BIRMINGHAM CITY University

BCU PSF Application form – Senior Fellow (D3)

Submit this application as one file (including referee statements and any other evidence relevant to your application), by email to psf@bcu.ac.uk

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Role/job title	Senior Lecturer in Music		
Faculty/School	Royal Birmingham Conservatoire		

Case study

This should provide a specific example of successful co-ordination, support, supervision or mentoring of others in relation to learning and teaching and/or supporting learners [around 1500 words].

The Language of Music

Designing and planning 'joined-up' musicianship training and learning activities across the first three years of the four-year BMus programme, and mentoring colleagues and visiting tutors in their application.

I was very keen that through the Transforming the Curriculum (TtC) initiative, the modules on which I lead would form a more coherent pathway than ever before. When I first joined the Conservatoire, the programme was full of 6-credit modules that easily permitted the student to think of them as unconnected to their principal study. Subsequent course reviews did something to reduce this number, but after the most recent, there is now a 20-credit module entitled *The Language of Music* in each of the first three years of the BMus course. Through my own experience, most particularly having to explain the course structure to hundreds of prospective students at Open Days [A1, K3, V1], the benefits of this streamlined approach are very easy to expound.

In a nutshell, this module fulfils a central course rationale. While it is a characteristic of a conservatoire education that the principal-study area is at the heart of things, students must be equipped with a range of additional attributes, especially as they are likely to have freelance, portfolio careers which rely on self-motivation and good organizational skills. The BMus course encourages students to develop key areas of skills and knowledge, both in their chosen musical discipline and in the wider arena of musical knowledge and professional practice. As mentioned in Case Study No.1, musicianship is fundamentally a difficult skill set to quantify. A singer might possess a most beautiful voice and convincingly emote on stage yet have little ability to understand the rest of the music going on around them. Conversely, some students with amazing technical facilities and an astonishing aptitude to recognize notes with perfect precision, possess no ability to *communicate* the music when on the platform. A third class might feel that music not featuring their own instrument is 'boring' or 'irrelevant'. All of these deficiencies need to be overcome.

Since my appointment, I have taken personal responsibility for the musicianship skills of the undergraduate population, and also the orchestral and choral conductors on our postgraduate courses. Case Study No.1 explored how the student body was 'streamed', and as currently drafted, *The Language of Music* module strand focuses on those three distinct areas of study: Harmony, Aural Skills and Music History. This has not only given me the opportunity to devise and plan learning activities across a broad range of skills [A2] appropriate to the emerging

professional musician, but also mentor a variety of fellow staff members and visiting tutors in their successful application.

In brief, studies of Harmony now begin with basic technical applications: species counterpoint — the absence of which in the curriculum I sorely felt when I joined the staff — and more traditional four-part exercises. Year 2 develops these skills with stylistic applications, principally in the genres of Baroque trio sonata, Classical era string quartet, and early Romantic song. Aural Skills likewise starts with the basics: intervals, four-square rhythms, basslines, textures, structure and form, all drawn from the Age of Common Practice. These are explored in more complex presentations during Year 2 involving chord progressions, irregular metre, and chromatic/angular melodies.

Moreover, I was also very keen that the students' *historical* knowledge of music should extend beyond the start of the Age of Common Practice. Many musicians/performers are perhaps uncomfortable at that prospect, but with my background as a composer, conductor and singer of choral music, I was well placed to expand the repertoire in this regard [K1, K2]. It has also been greatly satisfying to mentor, supervise and support some of my full-time colleagues and other visiting teaching staff in these less explored areas and to create the associated teaching and assessment materials and train them accordingly (see above for feedback). Pleasingly, as a result of the TtC course design, the protocols I set up for the first year — a weekly all-year lecture, followed by a small-group workshops involving elements of analysis and discussion on various set pieces — are now in place to be brought into the second year, where the focus will shift to twentieth- and twenty-first-century music. Though this latter module has not been taught yet, if I deliver more mentoring and training, I am hopeful it will garner similar levels of student satisfaction (see Figure 3).

A relatively recent development means my professional skills as a choral conductor and composer also have a role to play [K1, K2]. Through weekly sessions of singing in Chorus, a compulsory undertaking in the first year, students further develop their core musicality and provide themselves with the perfect arena for exploring key transferable skills such as working collaboratively and cooperatively. It also provides an opportunity for the students to perform in front of a large audience at the annual Christmas concert, which supports the University's Strategic Pillars of *Transforming Birmingham and the Region*, and sometimes in BBC Radio broadcast events, which naturally supports the ambition of *Transforming the University*; the Verdi *Requiem* that closed the old Adrian Boult Hall was particularly successful in this regard. Our course design is predicated on the basis of more student-directed learning as it progresses. Year 3 allows them to follow musicianship specialisms focused on one particular area — examples include Minimalist Music, New Music Theatre, Editorial Techniques, Conducting, Music for Voices, *etc.* However, in 2012, annual monitoring of the BMus programme revealed some dissatisfaction within this strand of the course; students felt that the ear-based training of years 1 and 2 largely disappeared in year three [K5, K6].

I determined that a continuation of the 'same old' — that is more *complicated* examples of harmony or more *fiendish* dictation exercises — would not do. Rather, an entirely new approach that could change perceptions of what Musicianship skills were in the round should be constructed [K3, K4]. For instance, there are many individuals on the course with Absolute Pitch: that is, able to hear 440Hz and, without external reference, know that is the same 'A' to which an orchestra typically tunes; according to Gregersen, Kowalsky, Kohn and Marvin (1999) this ability is particularly prevalent amongst East Asian populations, students who are particularly well represented within a typical Conservatoire cohort [V2, V3].

At first glance, this might appear a particularly useful skill to have and is often perceived as an 'advantage', particularly by those students *without* the ability — however, there is a real danger

of a “woods for the trees” aspect to aural perception in these terms. When presented with a sounding chord, students with Absolute Pitch often say “there’s an E, a C-sharp, a G and an A.

End of.” In visual terms (as shown in Figure 1a), that’s the equivalent of saying, “there’s some blue, some green and bits of white”, whilst completely failing to perceive that it is a picture of a hillside tree on a sunny day; for the record, as played, the aural equivalent is a second inversion of a dominant seventh chord.

Figure 1a: The perils of “wood for the trees” in aural terms

Figure 1b shows the same scene with offset colours and different pitches — visually, few have difficulty in *still* seeing that as a tree on a hillside. Likewise, in aural terms, it is *still* a second inversion of a dominant seventh. But as many international students would say that they now hear an A, an F-sharp, a C and a D, there’s a real temptation to think that the ‘picture’ has changed.

Figure 1b: The same picture but using different colours/pitches.

Thus *The Seeing Ear; The Hearing Eye* was born. My intention was to design a module from the ground up that trained students to see a piece of music on the page and instantly imagine what it would sound like when performed; conversely, they should be able to hear a piece of music and perceive elements of its structure at the micro, midi and macro levels and

understand what it might look like on paper — not in terms of fragmented skeleton-score repeated listening, as they had experienced in their first two years here — but very much stepping back and 'hearing' the full picture [A1, V1, V4].

In the first year that I ran the option, I admit that I was not bold enough; for familiarity, I included aspects that felt like echoes of training they'd received in years 1-2. However, feedback from the option meant I jettisoned such material and jumped in with new 'instant recognition' traits for seventh chords [K5, K6]. Since that time, the feedback has been ever more positive. During 2017-18, 100% of students enrolled on the option "strongly agreed" that it had been well taught, well planned, covered interesting material, and that I had been responsive to their needs. Invited to write what the best thing about the module was, answers included: "the way the material was taught and explained"; "exploring sounds instead of pitches"; "the creative approach to […] learning aural skills"; and — a particular favourite given the module title — "it has helped me understand music in a different light". When invited to suggest what they might change about the module, responses included: "Nothing — overall it's a really interesting + helpful class with an inspiring, enthusiastic teacher".