

Polifonia Profession Working Group



Socrates
Erasmus



ERASMUS THEMATIC NETWORK FOR MUSIC

polifonia

Site visit report 20 July 2006, Dartington

Dartington College, Dartington, Great Britain

This visit profiles an educational institution in the forefront of cross-arts collaboration seeking to develop entrepreneurial, reflective and autonomous musicians capable of adapting and situating their work in a broader artistic and societal context through a rigorous interdisciplinary program which nourishes the development of “core” artistic, written, oral, entrepreneurial and strategic skills.

Schedule

July 20, 2006 12:30 – 15:30

Due to unexpected difficulties in transportation, the site visit was shortened and took the form of an open give and take with members of staff:

Claire Donovan, Deputy Principal, art historian
Catherine Laws, lecturer in music, musicologist, pianist
Christopher Pressler, Dean of Information and Learning
David Prior, lecturer in composition and digital media
Trevor Wiggins, ethnomusicologist, Director of Music

Set in a beautiful rural 850-acre 14th century estate in South Devon, Dartington College of Arts seeks to provide a “radical, innovative Higher Education learning community for contemporary arts practices in performance.” Undergraduate and postgraduate degrees are offered to some 500 students through practice-led learning and contemporary arts practice. Specialist areas include cultural management, choreography, music, theatre, visual performance and performance writing, with each field providing activities in creative enterprise.

In addition to the College, DartingtonARTS provides a year-round programme for music, dance and contemporary performance, theatre and film. Dartington Plus is a partnership between the Dartington Hall Trust, the Dartington College of Arts and the King Edward VI Community College designed to provide broad accessibility to and participation in the arts.

The College resists stylistic labeling and musicians may specialize in classical, jazz, pop or world music. Dartington does not subscribe to the traditional view that technical expertise and intellectual ability alone will be sufficient to the continuation and development of the gifted artists’ aspirations. Here, above and beyond the purely artistic skills traditionally associated with conservatoire training, students effect practical work (in performance or composition), a context-based project off campus, and written research, taking into account the range of situations in which they will be called upon to work. Lines are blurred between performance and composition, for it is in the second year only that students choose to major in one or the other. The option of a major/minor in different artistic disciplines allows for a major in music and a minor in theatre, for example.

Context-based enquiry is one of the cornerstones of the Dartington educational experience, and is carefully prepared through a series of methodological seminars throughout the 3-year

course. The project involves research, project planning, monitoring and evaluation, documentation, presentation and practical work (performance, composition, workshops etc.). Research integrates the geographical and social location, needs of participants, and an understanding of the “norms” of the location in question. Project planning involves a written proposal and a budget, an understanding of group dynamics and project management. Monitoring and evaluation is every bit as important as the final outcome: in other words, students’ ability to monitor progress and adapt where necessary is a key aspect of the final assessment. Developing one’s own work (“practical work”) is obviously at the heart of this process, but it needs to be adjusted and indeed balanced with the notion of context, which is seen here as essential.

During their second year students are involved in a choice of group projects, locating their work within a field of discourse, thereby honing the skills they will need for their final project. Examples of recent projects from final year students include researching Finnish music folk styles (in Finland) and developing an audio analog program to perform them, or building a digital kora and developing repertoire for this instrument, thus drawing on ethnomusicological and composition skills as well as knowledge of multimedia. Students are encouraged to reflect critically on their practice and to locate the practice within their discourse. Performance is seen as a whole and includes the use of space, the location, presentation and the capacity to be self-critical.

The College’s teaching of different arts forms inevitably affects the approach to performance, as does the emphasis on developing relationships within the broader community. For example, modules within the music ‘minor’ (open to students of all disciplines and called “Sound practices”) look at music journalism, the relationship between words and music, and the artistic use of sound outside the context of music (sound sculptures, radio art), leading to a broader awareness of sound art. Inter-arts collaboration is as essential to the training program as is project development.

Today’s students are “digital natives” and as such the College recognizes that this changes the way in which core skills are defined. These musicians share different skills and sensibilities from past generations, and already have a high degree of refinement in the way in which they “read” culture as it relates to these technologies. Technology’s shaping of culture is more important than the technology itself, and the College’s approach seeks to foster a greater awareness as to how this will affect the artist’s practice.

Dartington wants its students to develop adaptive, transferable skills, and acknowledges that today’s students are already focused on “their” work more than a simple career pathway such as orchestral musician for example. These capacities can in turn can shape and indeed transform the very nature of the creative industry. Written skills for example, are defined broadly and can take different forms: research and communication through writing, reflecting on one’s work (using an appropriate format) and music journalism all participate in the development of these skills which can be applied to practical (documentation) purposes or to musicological ones, for example.

The College has instituted a number of partnerships with individual artists and the arts world, so that students can “shadow” people in the profession, and through 8-9 month work placements taken for credit in the third year, have a hands-on experience in different aspects of the music industry. For those choosing this option or a 3rd year of study abroad, the course has been extended to four years.

Dartington staff do not believe there is any one solution to training open-minded, flexible artists equally at home in leading workshops, teaching, or creating and performing new works, and indeed they are continuously questioning how to best provide high level artistic

training adapted to today's needs. The College's uniqueness can perhaps best be summarized by its broad collaborative approach across the arts which integrates training into a multi-faceted and evolving arts industry. Through their contextual projects and inter-arts experience, young musicians can thus develop their practice and forge an identity through multiple pathways which are adapted to different realities while also creating opportunities both in local communities and the broader international one as well.

Text by Gretchen Amussen