

An interview with Judith Weir

Cemil Egeli

Cemil Egeli is a senior lecturer and programme leader for the counselling skills (BA combined honours) degree at the University of Chester. He is studying for a PhD at The University of Warwick exploring the experiences of students, in higher education, who come from dual heritage or mixed cultural backgrounds. He previously studied music and taught as a secondary school music teacher. Email: cemilegeli@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT: Cemil Egeli previously worked as a researcher on the flagship arts TV programme ‘The South Bank Show’ (then broadcast on ITV), where in 2001 Judith Weir received the prestigious music award for her choral and orchestral work, *We Are Shadows*. Some 20 years later, Judith Weir has very kindly agreed to him posing some interview questions.

KEY WORDS: Music, pandemic, social-context

Judith Weir is one of the leading British composers of our times. She was born to Scottish parents in 1954 and grew up near London. Judith has taught as a visiting professor at Princeton, Harvard and Cardiff universities. Honours for her work include the Critics’ Circle, Ivor Novello and Elise L Stoeger awards, A South Bank Show Award and a CBE. In July 2014, Judith was the first woman to be appointed to the post of Master of the Queen’s Music. Amongst her priorities in this role is support of school music teachers, of amateur orchestras and choirs, and of rural festivals. Judith regularly blogs on her website www.judithweir.com.

Cemil Egeli (CE): How did you find music, or did music find you?

Judith Weir (JW): In very informal ways when I was young, music found me. My parents both played in bands or amateur orchestras, and there had been a lot of even more informal

music in their backgrounds in the north of Scotland (playing for dances, singing in church etc.) At my primary school in Wembley, we didn't have actual music lessons, but there was a talented teacher who organised recorder groups and would sometimes write out his own arrangements of classic tunes for us to play. Later on (at secondary school), it seemed quite normal to get my own groups together and somehow find music for them, which led to me arranging, and then writing my own new music. Obviously I must also have heard a good amount of music during these years - pop, folk and classical - but thinking back I recognise music as having been primarily a practical activity.

CE: What inspires or influences you? Where does the music come from?

JW: I think of the compositions I'm going to write as 'tasks.' Each of them poses specific questions, and my new piece will be a response, or possibly a solution to problems inherent in the area I'm going to write in. These factors influence me, and thinking about them creatively is my main inspiration. Nearly everything I write is for specific musicians or circumstances, most often to commission. When I say this, people often reply sympathetically, "*wouldn't you prefer to be completely free and write whatever you like?*"! But this is the way I like to write. I like the feeling that the new work is a shared project, that people at the other end are interested, and looking forward to their own encounters with the questions I've been wrestling with while writing this piece of music.

CE: Music education across schools (and universities) is often under threat, be it from government policy or budgets (for instance with the current Ebacc performance measure), have you any thoughts on music education?

JW: Music is potentially a very strong academic subject. Uniquely, we ask students to work historically, technically (composing, doing harmony exercises, etc.), and practically (singing and/or playing an instrument). Listening and collaborative work are prioritised, and there are strong elements of science, computing and mathematics in what we do. A music graduate ends up with a particularly wide skills set, and many career possibilities. Of course, not everyone who could potentially do so reaches this point because, particularly in the last decade, educational metrics generally don't cover music. In the early days of the National Curriculum, GCSE Music was an accessible course for anyone interested in music, but in recent years, under government pressure to focus on so-called 'facts', the syllabus has become baggy, enveloping a confusing array of topics. Given the stress on school budgets, it's not surprising that schools are no longer employing music teachers, or filling vacancies. That's the worst part of it. Every school needs some music in its daily life - especially now that the school day is often so stressfully compressed with exam targets for the students. It's worth noting that in the private sector, where money is available,

music immediately becomes a priority, with impressive facilities and high-profile student performances. But every student should have the chance to make music one of their daily priorities while at school.

CE: Previously you have talked of the world needing to meet up as we are increasingly behind computers and staying at home. This was before the pandemic which has driven many of us in this direction. What can music offer us as we move beyond this pandemic?

JW: The pandemic gave me plenty more time to think about this! And of course, the desirability of hearing or performing live music has been at the front of many people's minds during this period. Between a couple of the earlier lockdowns I was able to attend a small-scale live performance for the first time in many months, and it was interesting to observe the extra non-musical features of this experience, almost in slow motion. These were clearly adding to my enjoyment and anticipation. Learning about the event in advance, planning the concert visit, travelling to this special place where music would happen, being greeted by friendly ushers, looking around the venue (in this case, a multi-storey carpark), seating myself comfortably. And, later, re-enjoying the whole thing in my memory for weeks afterwards. Above all, I realised how musical experiences gain from the social context in which they occur. And how the commitment we make to attend a performance at a certain time and date brings us into a kind of companionship with our fellow listeners, and with the musicians. It can be an exceptional communal experience; warm, intense, friendly, serious depending on the artistic features in play. As a result of all this, the music speaks at its clearest. Your question asked "*What can music offer us?*" but perhaps this also suggests "*what we can offer to music?*" - i.e., our undivided attention!

CE: How does music help us?

JW: Most obviously, music can be a completely different focus for our attention and thoughts. So often during the pandemic and other times of trouble, we hear that listening to music has helped someone make everyday anxieties more bearable. But it would be wrong to think that music merely provides a way of escape from reality, a temporary break from the real world. I would say that music's most unusual feature is its way of moving through time, at different speeds and in different forms that change and stretch our perceptions of how time passes. I've found that realisation very helpful, in non-musical contexts as well. It is possible to slow down time, to speed it up, to pause it, to think in different time intervals - music shows how it could be done.

As is often said, active involvement in playing or singing music is demonstrably "*good for us*". Learning to play an instrument is a lifetime activity. Small increments of

improvement or enlightenment are always possible. It's most certainly possible to start playing an instrument later in life and hopefully to keep playing into old age - much more emphasis still needs to be given to this by the music teaching profession. Playing music in groups is a special kind of social activity, involving working together with others in unspoken ways. There can be riotous enjoyment at rehearsals (often found in choral singing), but also quiet companionship without the necessity for chatty conversation, for those for whom that doesn't feel natural. And above all, this is a worldwide activity, beyond linguistic borders. You can go anywhere, and do it with whomever.

Wherever you are, whatever happens, music is there for you.