

Musicians' portrait: Sean Gregory

Sean Gregory works as a composer, performer and creative producer throughout the United Kingdom and overseas. He leads collaborative arts projects for all ages and abilities in association with many British and international orchestras, opera companies, theatres, galleries and arts-education organisations.

Sean is Head of Professional Development at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London and Artistic Director of Guildhall CONNECT. These innovative programmes embrace a number of partnerships exploring ideas and approaches which aim to develop new modes of good practice in the field of creative and participatory music-making, as well as interdisciplinary and transcultural arts practice. A wide range of projects provide opportunities for participants to develop individual creativity, to extend forms of performance practice both within and outside the Guildhall School and to foster a shared understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds.

Central to Sean's work is the facilitation and development of new ensembles (from 3-piece to 30-piece) with line-ups that include vocals, strings, wind, bass, rhythm sections, non-western instruments and technology.

"There was this totally visionary statement on a little leaflet on the musician of the future. One of my teachers told me, 'it looks totally impossible and idealistic but this is absolutely something for you Sean!'"

Born in 1966 in a suburban part of South West London as the oldest son of a policeman and a nurse, Sean Gregory spent his youth in London. A brother was born 20 months after him. Sean went both to primary school and secondary school in London.

In 1984, when he was 18 years old, in a small way his life turned upside down: his parents decided to move to Bournemouth. The move came up suddenly. Sean still had to do his A levels, and his brother his O levelsⁱ at that time. He did this whilst moving to Bournemouth. "We felt uprooted leaving our friends and our home. But we moved and together my brother and I got a job at the beach. Actually it was liberating, our parents became much less worried. My brother and I shared a room that summer and we stopped arguing forever."

Sean's mother died of cancer in August 2002, after having fought the illness for ten years. It still remains a shock for the family. His father is still alive. Sean's brother is in a creative field of work as well: he works as a graphic artist and lives in the South of London. Sean has a good relationship with his brother and father.

Music during childhood and adolescence

Music was always there. Sean's parents bought a piano when he was six years old. "Mum played a bit and taught us the basics. The key thing was that they (the parents, RS) both loved music. They had an all-round taste. Classical, pop, jazz, show music and so on."

From age 7 till 11 Sean got piano lessons with a piano teacher living across the road and after that from a few other local teachers. He remembers his time at primary school as very inspiring: activities took place like classroom music making (although there were no 'formal' music lessons) and drama. Sean describes the school as 'forward thinking from a holistic point of departure', where story telling, movement and theatre all had its integrated place. The creativity through drama was a big thing in the school. "We created our own plays and built music into the plays. It was an encouraging environment, it shaped me. Even in the primary school drama groups I created silly little bands with biscuit tins. I already was an organiser from a rather early age." Many performing arts activities were organised outside



school time, including weekends, in a non-formal way. The teachers were very encouraging. Sean regards them as influential in his development.

In secondary school instrumental lessons were offered as well, and next to the piano Sean chose the flute as a second instrument. Not many people played music in Sean's environment and he was regarded as someone that just enjoyed music making: "I had a lower middle class suburban upbringing where you did lots of things and music was one of them."

But nevertheless: "For a little while there was this idea that I was a natural talent. I then had an awful experience: a teacher, obviously an expert working with talented youngsters, gave me a test, aural, sight reading and so on. As a result of this process I felt a failure and was crying at the end. I must have been 11 or 12 years old. My parents were embarrassed. The message from the session was obviously that I was not a natural talent. What a musician was, was apparently defined by a certain concept, certain preconditions." Sean does not know whose initiative this had been. "When we were young I always thought my brother was more naturally talented. He is very musical."

Sean's parents remained encouraging and supportive, fulfilling a special role. Sean describes it as "something they did not force, but offered as an opportunity. Music required commitment. You needed to practice if you take music."

Sean's father did not play any instrument. But "he has a spirit about him which is very musical. He has a very artistic sensibility and a passion for music, not intellectualised, just a love for it. Dad wanted to hear me play popular tunes as well as classical music. Both mum and dad loved good music. Actually they represented both the 'vernacular and the vertical'.ⁱⁱ There was no value or judgment added to my music making. It was based on response and feeling." Although his parents were strict and there were sometimes difficult times with them, he feels they were always nurturing, encouraging his personal development.

When Sean was 13 years old his mother applied on his behalf to some music colleges to be a Saturday student.ⁱⁱⁱ Sean auditioned for the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, the Royal College of Music and Trinity College of Music, all in London, in the end getting into Trinity College. Auditioning was quite an experience. "The audition at the Royal College was terrible. Nobody spoke to me. The Guildhall was friendly. But after auditioning at both schools I felt 'I do not think this is for me'. But then came the audition at Trinity; I played and they then asked me if I had ever improvised or composed. I had not really. This woman who asked was Lettice Stewart, the head of the Junior School. She basically got me to improvise on the piano. It just happened." This was a very positive experience for Sean: an interview, where, rather than having to prove yourself, turns into something which enables you to make a discovery about yourself.

"Going to 20 Mandeville Place in the centre of London once a week by a 20 minutes train ride was a big thing for me. It had a huge impact. London became and remains my home and soul. Going to these lessons and having experiences with good teachers, it was fantastic. Junior Trinity had an amazing mix of people from all kinds of backgrounds, where talent and potential counted in the first place."

Sean got a grant from the local authority to pay for his tuition at Trinity College. He was in his third year at secondary school when he started. The most important experiences for him were the 'musicianship classes'. "A lot of the teachers asked me to improvise and to bring a new composition in every week, to further develop in the class. Those classes were mini workshops, interacting and playing as a group. We were with about 10 pupils. Sometimes we tried out compositions all together with our instruments. That was really inspiring, your ears and eyes were always being opened to new possibilities." Trinity College was a creative and inspiring environment, where Sean felt at home and was allowed to develop.

Sean was at Trinity's Junior School from the age of 13 till 18. He finished there in 1984 at the same time as completing his A levels.

Secondary school was a boys grammar school, where Sean got in with a scholarship, but "There was not much music. Singing hymns was the main thing." Sean found the traditional group music making at secondary school terribly boring. He did not like the over prescribed singing in a choir or playing in an orchestra.

Things changed however when a new music teacher was appointed, Roger Askew. He had a broad view on music education and changed a lot of things. "He introduced proper music in the curriculum; in the end I did my O levels and A levels through him. I was the only one doing music, the rest did it as an 'extra'. He encouraged me to get ensembles going, jazz groups and rock bands. I did all of that combined with my Trinity experience. At the age of 14 and 15, I started teaching myself the guitar and drums, due to a deep interest in the Beatles and the nineteen sixties. That became my real aural training. I was copying, picking things up, learning from books."

Sean observes that a lot of the young people he works with at present, although often learning an instrument formally, use instruments they have learnt themselves when playing in creative ensembles.

Decision for the profession

The decision for music as a profession made itself. Sean did not assume he was going to do music, but Roger Askew advised him to apply for a degree level in music. This surprised Sean: "I was not an academic type of musician, nor a traditional musician. It did not appeal to me to spend three or four years basically just playing your instrument and being solistic at conservatoire level." However, Askew told him he could take courses in which he could combine things like composition and collaboration in other art forms. That was important information for Sean. He finds it special that his teacher seemed to understand him so well, while he himself was an Oxford academic. "Him, Trinity, my parents being encouraging; it all helped me take this decision."

Study at Bath Spa University College...

"I heard of Bath through an older friend from Trinity who went there; he told me about the flexible curriculum they had. I visited the place, and felt positive. I entered Bath Spa University College in 1984, taking a Bachelor of Arts in Music." Sean loved it there, it was a small college, 'very rural and out of the city'. First he lived on a campus, and then in his second year he moved to Bath. The staff included George Odam^{iv}, who ran the Composition Department and the teacher training course. He was one of his teachers in composition. "He was pioneering. The school in Bath had one of the first composition courses where you composed for professional musicians. They came in and you talked to them. That was innovative and encouraging for work in cross arts and other collaborations. I got a good foundation there. You could make a lot happen. I did free improvisation, jazz, classical, folk, pop, rock. It was a brilliant environment, with an amazing mix of staff with pioneers on the composition and improvisation side and good educators between them."

The curriculum offered three key areas, performance, composition and history & analysis. In the third year Sean specialized in composition. There were improvisation classes, but also stylistic harmony and counterpoint and studio and electronic work as well. "At the time it was quite special and unique. Every week I also had a one-to-one piano, flute and composition lesson. You were constantly getting attention. I was happy with that." The assessment was traditional: "I do not remember it being heavy. It was rather predictable. You had to jump through a number of hoops."

Yet after this three year's degree course Sean still did not know if he would 'end up in music'.

...start of the journey at the Guildhall School...

After graduation in 1987 Sean stayed in Bath for a year. That season was a year of working, mainly teaching. "I taught, played and composed a bit. But then I realised I did not want to be a classroom teacher or an instrumental teacher. I knew that if I would do this all the time I would be bored. So I had to move on."

Sean then heard about the *Performance and Communication Skills* post graduate course at the Guildhall School in London. George Odam knew Peter Renshaw^v, the founder and developer of this course, who was leading it, and advised him to apply. "There was this totally visionary statement on a little leaflet on the musician of the future. One of my teachers told me 'It looks totally impossible and idealistic but this is absolutely something for you Sean!' The audition was fun: part of it was a workshop and I felt empowered. It was an incredible experience. I knew: this is my thing. I was sure of that. If necessary I would apply again and again to get on it. That was the start of my journey."

Sean started the PCS post graduate course in September 1988. "It was amazing. We had a group of 16 students in our year. It was like being in a mini company, three days a week for one year. The year was divided into blocks, dealing with skills like workshop leading, percussion, voice, improvisation, and group composition. There were project blocks as well, all six weeks long. In each block you focused on a particular project. Then you started to get placements at different places and in different contexts. We worked in music theatre contexts and with contemporary dancers. We were improvising, coming up with our own ideas and always work in groups. Through the year we had to make self assessment profiles, quite new at the time, having to do your own personal development in reference to what you did. We then had a group discussion, a peer assessment and then a final assessment. I loved it, though some people hated it."

...and the start and development of the career

Sean got his diploma in 1989. Since then he has had a career of approximately 16 years.

First he taught the recorder and flute in primary schools in London, just to earn money, "getting the experience having tough kids. I cut my teeth and started changing things; I tried to get them to do something collectively musically."

In 1990, through Peter Renshaw, Sean got a *Composer in Residence* job in Stamford in Lincolnshire. He could do his own composition work there and run educational projects. One and a half year later, in 1991, he had his defining moment. Renshaw offered him a job at the Guildhall School, as part-time PCS administrator, together with some teaching. Next to that Sean started to work in London as a freelance musician and workshop leader, doing a lot of educational projects with different organisations, orchestras, dance companies etc. This went on till 1998. "Outreach or education work it was called, with as underpinning principle group music making activities which involved creating your own music."

In 1998 Sean became a full-time employee at the Guildhall School as 'Coordinator of Ensemble and Community Development'. Peter Renshaw was still head of the department. In 2003, two years after Peter's retirement, a department of Professional Development was created. "I became head of that and that is my main thing now."

Peter Renshaw has always been a sustained influence for Sean. Sean describes him as a great mentor role model, having strong ideas and vision, without imposing them on other people.

Reflecting on the education and life span

In general Sean feels satisfaction with his education: "Every institution I was in, primary and secondary school, Trinity, Bath, the Guildhall, somehow they gave me enough space to do what was important for me. The value of institutions is that they are always there as a sort of grounding force, as a reference point. You can even rebel against them! The important framework for me was that I could be creative and was encouraged. There were always one or two people who were good for me and who were pushing me in the right way, by conversations or asking questions. I met them through these institutions."

Sean feels that his teachers have all been mentors in different phases of his life. "They were mentors, not so much role models. I just came across them. Some of the people are still there, like Peter and George (Renshaw and Odam, RS). Maybe it has to do with my journey; these different people were there for me as *signposts*. I was never made to feel a failure. That is a big one. Nothing ever was allowed to dampen the spirit."

Nevertheless, if Sean had to shape a new conservatoire, things would change. "I would redefine the core business: what to develop, how to be an effective musician. Not just in the technical sense, but in the interpersonal sense and communicative sense. Your role and potential in society. I would have another approach for skills development. That includes a decent understanding of how harmony, rhythm etc. works, but the theoretical subjects would be connected to your own development. It would be more relevant, in order to develop your innate musicianship. Technology, the void in my life at this moment, is really important for musical training as well. Everything needs to be shaped out of who the student is. My ideal institution must find out about the student. You accepted that person in the first place, so it is your responsibility immediately to find out how best to nurture this student. You recognize the potential, so you should not run purely prescriptive courses. The real chats with students in conservatoires always happen too late, when students are nearly leaving."

Sean observes connections between his own life span and personal career span. For example: "I was in the scouts from the age of 8 till 18; I got little assignments and I was made leader of different groups. That gave me confidence and self esteem. Through that sort of experience I learned to take initiatives. I set up camps, I arranged trios at school, started a debating group etc. Wherever I could take an initiative... it was important."

He considers turning points in his life so far: "I made an emotional decision one year ago; I broke up with my partner, I was not ready for a family. Before that I always took the easy option, not to upset people, but I learned not to do that anymore and start to get clearer. I have the feeling that I have to take one or two more decisions like that. If you want things to happen you need to take destiny in your own hand."

His mother's death was another turning point which Sean is still processing. "I had a strong relationship with her. She was a real mentor. The whole family thing really became important. It is with me."

Learning as a musician...

"I never thought of stepping out of the traditional pathway. I benefited a great deal from it. It was not the driving force but a big contributing factor to my involvement with music." Reflecting on his formal learning in music Sean perceives most of what he did 'by road'. "I systematised it. My formal training meant training my ear, eyes, or my hands to do what you had to do to get by when jumping through hoops. I am pleased that I did it. It has been a gateway into other things. Maybe otherwise I would not have been here right now."

Sean feels that nevertheless his development as a musician has mainly come through non formal settings and informal learning: "you feel ownership; you feel engaged with it."

In connection with his work as head of Professional Development at the Guildhall School he thinks about it a lot. "We need more people having these skills to activate music making in different contexts, but how do you train that? I realise the reason I developed is just by experiencing it, by listening and being aware. It cannot be quantified."

He finds himself thinking about the craftsmanship of leadership, of the roles of musicians that are needed alongside the craftsmanship of the classical musician. "There are better ways of understanding and internalizing the notion of harmony for example than how it is currently being taught. You cannot deny people these things. I do feel that there are better ways to enable people to learn musically. It is important to connect to what is already there."

...and on the job

Sean finds richness in a variety of learning environments ranging from mainstream to special needs. "I learned a lot in terms of people-based learning. In certain situations I become very self critical, thinking twice about it. There is something incredibly honest about those special environments; some of them sort of see through you, meaning things that you take for granted that will happen do not always happen."

Issues of working with other disciplines, other cultures and language lead to a rich learning background. "A West African musician sings at you and communicates through gestures and you find something to give back. A sort of primal source of sound in music, rather than something that is contrived. It works."

Recently Sean has been doing work with actors at the Guildhall School. "Musicians and actors together, that has been my latest learning curve. Actors are used to improvising; whole personalities are involved. It throws up a lot for the musicians." Sean organises specific evaluations over these new developments. "We talk about risk-taking and awareness that there is no right or wrong." He finds that students recognise more and more the reality and relevance of these issues for their training and development.

Oil stain of this work – ending up in Africa

Initially through the British Council supporting students of the Guildhall School in Tanzania who were working with local musicians, Peter Renshaw started a programme where West African musicians came in yearly to work with students in the Continuing Professional Development Programme. "Now we work in Gambia as well, we offer placements to students every year. Students come back with amazing experiences, through percussion, dance, singing, improvising with their own instruments and then apply it to their own work. It is especially the context thing again: the experience in that space and time, and what you pick up. It is a sensibility that leads to your own personal development. How you then transfer that back into your own practice. It is a big one!"

L'art pour l'art and social inclusion

Sean has developed a lot of work which is connected to social contexts. Can he enjoy making music just for doing it or is the contextual dimension (elderly people, sick children, schools, special needs etc.) critical for him? "In order for something to happen, it has to have meaning. That can have to do with the people in the room or the place where you are going to take the music to. So the context the music is happening in is an important factor. But it is always artistically driven." People he meets and talks to are central to his involvement in music. "To be in a room filled with sound, which can provoke emotion and feeling in you, or draw something out of you, or which you can use and shape to create magic with as well. I think the journey is about what moves you and what makes you tick and what drives you to keep going with it."

Sean tries to develop an antenna for what is fit for a purpose for a particular moment. It is a constant learning process. "The roles can differ. You can be a leader, a facilitator, a composer, arranger, a supporting instrumentalist, you can be the person who just makes it happen; you can shift roles. Artistically it comes back to this trying to capture both the essence and the practice of this work, what it actually is, without putting it into a box, and at the same time defining it enough so that it stops being just called 'outreach' or 'educational and community work'. The principle is the notion that you are with a group of people that you encourage them to come out with their own ideas. At the same time there is a great need to deepen that practice, for example in schools and with young people in non formal situations. It is also important with regard to collaboration with other arts disciplines or collaborations with other cultures. The notion of exchange is important. The key part is that together you develop something into something else. That can go for young children with no skills whatsoever or a highly trained dancer or a West African musician, searching and exploring new meeting points, new languages and possibilities."

Motivation

At the question what his strongest motivation is to do what he does, he thinks for a long time and then says: "Sound. There are many answers, in the moment answers, who you are with or the project you are on, and a longer term projection. Where the world is at now, things need to be said through music, through sound in the first instance. But I also think and feel that many things are not said as yet through music. Saying things through music can contribute to how people interact, to how people feel about themselves, view themselves as individuals, and how they interact in groups. That is achieved through the fundamental organisational means of sound, like rhythm, harmony, textures whatever. They are steered, created and manipulated even in response to what is needed at that moment. It is a very fine line then, a delicate balance between the artistically and intellectually driven sides, but there

is a spiritual and therapeutic side of that as well. It sits within those two things. One should not exist without the other. That is my primary motivation. I have this projection in my mind, realised in different ways at different times.”

The different worlds of music

Music from the sixties became important to Sean. “Especially the Beatles. I love their music. They were a social phenomenon. They were role models. I still do not tire of that role model, what they were, who they were, the music they created, being in the right time and place, a representation of what life is about. The natural sort of life span they went through, from their early naïve days, their developmental period to their sort of exit strategy, starting to do their own thing and move on. Many other musicians from that time inspired me a great deal. There is a kind of chemistry in music of that time.”

It is the folk based side of music making that fascinates him. “I am not a folk musician. But it is this phenomenon, the notion of a group of people getting together who create music which does something for them. Often music that is created in that moment rather than written down on a page is very strong, although I love both. This notion of people who have something to say there and then, as a group of musicians through their instruments, appeals to me. Even if they are not that technically brilliant, it is still possible to offer something, a pop song, an amazing collaboration in education, a meeting of minds in Africa, or whatever. It is a manifestation of the moment rather than something that is sustained for the sake of keeping a tradition alive.”

Development of iO, leading to communities of practice

Essential for Sean during the development of his career was the cooperation with his colleagues, who were influential. “There is a little wave of people I grew up with^{vi}, lead with and make music with, we come all to the age where we start to define our pathways a bit more.” From 1997 until 2002 Sean ran *iO*, together with these musicians, a large 30 piece band, which became a major defining force for him. “Some of us were saying that some wonderful music has been produced the last 10 years, but it never gets heard again, so we wanted to produce our own work that was not only regarded as educational.” They made some live recordings of their work. “It was a great experience, we got good gigs. It deeply affected us and a lot of friendships and new projects in different combinations came out of it.” Sean does not think that they will do it again in that shape or form, but interesting ensembles and projects have emerged as a result of working together in *iO*.

“It really developed. That is another side that I want to keep developing. A *community of practice* that is exactly what I mean.”

A role model in leadership: Arsenal's trainer

Sean loves football. He creates space in his life for the London football club Arsenal, being a season ticket holder and he sees parallels between music and sport. “I love the social side of football, and the philosophy behind it. The way Arsenal's manager Arsene Wenger works is an example for me. He has a holistic view, he revolutionised the training in the UK. He sees football players as human beings and works on self awareness, on working in teams, on youth policy.” Arsene Wenger is a role model for Sean. “He is a real leader, leading from behind as a genuine coach and mentor. He built up a great team of players, built a whole new training compound, and a new 60.000 seater stadium will be opened in 2006. All with support, good food and attention for well being. I reflect on that and it inspires me.”

Longer term aims

A certain dream for the future has never left him: he would love to be involved with running ‘a special place’. No doubt with the Arsenal model of Arsene Wenger in his mind, Sean describes it as “a centre that embraces musical training from a young age till the profession; it is about lifelong learning and also about producing new work, in a way which the professional sector could not do because they are tied down to their market niche. This is about the real world of training, research and reflection completely integrated. It is something

for everyone where the formal and non-formal can meet. It starts from scratch and gets built up. It will manifest itself via something like Guildhall, or maybe via a combination of organisations. This is a holistic ethos which I believe is achievable through organisations and key people working together. It would produce an enabling framework which acknowledges the approaches, disciplines, styles and genres that are traditionally there. It embraces the notion of research and development and literally reaching out into the wider sector. I really want to be involved with leading something like that.”

Sean finds it hard to achieve a balance between all the things he is doing. “I always have too many things on the go with different priorities at different times. I want to do more practical work, but not more of the same. I would like to think more of my own creative work and development.” Another area in which he feels a burning need is writing. He would like to produce a book, consisting of a compilation of the materials he has developed: “a written description and a musical description. Hopefully those two might tie up.”

In the UK there is an increasing interest in the work he is doing. “Time will tell if it is just a phase, due to government changes. But I think there is a momentum now for music as a participatory experience to have a wider resonance in society.”

Budget cuts in the arts are an issue in the UK as they are everywhere. A tough time could be ahead. On the other hand Sean feels that terrific developmental work is going on, but it is caught in educational and outreach work. “Sometimes orchestras do this kind of work, doing an outreach programme, but it is not really affecting the practice in the artistic direction of the orchestra itself. They use it to sell themselves. There is nothing wrong with that, but you also need to respond to the dynamic of the people you are with, and that is not questioned.”

A way of life

“I am where I am, because I go with the flow, riding the waves. The flow has always been in the right direction. A question in my mind is whether I will need to start to shape and direct things a little bit more and take some tough decisions or one or two risks even, in order to make those things happen. I was fortunate enough to have the right people at the right time and the right opportunities at the right time. The main thing is not to stagnate, not to get stuck. I feel I am still growing. The work and practice continues to grow, change and develop. I feel very lucky to be part of that.”

Sean does not perceive what he does as work. “It is not a job. It is a way of life for me. People and socializing are central for me. At the funeral of my mum I felt it more strongly than ever. That is what life is, you feed off people and you feed something back to them. You do it as long as you live.”

Interview held June 16, 2005

Text by Rineke Smilde

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ⁱ O = ordinary level, A = advanced level

ⁱⁱ Sean refers here to Peter Renshaw’s often made quotation in which the ‘horizontal’, being the vernacular culture, is placed opposite of the ‘vertical’, being the traditional, and more formally taught, culture.

ⁱⁱⁱ Meaning to take classes in the junior school (preparatory for the conservatoire) on Saturdays.

^{iv} At the time of the interview being co-ordinator of Research and Staff Development at the Guildhall school of Music & Drama.

^v Peter Renshaw retired from the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in 2001 as Head of Research and Development. He is currently an arts and education consultant.

^{vi} Sean refers here to fellow students of the Guildhall School.