focuses on student experiences of innovation in online teaching and learning.

The past two years have been very challenging for organisations providing educational support for young musicians. However, it has also driven some exciting innovations in online tuition, some of which seem likely to persist beyond the pandemic. In the future they may be of particular benefit to those in rural Scotland who face a variety of challenges associated with attending musical education in person. But how has the experience been for youngsters? What worked well for them and what did they miss? The following account tells their story

Over this time, the Agar Trust has made 30 awards to youngsters travelling from rural Scotland to pursue educational activities in music. In the year from Autumn 2019-2020 we made 15 awards and from that group, nine described experiences of online tuition. It was a period when "normal" life was ongoing for part of the year; and those who did receive online tuition were attending Junior RCS (5), private tuition (2) and conservatoire (2).

In contrast, from Autumn 2020-2021, a further 15 awards made, but in response to the continuing pandemic, 13 of those award holders had experiences of online tuition. These students were attending conservatoire/higher education (9); specialist music school (3) and private tuition (1) and were marginally older than the first cohort.

At the end of the year of the award they are required to send in a completion report, and over the past two years we asked them for their views on what aspects of online tuition worked for them. We have set out an account of their experiences, which includes a qualitative analysis of the many insightful responses from award holders' completion forms. It has been used to illustrate the positive lessons learnt and challenges experienced in receiving online tuition.

### **The learning experience from home**

For those practising and receiving tuition at home in rural Scotland there were undoubtedly positives, particularly when facing alternative lengthy journeys.

*Normally if the weather was bad, I couldn't leave the island for lessons. Now I'm able to have regular lessons despite the weather because it's all online. (Nasstasja, Arran)*

*I have been getting Skype lessons from my tutor at the National Piping Centre in Glasgow which works well especially as I am in Argyll. (Ruaraidh, Ardrishaig)*

At the same time, there were often challenges with sharing poor broadband connections with other members of the family, coupled with the universal difficulty of not being able to play with the tutor.

*It can sometimes be difficult to see what the teacher is showing you, also the acoustics aren't great, so it is tricky to rely on hearing the notes. When there are multiple lessons going on in our household the wifi can get slow. (Eva, Isle of Mull)*

*Your tutor can't speak to you while you are playing so there is a lot of starting and stopping during the lessons. Also, it is impossible to play with someone else as there is a delay over the internet. (Rory, Invergordon)*

It remains the case that the technologies which are available to support online tuition to people's homes are not optimised for music learning and do not allow more than one person to play or speak at the same time, which will always preclude any ensemble work. Coupled with this, the limitations of domestic broadband speeds, as described in our first report (2017), do continue to be a hurdle, which is particularly acute in rural Scotland.

However, over the past two years, the lockdown has been a powerful driver for innovation in this area and a number of useful lessons have been learnt. Most of the comments which follow in this account are from students who came from rural Scotland and are now in Higher Education or specialist music school, in other parts of the country. However, many of their experiences will be common to anyone involved with teaching and learning in music, regardless of where students and staff are situated.

### **New opportunities**

Certain parts of music courses have offered exciting opportunities, for example **masterclasses** which could involve specialist musicians and students from all over the world. In addition, other aspects involving speaking rather than playing, such as lectures, or discussion worked well.

*A thing that was really amazing was one of the tuba teachers set up a series of weekly masterclasses with some of the best brass musicians from around the world, where we got to sit and listen to their stories and ask them some questions too. (Gavin, RCS)*

*We have been online for our lectures and the written parts of the course. I personally thought it worked well. (Amy, RNCM)*

*Lectures for Music Theory and Music History worked very well online and since they were recorded, reflection on previous topics was made significantly easier. (Johnny, RWCMD)*

The use of **recordings** is also mentioned by several students as being very effective for learning, because they provided a more accurate representation of playing and also allowed space for reflection, repetition and discussion.

*By sending voice memos of my performances to my tutor,..he was still able to hear my progress and give advice on my playing (Emma, Junior Conservatoire)*

*In the run up to my virtual recital assessment, instead of playing live in a lesson I submitted full recordings to my teacher, which we listened to together. This made the feedback from my teacher much clearer, as we were both focusing on listening. (Neavan, Birmingham conservatoire)*

*..sharing recordings worked well as a method to hear a more accurate representation of my playing than over video call... And lessons were recorded on my laptop so I could rewatch them. (Hattie, Yehudi Menuhin School)*

Other teaching approaches seem to have worked even better online than in-person tuition:

*Playing to a click track did help hone certain skills such as accuracy in keeping time. (Freya, Douglas Academy)*

*Zoom is wonderful at exposing pitch, so my intonation has probably improved more than what it would have, had I not been receiving Zoom lessons. (Kara, RNCM)*

While it is possible that certain elements of playing may be clearer using online technology, it could also be that the use of a video camera may focus attention on different parts of the instrument and player. For example, when tutoring a cello player using a video camera, it might be easier to see the actions of the upper hand (pitch) than the lower hand (bowing).

To an extent the variability in student experiences seems to have depended on the teaching style used and also what exactly tutors were trying to convey.

*My teacher is fairly technical in his teaching style and explains things rather than showing through demonstration, which I felt translated better into an online format. (Rachel, RAM)*

*For general guidance and perhaps musical interpretation it works just as well online. (Molly, Yehudi Menuhin School)*

It also seems likely that there will be teaching techniques which are generic to all levels and others which are specific to a particular level, and certainly to a particular instrument or voice.

### **Less effective approaches**

Some online teaching approaches appear to have been rather less effective, or they were at best challenging, and tended to leave students disappointed or lacking in enthusiasm or inspiration. We note the repeated emphasis on the lack of an authentic **representation of sound**,

*When the RNCM finally opened up and we could finally be in the same room as our tutors, almost everyone presented with the same difficulty – we had all lost our sound and projection. This was due to being stuck practising in our small bedrooms and the fact that zoom condenses all dynamics to a mezzo forte. (Kara, RNCM)*

*I missed being able to sing in a space designed for music making, in comparison to my student accommodation as well as singing with a live accompanist and not with a backing track over zoom. (Eve, RCS)*

*It was sometimes hard that he couldn't hear the finer details of my sound production and I didn't feel I left lessons with the same level of inspiration as in-person lessons. (Rachel, RAM)*

*What your teacher hears is determined mostly by the quality of the student's microphone and the teacher's speakers. (Neavan)*

We note that a contributing factor is a result of the size of room in which students were practising, in addition to the effects of the technology.

Other students refer to the tutor's reduced ability to convey any **physical demonstration**:

*In person we work in so much more detail, and it is also a lot easier to give physical pointers and to help with technique. ...it is hard to express more detailed technique pointers or advice on sound production through the computer. (Molly, Yehudi Menuhin School)*

*Postural classes like Alexander technique didn't quite work for me. It was hard to grasp what I was meant to be doing with my body exactly, rendering it almost useless unfortunately. (Johnny, RWCMD)*

While the comments so far refer to the use of online for individual tuition, several described joining **online group performances**, using recordings from several participants which are combined. Student responses show they have been exciting for some and less so for others.

*The most inspiring project I took part in was an international 78 horn ensemble playing the Mr Bean Opening Theme. My year at RCS Juniors helped give me the experience and confidence to feel that I could take part in such a challenging and worthwhile collaboration. (Freya, RCS Juniors)*

*You have to play on mute when rehearsing as a band, so we don't know how we really sound together. (Rory, National Piping Centre)*

*This year I landed some great orchestral opportunities, creating a virtual performance of Prokofiev's Dance of the Knights with NYOS Symphony orchestra..(Lucy, NYOS)*

One student shared some positive experiences of ensemble work undertaken at the Guildhall, where they are using the LOLA (Low Latency) technology. Lola uses specialized audio/video transmission software and works over a university network, which makes it possible for musicians to play together over thousands of kilometers with no adverse latency effects. There have clearly been exciting benefits for these students too.

*Big projects like the Gold Medal at the beginning of the year were done with the low-latency network, which meant a whole orchestra could play together in real time, while split into different rooms. The strings were in the main hall with the soloists, wind in another room, brass and percussion together and the conductor in another, all displayed on screens in each room so we could see each other. (Sandy, Guildhall)*

Developments in LOLA technology will mean that in the future it will be possible to use it over networks with lower bandwidth than at present. The potential value of this is becoming more and more obvious as the use of online music tuition becomes a part of accepted practice.

### **Beyond technology**

Beyond the triumphs and limitations associated with learning online, there is always the sheer joy of making music together in the same room. The students were unanimous in lamenting the loss of in-person ensemble playing and performances, they all missed it so much and were so happy when these opportunities returned.

*Our band have begun playing together again in the local church which is AMAZING to do. (Cara, Campbeltown)*

*I attended my first live concert since March 2020 a couple of weeks ago. .... My entire row were in tears come the end, and I think it reignited the motivation and love for music that I felt I have been losing over the past year of isolation. (Kara, RNCM)*

Perhaps the most heartening outcome from these all these youngsters is to read of their positivity and resilience, despite all the setbacks.

*Online tuition was a big shift that many people took a while getting used to. Initially I simply viewed this as an obstacle that couldn't really be overcome and there wasn't really any benefit to it. However, after 18 months of online lessons, you begin to see some benefits, such as being able to easily record your lesson, share your screen and allow lessons to take place when even you and your teacher are great distances away from one another. I definitely think online tuition has its positives and I am ultimately glad to have experienced it, as I don't think it will be gone completely anytime soon! (Lucy, Douglas Academy Music School)*

These students are ready to adapt and survive.

### **Where next?**

The privations of the last eighteen months have been significant for youngsters studying music, and for their tutors. But this lockdown period has also been a drive to innovate and create new approaches to the planning of music education and to attracting more students. It has opened windows to contact with others around the world, to hear and see music of the highest quality, and to engage in collaboration. These benefit everybody, but especially the geographically isolated.

We are delighted to note particularly those innovations which may in future have a positive impact on families in rural Scotland. For example, we note the widespread use of recorded auditions, for example in recent use by NYoS, which effectively provides a level playing field, regardless of where applicants live. The availability of masterclasses, for example in use by RCS, produced with specialist musicians who could live anywhere, which can be made accessible to youngsters, wherever they live. We note a recent online event from the NYPBoS, who advertise a priority for youngsters from the Highlands. Finally, in a blended approach, the SCO Academy together with St Mary's Music School are offering a series of sessions on four Sunday afternoons, combining online tuition together with a tempting final play through, offering space for rural youngsters to join in without excessive travel constraints and still to enjoy playing finally with those they have met online.

A growing familiarity with online learning really opens up new opportunities for music teaching and offers the potential to reduce the carbon footprint of current practices. It demands a proportionate response to the use of online media for music education. We need to be clear about the purpose and expectations of teaching sessions, in order to maximise the options available: what works well online, and what requires a face- to-face environment (see Agar Report No 2, 2020). The importance of motivation and excitement should not be neglected because it can be central to generating and maintaining the enthusiasm of youngsters for learning music. There will always be times when there is no substitute for in person tuition. But let us not lose sight of what we have learnt about online use over the last two years.

Agar Report No. 1 (2017) Online music tuition in rural Scotland. <https://www.agar-trust.org.uk/Files/OnlineMusicTuitionInRuralScotland.pdf>

Macdonald, J. (2020) Access to educational opportunities in music for youngsters from rural Scotland. A role for Lola? Presentation to *CEMPE/LATIMPE Low latency streaming colloquium, RCS Glasgow Jan 2020*

[https://www.agar-trust.org.uk/Files/Low\\_latency\\_Glasgow\\_2020.pptx](https://www.agar-trust.org.uk/Files/Low_latency_Glasgow_2020.pptx)

Agar Report No. 2 (2020) Perspectives on music education from youngsters in rural Scotland. A future for blended learning? *Students as researching artists - Music, technology and musicianship, Latimpe Platform May 13-14 2020*

[https://www.agar-trust.org.uk/Files/Perspectives\\_from\\_youngsters\\_2020.pdf](https://www.agar-trust.org.uk/Files/Perspectives_from_youngsters_2020.pdf)