

# **Decolonizing The Music Curriculum**

## **Interview With Ashley McAulay**

### **Edited Transcript**

August 9th, 2023

#### **Philip Brissenden**

Thank you for agreeing to this interview Ashley, I would like to begin by asking you about your early musical experience and early musical training. What was it like - your experience of growing up with music?

#### **Ashley McAulay**

Well, It is an interesting one because my mum's A trumpet player, my grandad was a bass player, my great grandad was a bass player so a lot of people in my family are very music based. And so, through that, I kind of fell into it in a way, but the training came not from private instrumental lessons at the beginning, it actually started from playing Samba within a Brazilian band. And then I started private lessons with the trumpet, and I didn't like that – just because some people just don't gel well with certain instruments. And then I ended up changing to flute, which I've stayed with ever since, although obviously I have also added more instruments on top of that – I also learned saxophone, bass guitar and then I found different genres which I have enjoyed with those instruments...

### **Philip Brissenden**

Interesting. What about your relationship with notation - your reading and music theory? It's interesting that you didn't begin your training with formal instrument lessons - or even perhaps depend on formal lessons.

### **Ashley McAulay**

Well, I suppose it began with normal experiences that you have when you are in primary school. So, you know, you pick up on things, but perhaps not as fast. So, my reading and theory and stuff was a little less. I suppose it wasn't bad, it wasn't good. But I think I had to work on it from quite an early age - and my theory. When I began instrumental lessons, my theory just developed along with my playing, but my teachers never really pushed it and they didn't really push grade exams either.

I guess the thinking was that if you're going to do the music side, you'll do the theory your own time. But if there was anything that I was interested in on that side, then they would help me. So it was a bit hit and miss until I then started getting into high school and *then* they started to go theory, *theory, theory*. And I did my GCSEs. And then I went to college and stuff. So, I've worked on reading and theory over time, but at the beginning, it was a bit rocky.

### **Philip Brissenden**

So you didn't learn theory in in private lessons at all?

### **Ashley McAulay**

No, I didn't. Not really. From what I remember.

**Philip Brissenden**

And – just because you mentioned grade exams, did you do any at all?

**Ashley McAulay**

No, I've never done grades

**Philip Brissenden**

Not at all?

**Ashley McAulay**

Not at all.

**Philip Brissenden**

That's very interesting, and slightly unexpected from my experience of your style and technique. But I *am* aware that you have played in orchestras.

**Ashley McAulay**

Yes.

**Philip Brissenden**

Tell us a little about those experiences.

**Ashley McAulay**

Well, when I was younger, I played in amateur ensembles and stuff like that. So, I played in wind ensemble, and then I played it a wind orchestra which was which was quite cool - you know, you play like basic stuff. Kind of like Mozart and stuff like that. And then

like, wind, orchestras to try and branch out and make you do things like arrangements of film score music, Jazz classics; classical and stuff like that, which is quite fun.

And so it was all very enjoyable. Then when I started at university, and I played in the orchestra - it's like *go and do it*, because the experience is there; so audition. And I did - I auditioned and I got in at some point, which was good! I know the time it took - I probably needed the time to develop. We played Massenet and Ravel, Elgar and I can't remember what else. Yeah - and it was a lot harder and a lot faster than I was used to. And to be honest, it helped me develop a lot. And that's one of the reasons why I've had to *work and work* on theory as well and *theory from practice performance* perspectives, because it's kind of like, *how am I supposed to learn this in this short space of time?* But I had to, and I had to get used to using every minute of a practice.

### **Philip Brissenden**

Thank you that's great insight Ashley, but you have also jumped ahead a little bit to your undergraduate studies. Let's explore that a little - you did your undergraduate at the University of York?

### **Ashley McAulay**

Yes.

### **Philip Brissenden**

Which I remember has - well it's a long time ago for me, but my experience was that it had a very strong student orchestra - is that still the case?

**Ashley McAulay**

Yes, it is. They have a student run orchestra, which is more like the concert band. And they also have an actual Symphony Orchestra. So, I played it in University Symphony orchestra.

**Philip Brissenden**

And you had to audition for your seat?

**Ashley McAulay**

Yeah, we had to audition for our seats. Which was fun! I remember the first audition I had - it was, *play this excerpt from Rachmaninov. Second Piano Concerto* and I thought *Brilliant. I've not looked at that*, and when you've not done sight reading in quite a while, you kind of like prefer to prepare!

**Philip Brissenden**

And of course, your undergraduate experience was considerably affected by the pandemic.

**Ashley McAulay**

Yes.

**Philip Brissenden**

Can you give us some sense of your experience of that – I am interested *as a performer?*

**Ashley McAuley**

Yes.

## **Philip Brissenden**

I mean predominantly, I would say you describe yourself as a performer, am I right? I know you have lots of strings to your bow.

## **Ashley McAulay**

Performer, composer... I don't know what I do anymore. So, to the pandemic. It kind of took away being able to perform in groups completely outside of the university. So the good thing about being in the University of York... let me see, the pandemic was from January of 2020. And then things were starting to be able to be open again – or we just got better at establishing rules. And at the university as long as they stuck by the two-metre rule, we were able to rehearse. But we weren't able to perform outside of that. So, we had to find ways to get round things. I start doing recordings and stuff like that within the hall - we also had to be two metres apart for that. And then there were a lot of people and only so much room, so we couldn't practice everything.

It was a lot when you think about it - and obviously it carried on throughout the whole of my third year and there were even restrictions on my final recital. We were only allowed people that were on the music programme in the audience. It was this "big thing" that you've been working for three years and, like all the external facing concerts – nobody could attend. So yes - when I think about it my experience was very affected. But at the same time, it meant you had to find ways to push back, and to push your own agenda; push your performances out. And the good thing was that at the University of York, they provided a lot of things. Everything can be live streamed so you *could* send it back home and be like, come on! You can watch this live – as its happening. But it did feel like a very different world.

### **Philip Brissenden**

Those experiences certainly resonate with me as you describe them. And then of course, you came to us at the University of Salford for your Master's and If I remember correctly – we were still not completely clear of the pandemic.

### **Ashley McAulay**

No, actually - when I started at the University of Salford. It was like, OK, we could go back into classrooms, but people were still sitting apart because you could tell there was a bit of an after aftershock and then when it came to the performance side as well, I still wasn't allowed to have anyone external to the programme in the audience. So, I was a bit shocked by that really because it was like, wait a second - we're out of the pandemic. But it was understandable because obviously there were still things in place and because of the University of Salford still sticking by COVID-19 restrictions. I suppose it made sense. But it was kind of like, *wait, why are we still not allowed to bring people in? Surely, it's one performance you can - it's Peel Hall, it's quite big!*

### **Philip Brissenden**

It's amazing how the mind forgets. Perhaps because, I don't know - In one in one way it seems like yesterday and in another way, it seems like a lifetime ago, doesn't it? The past is another country...

### **Ashley McAulay**

Exactly, it was a very, very different time. I can still remember sitting in this very room scrambling away at my undergraduate degree. Everything had moved to online; all the lessons were online, and my flute lessons were online. And it made no sense because we had to find ways to try and get the best sound using the worst means of communicating sound.

## **Philip Brissenden**

As a graduate of University of York myself, I'm interested in your perceptions of the differences, from a *decolonization* perspective between the two institutions, the University of York and the University of Salford.

## **Ashley McAulay**

The University of York obviously has their own perspectives - they have things like the gamelan ensemble. They do a lot of things that kind of push away from a traditional view of music i.e. The performance of the Chimera Ensemble, which is the equivalent of the Adelphi Contemporary Music Group in essence, but student run. When I think about it there was a lot of stuff that was pushing back on the standard view of western music, of course there were many lectures too. And so, from a *decolonization* point of view, it bubbled between a community of students that were very proactive – they were trying to push away from the mould or the norm, and some staff involvement. And I think there is a similar balance with Salford - but with Salford I was expecting to come from my classical perspective and when I got here, it was like, *wait a second, I'm doing things that I've never really focused on before!* One of them was the World Music ensemble, which I could engage with immediately, because I have a good understanding of different genres. But then I began thinking that I was not playing enough sheet music anymore. I played off chart, so I was having to improvise constantly and kind-of-like work things out, and this has helped my technique a lot in terms of building my air up. And then obviously with the ACMG [Adelphi Contemporary Music Group], we literally just try and tear away at anything that we can. Yes, definitely not traditional western music – or notation, we have no sheet music at all sometimes, just improvised.



**Philip Brissenden**

Now, that's very interesting because my perception of your performance experience, not that I ever really asked - was that you had quite a lot of experience of improvising.

**Ashley McAulay**

I do - from jazz. So when I was younger, it was jazz band. And then when I went to university, I did go to a Monday jazz night thing and I did get involved in jazz, but I wasn't heavily involved as much as I used to be. And then I went to Salford. It was just, well, I'm doing nothing now besides going to Matt and Fred's. I do know my jazz, but I didn't use it all the time. But I do have a lot of interest in the Jazz and improv scene - and Avant Guard improv. So it's very it's a very mixed pool of things that's happened and I guess the reason that I have ended up picking up so many things and getting involved in so many projects and different genres is that I have just said yes to a lot of things.

**Philip Brissenden**

Thank you that gives us a nice perspective on you as a musician. There are really two artefacts that I want to you to talk about during this interview.

**Ashley McAulay**

OK.

**Philip Brissenden**

Of course, with both, I am interested in you considering them from the perspective of *decolonization*. The first is your final negotiated project for you Master's, where you really focused on the nature of notation, and the second will be your experiences with

the band that you've been in *Wingspread* and the whole issue of musical hybridization. Where would you like to begin?

### **Ashley McAulay**

I'll start with my final project because it's the one that I've been thinking about the most as I prepared for this interview. And so, the whole basis of my project was that it was about people experiencing and understanding music, or musical things - other things that are not westernised graphics, not westernised scores. So by this I mean staff notation and everything - that's what we see in a traditional ensemble such as an orchestra. I began by looking at late 20th century composers; John Cage, Morton Feldman, Kaija Saariaho, and I also looked at composers like Arvo Pärt, who composed with traditional notation, which all these composers do at some point, but then they try and break away, they think: *why make this elitist?* And they try and make it readily available for everyone because everyone interprets and reacts to symbols and signs differently. And so that's what I did in terms of my research practice. I decided to compose around thirty compositions.

### **Philip Brissenden**

An immense amount of work.

### **Ashley McAulay**

Yes, it was 30. It *was* quite a big amount of work. And then trying to get them performed to see how people interpret music without Western eyes - like fusion music. Because obviously it's mostly people from a Western context of performing music, but without that context for interpretation. An interesting aspect is that you can see people react to certain things at the same time in the same way - and that it matches up to my reaction. The clearest example of this perhaps is *Hieroglyphs* which was performed all by voice.

You can listen to this on YouTube, and I find it quite thought provoking. And so from a decolonization point of view, I think that I was gradually stripping away what I would expect to see as an orchestral player, or perhaps not even as a classical player - just as a player who reads and is used to working from some form of staff notation, and to think "all right, how am I going to try and communicate without that border?" And obviously it works to some degree – there is some universality or at least some agreement, because you are able to express different things like *time measurement* and *what kind of gesture* you want it to be, or even *what rhythm* in a way, although obviously people read rhythms at different times and so it then creates different kinds of textures that you could not easily achieve with western notation.

That's one of the reasons why I like playing with texture within a piece. It strips away western thinking because we're not used to reading it and it makes people *think* more about sound, rather than thinking, "*oh! am I playing this right?*" and "*where does it fit in?*" and counting rests and all the stuff that leads to fulfilling a defined role, and insecurity – not very musical. It can make people have a different perspective on music and sound and how to create a sound world and I just wanted to bring people back into *listening* rather than thinking "I *will* play this phrase correctly at the *right* time (and then everything should be fine!)"

### **Philip Brissenden**

So, I probably should have asked, as you were talking about your early music experience, but I'm looking behind you in the room that you are sitting in now and there is a *lot* of visual art behind you.

### **Ashley McAulay**

Yes.

### **Philip Brissenden**

One thing that struck me at once about *your* approach to and abilities in producing graphic scores is they are very beautiful. They show you not only as a musician, but as an artist. Have you always painted?

### **Ashley McAulay**

The interesting thing is I got more into graphic scores when I was coming out of my undergraduate degree. I've always doodled, but I've never thought "how can I make this into music?" And then once I started doing my post grad, I was finding loads more things that I was drawn towards, though it took me a while to actually solidify the type of visual composition I was going to produce for my project.

I think the thing that clicked with me, and really inspired me was Peter Maxwell Davis' *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. It's fascinating to look at - he has captured elements of western notation into the form of a birdcage, and I thought - "this is quite cool" and "I wonder if I can do anything like that". And in my first sketches it *was* something quite similar like using elements of western notation in certain shapes, and then I was just like, wait, why am I making something that's supposed to be the same as someone else's? I'm going to do something so different that it's got my own flavour!

In terms of visual artwork in my early days - I've always done bits of drawings and little bits of painting, but I've never really taken it seriously or developed it - it was just doodles. And then obviously it then developed into this project. And I have just really enjoyed doing it. Yes, it's also a good distraction - if you ever want to make a graphics score, It takes a while and you try and find different mediums.

**Philip Brissenden**

Thank you for this section of the interview. I would just like to add to it that I'm just profoundly grateful for your contribution to the ACMG.

**Ashley McAulay**

I'm planning on coming back!

**Philip Brissenden**

But over these years you have absolutely enriched the experience. With the players and composers that we had with, with you and Eirik and other people, it we have made some remarkable music.

And one of the things that I I'm interested in is that, it so often felt like it was truly student led. Like I was being pulled along by the current of things that people were producing as opposed to maybe other years where I kind-of-felt like the staff, and staff compositions were at the centre of the ensemble, and that if we didn't produce pieces - that maybe nothing would happen! So, thank you for a significant contribution.

**Ashley McAulay**

At the beginning of ACMG, I remember walking and thinking is this it? Because obviously it was just lecturers and then a few of us, but obviously it started to pick up momentum, we ended up getting more students in and then we ended up having a *lot* more! Then the student-based compositions – I think we did a whole concert of just student pieces, maybe Justine had one piece in it and then the rest wasn't from anyone else besides students; it showed a lot of interest and some of the music was incredible. Dave Crawley's *Glacially Slow* played within what was already a long concert, that was an

experience I'll never forget! I've always had a fantastic experience. And obviously, yes, I'm hoping that it's keeps building up gravitas over these years and I do plan to keep coming because it's so nice to work on new music with people that are finding it interesting as well, because then they develop their own ideas and stuff.

### **Philip Brissenden**

Excellent. OK. Let's turn now to your experiences with the band *Wingspread*. If you could tell us a little bit about this and how this came about and what the experience was like and where you think it might be going now?

### **Ashley McAulay**

The way I got into Wingspread was that I was speaking to the drummer Adam Hargreaves, and he mentioned this fusion band that was looking for a flute player or a sax player. And then, in the World Music Ensemble, I heard the lead singer singing a Bengali folk song in B<sup>b</sup> major. I really felt that I gelled with the sound. I must have asked the right questions because they spoke to me afterwards, and then I ended up joining the band and then realised that this was the band that they *both* had been speaking about. And the first song we did was *this* folk song - *Bosoth*. But in this context it actually had a structure and a genre blend - it was playing with Celtic rock, Celtic folk, and Indian folk kind of vibes.

And then everything that we've done is always very well thought out in terms of bringing the music together. Everything that we do is aimed at trying to mould things together – this definitely is considered from a decolonization perspective. And rather than having separate elements we've used it all together and we try to make something beautiful out of it all the time and now we're getting to a point where it's becoming more second nature, like we're able to go. OK, this is what we're using for this song.

**Philip Brissenden**

How do you measure "beauty" in this context? I mean I am confident that I can identify something "beautiful" in a wide range of genres but you are mixing together two entirely different cultures and ways of thinking about making music, and the aesthetic sense all the band members must be different to yours to an extent.

**Ashley McAulay**

Well, "beauty" is a personal preference coming from an individualistic perspective. I personally find "beauty" within genres that other people would think too dissonant or harsh. So, mixing with the singer's style - to me I find invigorating and "beautiful" as it highlights so many of our interests and brings out some of our best work as musicians. Through this I have been able to improve on a variety of aspects of my playing within a variety of styles, and develop on my own compositions, which can be seen within my paper, you can also listen to the performances of my pieces as well as Wingspread's via streaming platforms such as Youtube.

**Philip Brissenden**

What does this communication look like in the practice room? – Give us a picture of it.

**Ashley McAulay**

Let's see. The singer usually brings in the structures to work with because they have a clear idea of what they want. And then they go through it, they used to handwrite it all, and then we would all find mistakes and it got to a point where I was just like. You know, it would probably be easier to make a new score, so we developed a process where I ended up then arranging it into new score and then making sure the saxophonist had a

part in E flat And then everyone else gets a C part so and we store it all in a drive in case anyone needs at all times.

Some of this was very difficult, you should have seen me trying to transcribe *konnakol* rhythms – very hard, but manageable!

### **Philip Brissenden**

*Konnakal* rhythms – can you give a basic explanation of these are?

### **Ashley McAulay**

So *konnakol* rhythms; its basically a system of learning complicated rhythms through vocables. These are elements of language in that they are spoken syllables to which you learn a complex rhythm (demonstration) and then we can use them in different ways. We use it in kind of a “rap” or “scat” sense. And I had to incorporate this into a score - I think I spent around four hours in my room on one rhythm making sure that I got it completely right. And so, if you consider *decolonization*, it's not trying to pull away from having a western view, Wingspread is trying to hybridise genres which, quite naturally, if you consider the disparate nature of the starting points - push away from the norm. It's such an interesting and project and we're trying to work on it constantly – the next gig we're playing is the Lancaster Jazz Festival, in just under a month

### **Philip Brissenden**

It's very interesting when you end up with both transcriptions, alternative forms of notation and perhaps no notation at - different ways of expressing things. And that you give different things to musicians, some of whom in the group don't understand anything about the notation that you've given to other members.



**Ashley McAulay**

No, exactly.

**Philip Brissenden**

And yet, when you will play it, it all contributes to a shared understanding of what it is that you're trying to create.

**Ashley McAulay**

Yes.

**Philip Brissenden**

It certainly comes over now in your performances, that that you all understand what you are doing in quite a subtle way - how exactly the hybridization is working is not quite so obvious to the listener I think.

**Ashley McAulay**

It's a very interesting model, and we we're working on a couple of new songs. I can't really say that much about that, I don't think! But it's like we try and pull at things from different perspective - like Math rock and Prog quite a bit. I think like now we have been working on this project for over a year of being after over a year - yes two years in January! It's interesting to see how we've moved from just improvising alaap sections, which to us are just improvised sections, but an Alaap is actually very strict - a certain structure and the presentation of the scales. And the way that we've kind of gone outright, *we'll put raga directly into our music* - And then we're trying to follow certain difficult structures and it's impressive how we've got from where we were to now. It's interesting how we've all listened to each other as well. In certain improvisations we just

pick up on things that are so subtle. Sometimes I sit there and just go, "How? How did that person pick up on that?"

### **Philip Brissenden**

That's some really, really interesting insight. So not really particularly connected with the issue of *decolonization* (I'm just interested really). What would you say you prefer the process of rehearsal or performing?

### **Ashley McAulay**

Performing. I love rehearsal for the sake of you're able to perfect things, but I love the idea of when you perform in anything can happen. So I think that's like going back to my graphic scores, I like the idea of anything can happen in that moment and it can never be recreated. And that's talking about how the piece sounds within the room, what people's thoughts are on the day, and it's also to do with your audience, because the audience could do anything - You know very "Cagian" - very John Cage.

### **Philip Brissenden**

Interesting - Actually maybe it does have a relationship to the subject of *decolonization*! Let's turn to this definition. So in preparation for these interviews I have given everybody a working definition of the term "decolonization" that they can think about and we can discuss. It goes like this, "the process of freeing an institution, sphere of activity or something else from the cultural or social effects of colonisation". What do you think?

### **Ashley McAulay**

Well, I've thought about it – you can see that from all my answers so far.

**Philip Brissenden**

Do you agree with the definition?

**Ashley McAulay**

In some ways, yes – perhaps not completely.

**Philip Brissenden**

How would you hold it to account?

**Ashley McAulay**

Its pulling away from Western tradition - trying to make people think, think differently, I find that interesting because obviously speaking to the lead singer of Wingspread and learning about the history of India and the colonisation and then decolonization. They are gaining perspective on it, and its changing all the time. It's interesting to see how people think outside of what they know. And that is *decolonization* really for me, causing people to think outside of the box and look at the world in a way that they've really not considered before. And I think it's amazing what can come out of it. Could you just read me the definition again?

**Philip Brissenden**

"The process of freeing an institution, sphere of activity, *etc* from the cultural or social effects of colonisation.

**Ashley McAulay**

I don't think fully "freeing" is possible because obviously some effects of colonisation remain – it is our enculturation! And the cultural and social effects of colonisation - well, there's a lot of them. But it's like pulling away from that and gaining a new perspective,

because you see something that you would not generally see, and it becomes more *magnetized* because it's not seen as normal. And so that's why in my work I think I've always believed in breaking through boundaries using different mediums as a form of scoring, even though if I was gonna be like rightly honest, it's like all my work is just scribbling! So in a way, I guess my work to date does fit with that process, but also at the same time, it still looks back at looks back at Western tradition.

### **Philip Brissenden**

There's a lot of insight in that answer. The more I do these interviews, the more I'm finding more and more edges and corners to the process of *decolonization* that I wasn't aware of.

### **Ashley McAulay**

I thought it was just pushing away from stuff and it's not. It's more than that. It's a very hard thing to define - what you put as a definition is a very short definition for a lot of specific things that, people are working through day to day. My thing was just graphics scores and alternative means of communicating music . But then once I actually thought about it - It actually does fit into that framework of reference.

### **Philip Brissenden**

Thank you, Ashley. Are there any final thoughts that you've you want to add to this interview?

### **Ashley McAulay**

I think I'm OK.

### **Philip Brissenden**

Ashley McAulay – its been an honour to interview you. Thank you very much for this interview.