

Blog by Music Excellence London Teacher Advocate Steven Berryman, Director of Music at City of London School for Girls

Joining City of London School for Girls back in September 2015 was an immense joy. Since being a student I had visited the [Barbican](#) hundreds of times to see concerts, films, dance and exhibitions. It was a John Cage weekend during my postgraduate years that sticks in my mind as being the best experience. It was my first opportunity to engage with one composer over the course of the weekend and to attend events in different parts of the Barbican centre. It was the Musicircus performance in the foyer spaces that was the beginnings of my collaborative-obsession:

“John Cage’s Musicircus is simply an invitation to bring together any number of groups of any kind, preferably in a large auditorium, letting them perform simultaneously anything they wish, resulting in an event lasting a few hours. There is no score, no parts, nothing specified except the concept. ‘You won’t hear anything: you’ll hear everything,’ Cage said”

(Peter Dickinson, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/jun/20/john-cage-and-his-musicircus>)

There were performers everywhere, and I was enthralled by how music brings people together. We collaborate so readily as musicians in performance, and my own desire to collaborate came from my composing.

I wanted students in my school to work with live musicians as I had always done as a student, and my initial attempts to collaborate involved bringing players to the school. It's this authenticity that inspires the pupils, and I found this particularly evident in non-Western music. I invited a local gamelan musician to be resident at the school and with the pupils we devised new music in groups. The gamelan musician then introduced me to a Nigerian drummer, and through the drummer I discovered a Taiko group, and so on. Collaborating with performers in this way brings a great deal of expertise to a subject in which teachers are expected to know a very broad spectrum of musical traditions to help cater for our diverse student body. These performers also bring a whole web of connections; we start to build a library of experts we can draw upon to support musical learning.

The City of London Corporation supports eight schools, and January 2016 was the first time these schools worked together to put on a concert at the Guildhall. I was new at my school but embraced the opportunity and saw the potential of working together. It was not an easy task. Emails were sent, responses were few, and meetings were impossible to arrange as you never managed to get everyone involved in one room at one time. What helped was having someone at the Corporation to take the lead and act as the hub. They helped to ensure communication remained open, and chased up those who were slower to respond than others. The concert was a huge success, and I was thrilled to see students admire the performances of their peers from other schools. As the event moves to Milton Court in January 2017 I'm confident it will be another vibrant and exciting event.

I've been relentlessly pursuing other opportunities for collaboration across the City Schools since, and more recently we have been working with [VCM Foundation](#) to run a Young Leaders programme for singers drawn from four schools. This cohort of 30 singers has worked with real purpose to develop singing workshop leadership skills and they've flourished working with students from different schools. It took a huge marketing offensive to make it known that the project existed. I recommend not giving up and always looking for alternative ways to get the opportunity known to the school you are targeting. Music teachers are rarely at a desk reading emails, so try sending messages to Community Service Co-ordinators, Head of Years, etc.

Collaboration also happens in the way my department approaches our work with students. We all have different areas of expertise and we strive to make the most of our skills to support the girls effectively. Regular conversations about what and – most importantly – why we do what we do is our greatest source of collaboration. Dr Ally Daubney visited the school last summer (2016) to facilitate further collaboration as we reviewed our KS3 Music curriculum. She encouraged an entertaining discussion about the ‘whys’ much more than the ‘whats’, helping us develop our curriculum for the year ahead. It is this regular

collaboration as colleagues, working with external experts that keeps us restless and always seeking out new approaches that keep the music curriculum right for the girls we teach today, not the students we taught yesterday.

No amount of emailing can replace a good conversation. I made a big effort to meet local organisations when I moved to the City with a view of developing opportunities to enrich the musical education for the girls. The City hosts a wealth of cultural organisations and the Museum of London have been a joy to collaborate with. We had our first ever Year 7 Music Day working with the Fire of London exhibition as the starting point for creative work. After a morning exploring the exhibition girls worked in groups, facilitated by a teacher, to develop new compositions that were performed at the end of day. Not only was the student collaboration a pleasure to see and hear, but as a team of teachers we needed to collaborate effectively. This took plenty of planning to ensure the schedule worked for everyone.

I've learned lots of interesting lessons through collaboration:

- Start with a conversation and not an email: meet people and get to know their work.
- Understand how the other partners in a project work; investigate what systems and procedures shape how they operate and mould schedules to their normal ways of working. Collaboration is more effective when it feels part of everyday life.
- Be flexible: if you believe in a project be ready to be the first to make a sacrifice for the greater good and long term success of it.
- Be persistent and know the benefits for the pupils - this is the selling point and the 'why' behind everything we do.
- Win over the management: no project will succeed or progress until it's been sold to SMT. Be clear on the benefits for pupils and work to make any project an extension of your school's mission/development plan or the mission of the group of schools.
- Consider the barriers before presenting to the other partners - be ready to have the answers to questions and solve them without them needing to ask.

We get very wrapped up in our own schools, and the competition between schools can hamper collaboration. We are so much more efficient if we draw on the skills and knowledge of others, and we quickly realise all those worries we had are shared by our colleagues in other schools. More often than not we have a solution to someone else's problem, we just need to find any excuse to start a conversation and see what we can share.