

Decolonizing The Music Curriculum

Interview With Hugh Shepherd

Edited Transcript

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PB Philip Brissenden

I don't know whether you seen the the frame questions and had a chance to think about them? First of all - if you can tell us a little bit about your your experience and musical background prior to coming to Salford to do the Masters.

HS Hugh Shepherd

I was interested in music from a pretty young age. I think it was about six when I had my first piano lessons with the lady across the road who taught violin and piano and various things. But it was around ten when I really got into rock and metal music, and I really wanted to be able to play the guitar. So I started guitar lessons at a guitar shop around the corner, did that for several years and at the time had no intention of going into music whatsoever. I just kind of really, really loved it - It was a great escape for me. It was at college when studying again, I hadn't done any kind of traditional music learning at that point at all, really - just learning guitar through tablature and I was doing Business, Biology and Economics in my studies and at college did Politics for the first year as well.

But that's where I had begun to really catch the bug for music, I had been making beats on my EMX Electribe - originally just making trance lines for rock and metal stuff, but I actually kind of drifted into making dubstep and drum and bass tunes and ended up doing short course at the School of Sound Recording in Electronic Music Production with Damien O'Brien and using Reason and Cubase.

PB Philip Brissenden

What year was that?

HS **Hugh Shepherd**

That would be 2012 or 2013.

PB **Philip Brissenden**

And how old were you then?

HS **Hugh Shepherd**

Eighteen I think, So it's ten years ago now, and I really enjoyed that course and felt like I was really making a lot of headway making music.

I kind of got into a really great flow with it and decided to go for the the degree, you know, it felt like really kind of keen interest at the time. So I ended up going to Futureworks and doing a Music Production degree. I wouldn't say that I did my best or achieved my potential being quite distracted at the time, but I ended up coming out with 67 or 68 overall. I probably should have got a 1st but didn't manage it that time round. And one of our teachers, of course; Rob Baldwin, was actually doing his MA at Salford at the same time as teaching us. And, you know, had good things to say about Salford and his course. And I think I just wanted to go into a little bit deeper. I didn't think feel like I had challenged myself or made the most of my undergraduate degree either, so I kind of really was really eager to push into something deeper. And so I suppose that brings us to probably 2016, I'd say or thereabouts when I started the MA at Salford.

PB **Philip Brissenden**

Yes.

HS **Hugh Shepherd**

I think it was 2016 and I and I did it part time. So it was two and a half years at Salford Uni doing the Interactive Music and Advanced Studio Production MA.

PB **Philip Brissenden**

So you've got quite a non-traditional background in music.

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yes.

PB Philip Brissenden

Do you read music fluently?

HS Hugh Shepherd

I have a basic understanding of notation. I did piano lessons but I never actually ended up sitting any graded exams or anything, but I don't use it in composition and I don't read when I play.

PB Philip Brissenden

So when you compose the the artifact that you produce definitely rests in the recording.

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yes, improvisation and edit are key to my workflow.

HS Philip Brissenden

That has become much more common and we have had to rethink the way that we approach our curriculum. Now, the first years don't have to produce a score at all for their first creative assessment, they can if that is a natural part of their workflow, but they don't have to. Notation only becomes a crucial skill within composition at second year level. What do you think of that?

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yeah, I I think that's a good step forward. I mean, it's obviously brilliant if someone *can* compose using traditional methods, but is it not the end result that really matters?

PB Philip Brissenden

It definitely is, and that can be a number of different things.

Let's return to your MA studies at Salford, because you next turned to study music from a *very* different tradition and on a completely new and unfamiliar instrument

HS **Hugh Shepherd**

Yes.

PB **Philip Brissenden**

How did that come about? – Tell us about it.

HS **Hugh Shepherd**

This is quite an extraordinary story really. It was on my undergraduate degree, walking through Piccadilly Gardens - there was Jali Kuyateh and John Haycock [ex University of Salford student] playing Kora in Piccadilly Gardens and at the time, you know - It was so immersive and magical! The sounds that they were making with the Kora just kind of blew me away. So when I had a recording project for assessment, I introduced myself, got their contact details and thought this could be something that I could record with them.

The actual recording fell through at the time and I ended up recording someone else. But I had that contact then and later on my Master's at Salford, when I had the choice of two optional modules the ethnomusicology module really appealed to me and just thought, you know, since I since I really loved it, and it was the first thing that came to mind, that I would get in touch with John Haycock and learn the Kora for that module, prepare a performance and - kind of immerse myself in that culture. And you know, I also ended up meeting and interviewing Jali Kuyateh as part of that project - and I was just kind of entranced by it really.

At the time I found it quite difficult to get really stuck into the playing because I had an old *konso* kora and I was constantly struggling with the tuning rings and I suppose it was when I discovered Adam from *The Kora Workshop* and hey! I found they make instruments and they also do workshops in France and Senegal and you can go and learn about the instrument and play with people. And I actually ended up going to France on my first workshop with them, and ordered my own instrument shortly afterwards from Adam with machine heads.

PB **Philip Brissenden**

But we're getting a little bit ahead here aren't we? Because you didn't get *this* instrument until your Final Research Project.

HS **Hugh Shepherd**

Yeah. Sorry.

PB **Philip Brissenden**

The first module you must have done on the Kora with the *konso* tuning rings - the ethnomusicology module. Did you perform at the end of that?

What did you perform? I know that's casting your mind back a bit!

HS **Hugh Shepherd**

I think it was [that instrument].

I think it was a kind of ceremonial love song, often performed at weddings, parties, basically a love song, but very, very pretty - in a kind of slightly different tuning, G Dorian.

PB **Philip Brissenden**

So at this point you're having very traditional lessons on the Kora and you are really seriously learning about the the tradition?

HS **Hugh Shepherd**

Yeah.

PB **Philip Brissenden**

How important was that *sense of the tradition* to you?

HS **Hugh Shepherd**

It is. It was very important, but in many ways it aligned well with with how I'd learned so far. It moved away from tablature though actually, I often learn music by trial and error, and also - people just describe, or watching someone do something, or someone just showing me something and then I'm replicating it, developing it, practicing it, you know, with a very limited record of what's happening. Or learning something by ear.

In that way, the way that Kora is taught was actually quite natural to me. And challenging, but in a way that I really like. Because when you learn a riff on the Kora, if you learn a combo line, you have to remember a sequence of 50 plus notes, then the intonations - the flow of them, the order of them and where it starts and where it ends, and then somehow you have to get your fingers to play it properly.

PB Philip Brissenden

Can you tell us a little bit about the role of a Griot in West African culture and how it is linked with the kora.

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yeah, with my limited knowledge Griots are actually more than just musical figures. They are story-tellers and they are cultural leaders in a way and traditionally this actually involves aspects of practical leadership. For example they litigate on disputes, say who could get married and who couldn't, generally they would help to make important decisions in villages and that kind of thing; which I found fascinating because the connection between someone who had a fundamental kind of musical training and role that also gave them kind of authoritative position within the community. So that in a way, that kind of both and it's, but it's traditionally a paternal thing, you know passed down from father to son and there are young African lads three years old, picking up a kora pretty much as soon as they can hold a small one, and then you know it's no wonder you know they're so amazing at playing it by the time they're adults, that's all they do!

PB Philip Brissenden

And do they sing?

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yes.

Yeah, they sing.

PB Philip Brissenden

Did you sing?

HS Hugh Shepherd

I've been tempted a couple times to do a bit of humming. This is an interesting question I'm on the fence about, I lean towards maybe that I can, and should give it a go, but I want to make sure that I actually understand what I'm singing so that I'm not kind of making random verbalizations that I'm not really getting behind and I don't want to kind of "appropriate" or or misuse. So if I was to sing, it would have to be respectfully and with some depth of understanding, and if not, then I would maybe hum melodic lines instead, which I think is probably OK.

PB Philip Brissenden

OK. So that's really interesting.

So it was definitely the kora itself – the kora as an instrument that attracted you, not the whole self-accompanying singing tradition?

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yeah. Though the stories and history behind the songs do fascinate me.

PB Philip Brissenden

So at this point in your studies you are very definitely learning *from* a tradition how to play the kora and what it means – its role within that tradition, and by the way your knowledge of the culture is still quite impressive even this long after the module!

So where else did the kora lead you? How else were you using it and playing it and experimenting with it?

HS Hugh Shepherd

At which point – the ethnomusicology module or the final research project?

PB Philip Brissenden

Well, we are still at the stage of the ethnomusicology module, but I want you to move into the next stage of your journey with the instrument - you can also talk about your frustration with the tuning rings.

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yeah, I think my my engagement with it was a bit stifled by my first frustration with

the *konso*. So the *konso* are like little braided leather strips around which the string is wrapped and then it holds tension on the strings between the ring and the bridge. Managing them is extremely difficult and tuning them is extremely difficult.

It does actually have a habit of slipping up and down, which means having to tighten and adjust the rings very often. It means literally creating like sugar pastes to try and hold them in place and things like that, it involves using sharp screwdrivers to do things and this can even be dangerous, Jali's got a massive scar up his face from one time when he pushed the screwdriver too hard and it just kind of traveled up his cheek. And you know, it's just a really fiddly business and I've got huge amount of respect to people that that persist with the *konso* rings enough to work with them.

Maybe it was my the diversity of my practice and and the, you know, the the fact that I maybe wanted to explore blending it with other stuff that I was doing, that stopped me from having having the patience for the *konso* rings and looking more for a more practical instrument which meant at least for me, with machine heads. Especially as a guitarist it is just a more familiar interface I suppose.

PB Philip Brissenden

I remember the conversation that we had because when we were talking about your final negotiated project and you were talking about the different ways that you were playing the kora that departed from the West African tradition.

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yeah.

PB Philip Brissenden

But how frustrated you were with the with the *konso* tuning ring system, it might interest you to know that I am not sure that many people are making koras in that traditional way anymore. I have seen African makers are also making with machine heads.

HS Hugh Shepherd

They're both.

They are making both, I think.

PB Philip Brissenden

They still make them both?

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yeah, I think they're still making both.

I think there are more machine head Koras though. I think you're right, but you know my my teacher Adam still plays a *konso* kora. But he, you know, he does sometimes have machine head ones as well. But there are still people out there who are, I think, dedicated enough to playing the Kora who have that kind of patience, time and dedication to master the the *konso* system and make it, you know, work for them.

PB Philip Brissenden

And you definitely wanted a machine head one in order to under undertake your 60 credit final research module. We just knew that it would make it much easier to retune to different scales and tuning systems quickly.

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yeah.

PB Philip Brissenden

Tell us about acquiring the the kora that you now play.

HS Hugh Shepherd

So this is quite exciting really. I actually I was inspired to order one when I made, as part of the earlier project, a little documentary of Adam actually making them in France. I stayed over there for a week in and around the kora workshop. I saw how they were made from start to finish - the different woods you could choose, the way that the bodies are constructed and learned a great deal about how they were made. And so I had some knowledge when I went into actually ordering one; you choose your wood, mine is babinga the second dearest option, which is a little bit redder, there were like three to four different options of wood, but I like the look and feel of the babinga. The long neck, handles and the bridge are all babinga. There are two

piezo's built into the inside of the body which provide very good direct amplification.

PB Philip Brissenden

How many strings?

HS Hugh Shepherd

22 in total, but it is not strung like any western harp but in two opposing rows of strings, each set of strings is in thirds, so that a stepwise run is played by each hand alternately. I suppose a western musician would fairly quickly surmise that it is tuned to F major – even though its traditionally not even a western tuning system at all strictly speaking. Of course, because each string is tuned using a machine head, you can soon alter the string tuning and tune to any scale or tuning system that you want to, because you can easily tune any string a semitone up or down

PB Philip Brissenden

So in terms of tuning, it's got the same functionality I would guess as a lever harp.

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yeah.

PB Philip Brissenden

So as you're as you're beginning to think of your final research project you decided to join two of the main music directorate ensembles one which was then in its founding year at the University of Salford, the *World Music Ensemble* - so you were a founding member of that, and you also joined the *Adelphi Contemporary Music Group* – the experimental music ensemble

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yeah.

PB Philip Brissenden

Tell us about those experiences.

HS Hugh Shepherd

Well, yes, I'm trying to describe it the right way. I suppose I felt like, you know, a lot of the people in those groups were very skilled with their instruments and in terms of their musicianship, and on some level of traditional tuition within composition and performance courses. So I felt very different - like a mad digital musician bringing a hundreds of years old African instrument that I could barely play into the fold and kind of twanging it around a bit!

But I think I might not be doing myself justice because I think I got into a good flow with it and made some good contributions. I actually have a couple of the recordings and feel like I contributed well to those pieces. In the World Music Ensemble it made sense for me to actually lead a couple of the kind of traditional songs that I'd been learning with other people improvising around me, and this kind of like turned things completely on its head, because then everyone else was trying to work out what and where *I'm* coming from with my traditional learning as opposed to the other way around!

And I learned a great deal during those ensembles. So, quite challenging, but also I felt that they were very relaxed and in a way that I think was very helpful - actually it wasn't like super frightening and I didn't feel like worried about my performance. That was good for me because I think the kora is best played when you're relaxed. To be honest, you have too many strings to worry about if your hands are all jammed up or you know your head's not in the right place!

PB Philip Brissenden

That's very interesting. So here you are now a non-traditional musician to start off with really, when we look at it in terms of Western music, traditional education, I guess the closest description is a *Drum and Bass* producer?

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yeah.

PB Philip Brissenden

Who has learned the Kora...

How did you develop your final research project?

HS Hugh Shepherd

So because I was very much still eager to push on with my, you know, kora practice of making dance music I think what I wanted to explore was how I could bring this sort of very acoustic instrument into a digital space -and from a number of different angles. You know through the course of my academic study, being exposed to things like *Music Concrète*, all kinds of world music - the experiences of the ensembles, *et cetera*, I wanted to explore more deeply how the Kora could fit into those kinds of scenarios.

And in particular, I had a very strong interest, how they could fit into electronic music, you know, perhaps where Kora could fit as the top line over a drum and bass piece, or where Kora sounds could be manipulated, as is often done in electronic music into quite unconventional sounds with grain shifting and time stretching and really manipulating that audio to make it sound completely different.

Actually the textures that came out of that are some of the nicest I've ever heard. I need to bring them back into some of the music I am writing now! Again, I was, I think inspired partly by the contemporary ensemble, where you know, if we're trying to kind of stand on our heads and use our instrument in unconventional ways; trying to make the sound of an insect or something, you find those kinds of atonal textures that you you know can use as well. Like plucking the strings below the bridge, or more obviously, actually it can create an incredible drum sound. I used that a great deal and it was a very deep exploration of how I could fit kora into my more kind of my kora practice - the more electronic side of my music, I suppose.

PB Philip Brissenden

Excellent. And a couple of collaborations that relied more on live playing; one with your father on lute.

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yeah, yes. So my my dad is a luthier. He makes lutes professionally. Obviously, as you know, you've you've met him, you actually came to a recital, I remember in that little

Chapel in Manchester. And he happened to be in the country one day and I thought, wouldn't it be great to do a duet and did some prep up front. He had, you know, this Recercar piece, which is traditionally something that has kind of quite a strong ground base. It's quite repetitive, it kind of repeats the around the same place which I thought would just be perfect because it's something I can improvise around, and on the Kora that went very well. So that was quite special to get something with my dad bringing together the kind of, you know, West African kora sound with a 16th century lute.

And then, of course, our collaboration with the Raph as well, where you've got an entirely invented instrument and the kora meeting to do something. So the outcome I think was quite different where Dad and I played quite similar roles I tended to try and find some complementary harmonies on top because the Raph flows so much more, there's a lot more kind of, you know, strumming across an entire harp surface I suppose so that they played quite different roles actually in that in that collaboration they sat quite differently - I suppose I was more of a the ground bass and you are kind of flowing over the over the top. And with a great range as well I think, which was which was quite nice.

PB Philip Brissenden

OK, so that is a whole range of exploration. We might encapsulate it as *integrating-your-musicianship*, because really you are leveraging all your skills when you look at the range of projects – the collaborations are particularly open ended - just bringing different things together in and seeing what happens and collaborating with other people.

HS Hugh Shepherd

Yeah.

PB Philip Brissenden

What you say about playing with ACMG and The World Music Ensemble resonates with me also - to a certain extent we discovered these things together, me on my invented instrument, and you on yours.

HS **Hugh Shepherd**

Yeah.

PB **Philip Brissenden**

And I think it it gave us both, a lot of strength and support to to be there together on these experimental instruments. I know having you there made me feel a lot better - I was a little more isolated after you left, although there are always other kinds of experimental instruments appearing in ACMG but not so much the World Music Ensemble. A lot of the time and I I thought the capabilities of the instruments kind of matched each other – what one couldn't do, the other could.

HS **Hugh Shepherd**

Yeah.

I think that pretty much hits the nail on the head, yeah.

PB **Philip Brissenden**

So this is almost my last line of questioning really, but it's perhaps the most important with respect to *decolonization*. Your final negotiated project, which was based in an ethnomusicology project became much *more* than an ethnomusicology project, it really, it's taking the argument actually that the Kora is now, like the violin, a *global* instrument. Sure, it has a origin, it has a tradition of itself, just like the violin will also have a tradition within Cremona, Italy.

HS **Hugh Shepherd**

Yeah.

PB **Philip Brissenden**

But If you go to the Indian subcontinent, many people there will tell you that the violin is an Indian instrument and they give a very convincing argument. And the kora, in a similar way is fast becoming a truly global instrument. And so your project was a ground breaking, model project. It remains in the archive of final research projects so that students can access it at any time, and if anyone suggests a similar project, I will suggest that they read it. What was the experience of writing the project up like?

HS Hugh Shepherd

I think the experience of writing it was - I really enjoyed working with you on it. I mean, to get feedback at some of those critical stages, I think my head was in the right place and I was enjoying writing it. But my writing at the time could be very convoluted, you know, saying things in quite complex ways that actually should just be said more simply. I think I actually struggled with the writing style, you know, just writing more clearly – storytelling, more than I actually did and conveying the content of the practice and supporting study. I don't know if you you'd agree with that because I was so very immersed in the project, I had lots of things I wanted to say and it was a little bit tricky to find the structure sometimes.

Having said that, I have three hard copies of it. They sit on the shelf and every now and then I pick them up and look at them because actually I'm extremely proud of that work. It feels like a body of work that it's kind of timeless in a way, and I *did* feel like I was kind of breaking new ground. It felt quite different from anything that had been done within the archive, or that was being done and and the Ik kind of felt very inspiring to me. I guess the various elements of my musicality combined into something really quite powerful, unique and and kind of purposeful.

PB Philip Brissenden

I mean, I remember it slightly differently - I don't remember having so much problems with your writing style at all beyond what I would normally expect! It is tough to write a piece of the length you undertook, you need training as a writer just like any PGR student would.

I do agree about the structuring though, deciding what went into the story, what was not relevant and how to evidence it all was equally a journey of discovery for me. I mean, you ended up writing, I think, around 26,000 words, which is more like the length of a typical MPhil.

HS Hugh Shepherd

True and I think that is reflective of how immersed I became with the projects. I went

on several trips abroad, you know, as you said, I was playing in ensembles. I was practicing it the instrument a lot. We played at festivals. The practice went far outside of the classroom, and writing the the written piece of work, I think there was probably just a lot to to bring in.

HS Philip Brissenden

My last line of questions brings us back directly to the issue of *decolonizing* the music curriculum. Here is the definition of decolonization, which I sent you in the preparatory material for this interview. *Decolonization*: The process of freeing an institution sphere of activity *etc* from the cultural or social effects of colonization.

HS Hugh Shepherd

OK.

PB Philip Brissenden

How do you feel about that in terms of in relation to what you undertook in your final research project?

HS Hugh Shepherd

I think the Kora could be an incredibly powerful gateway for people from even a very young age, into playing an instrument that sounds very beautiful. It's very easy to make a nice sound with it and the range of sounds, including drumming *et cetera*, which I think makes it very engaging. But it's an instrument that comes from a very different culture and has a very different style of learning. I think the learning carries with it huge opportunities to to immerse yourself in the history of the instrument, the people that played it, the effect that it is had, the recent developments, and actually the whole culture that's associated with it. And I think the exposure exposure to music from other cultures in a more practical way - there is something very, very powerful in that.

And I think in my mind, maybe it's because of my background teaching young people, but I think starting young might be one of the most powerful ways to go - right from the outset and exposing people to beautiful music from other cultures and not just having them listening to it but actually getting a bit more stuck into it

and it being something that's available to learn and to play. I'm sure this carries its own challenges, but perhaps moving a bit away from the recorder, the violin and the piano, and maybe the guitar at primary schools would be a step in the right direction, I think for me.

PB

Philip Brissenden

Hugh Shepherd, musical pioneer, it's been an absolute honor, thank you very much for this interview.