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Don't stop the music

Closures at Oxford Brookes are a sad reflection on the state of the academic music sector

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By

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The Critic

This week has seen the announcement of closure of the music and mathematics departments at Oxford Brookes University. Staff face redundancy either later this academic year or after “teaching out” remaining students, while the university is also [proposing](#) staff cuts in other areas including English and Creative Writing, History, Film, Anthropology, Publishing and Architecture. The University and College Union has averred that [48 jobs are at risk](#) during this process.

The implications of this move are grave across the range of disciplines affected, in line with what has been [branded](#) the “bonfire of the humanities”. But the situation for the music department at Brookes should be viewed in the context of wider serious and structural issues affecting the very nature of music as an academic subject in the UK. In earlier times, music department closures were rare — St. Andrew’s in 1988, Leicester in 1991 and Aberystwyth in 1992. But since 2004, there has been a steady stream of closures in Reading (2004), Exeter (2004), Roehampton (2010), East Anglia (2011), Lancaster (2015), Essex (2016), Abertay Dundee (2022), and Wolverhampton (2022). Many working in the sector expect further closures to occur in the near future, and many music academics live in continual fear for their jobs.

To understand this, one needs to consider the structure of the sector, and the place of the department at Oxford Brookes and its degree offerings within this.

Tertiary-level Music Departments belong to institutions in six categories: (a) the research-intensive Russell Group, 24 universities of which 18 have music departments; (b) the larger group of 67 “post-1992” institutions with music departments which acquired university status after the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act; (c) 15 “mid-ranking” institutions which were universities before 1992 but are not in the Russell Group; (d) around 20 Colleges of Higher Education or similar institutions which offer degrees but are not universities; (e) 9 conservatoires which are focused on more intensive practical training in performance and composition; and (f) around 9 private providers generally focused on commercial music training. As of 2020-21, recruitment figures are not publicly available for categories (d) and (f), but with respect to the others, around 20 per cent of music students attended Russell Group institutions, 9 per cent mid-ranking institutions, 51 per cent post-1992 institutions, and 21 per cent conservatoires.

Within such institutions, the majority of undergraduate degree programmes fall into five basic clusters: (i) plain “Music” degrees, usually featuring a range of music

history, theory and analysis, some study of non-Western musics, as well as some more practical study of composition and/or performance; (ii) Music Technology or Production degrees focused on studio work and sound recording; (iii) Musical Theatre, highly practice-focused degrees to train those who might perform in the London West End or elsewhere; (iv) Popular/Commercial Music courses, focused on the study of such music; and (v) Music Performance courses, of which those in most conservatoires are predominantly focused on classical work, with a few courses in popular music and jazz, while those in other institutions are dominated by commercial performance. Some other degree types — in music journalism, film, media and gaming music, or music business — are scattered across a few institutions. The most recent figures available show 16 per cent of students doing plain “music” courses, 26 per cent music technology, 19 per cent musical theatre, 12 per cent popular/commercial music, 16 per cent performance (around 12 per cent at conservatoires, 4 per cent at other institutions excluding private providers). All except plain music degrees are directly vocational, supposedly leading to particular types of employment, and are therefore less focused upon the delivery of “transferable” skills which would serve graduates well in other fields of work. However, the relationship between these vocational degrees and demand in the music industry is far from established — it is unclear how much properly-paid work is available to the thousands of annual graduates in music production and musical theatre.

In the period since the 1992 Act, much has changed in the sector. The majority of undergraduate degree courses in music technology, musical theatre and popular music came into being during this time, largely in institutions with newly-acquired university status. These were boosted by the [huge increase](#) in overall student numbers, from 17 per cent of young people attending university in 1987, through 33 per cent in 1997, to almost 50 per cent during the last decade. There was for a period a rise in numbers doing plain Music degrees, but in the last decade these have fallen sharply, often by 30-50 per cent, in mid-ranking and post-1992 institutions. This has led to the closure of such programmes and/or redundancies of relevant academics. The total numbers on plain Music courses in the Russell Group have remained relatively constant during this period, while the total overall number on such courses across the sector is now similar to that in the 1970s. However, plain music now accounts for a small percentage of students overall, even if one excludes the conservatoires.

Other relevant contextual factors include the trebling of undergraduate tuition fees in 2012 and their freezing at £9250 from 2017, meaning that universities have declining income in real terms every year. The removal in 2015 of caps on recruitment for individual departments has created ferocious competition between institutions, and EU students have been harder to recruit with increased fees post-Brexit. Public confidence in music education has had to contend with the depressed state of the wider music sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, and politicians [pouring cold water](#) on the value of arts and humanities degrees. Perhaps most significantly, there has been a sharp decline in provision of music in secondary education during the 2010s, with [a fall of over 38 per cent](#) in the numbers of state schools and colleges offering A-Level Music between 2010 and 2018. This last factor has meant a dwindling number of pupils leave school with the necessary skills in notation, theory, repertoire required to undertake a plain Music degree. Universities could offer foundation years to compensate for this lack of skills, but these are costly to provide,

and can have negative effects on the wider metrics by which institutions are held accountable by governments.

Music degrees are expensive to provide. They often require performance spaces, practice rooms, studios, equipment and technicians, instruments, and extra staff for instrumental and vocal teaching and ensemble direction. Of course, science degrees also require costly labs, facilities and technicians, but there is a wider range of government grants available for STEM subjects. Music is considerably more resource-intensive than non-performing arts and humanities subjects, many of which require little more than individual lecturers and spaces for lectures and seminars. Cutting a music programme can represent a significant saving for universities facing financial difficulties.

At the same time, the sector itself cannot be wholly absolved of responsibility. [In the name of “decolonisation”](#), the study of classical music is regularly impugned, [associated with imperial domination, white supremacy, elitist hegemony and more](#); a glance at a range of leading conferences or journals makes clear how well-established such perspectives are. A number of academics involved in sub-disciplines including ethnomusicology (the study of music in its cultural context), studio composition or popular music regularly espouse such views in a sectarian manner, when fighting over academic territory and resources. Also, where there was once a relatively clear distinction between academic study of music in a university and practical training in a conservatoire, the boundaries have become blurred. This has created much confusion for students, parents and some university managers, generally to the detriment of academic study, widely dismissed on anti-intellectual and utilitarian grounds. All of this has helped create many unhappy and unfriendly environments for those still drawn to the study of classical music, music in history, or other approaches associated with the humanities. A shift from academic music study to music technology has added a gendered dimension to the shift, as the latter is overwhelmingly dominated by male students, while the former was more evenly matched.

Furthermore, measures for assessing academics’ research (now the Research Excellence Framework or REF), [first introduced during the Thatcher Era](#), can and often do lead to a chasm between research and teaching, especially amongst practitioners (composers, performers, sound producers, sound artists) in [full academic positions](#). Overall, the most esoteric and experimental work tends to be viewed as most “research-like”. Mainstream classical, jazz, popular, folk performance and composition are seen as much less so, creating a situation in which some departments are populated by research-intensive staff whose expertise is markedly at odds with the most common interests of students. As a result, in some institutions much teaching is undertaken by precariously-employed staff, while various permanent staff concentrate on their research or take management roles.

The music department in post-1992 Oxford Brookes University was founded in 1979 (when the wider institution was called Oxford Polytechnic) and has a distinguished record in contemporary composition, film music and opera studies in particular (including the work of scholar Alexandra Wilson, [who will be familiar to readers of this journal](#)). I attended their annual [OBERTO opera conference this year](#), and listened to a range of fascinating and penetrating papers investigating the financial

dimensions of opera, whether today, early in the twentieth-century, or in the Habsburg Empire, with obvious relevance for questions of subsidy today.

Brookes was one of the roughly one-third of post-1992 music departments which made a REF submission in 2021, with a large amount of staff work submitted compared to other departments in a similar part of the sector. Their results were good if not outstanding. At undergraduate level they offered only a plain Music course, which over time became diverse in content, especially after major reforms in 2018, offering a range of popular and film music as well as classical, but decreasing amounts of historical study. A plain Music MA course was discontinued recently and replaced with one in Creative Industries. As elsewhere, staff were pressured to redesign courses in order to “follow the market”, but the new courses were less popular than those they replaced. There were plans for new bespoke vocational music courses, also linked to new buildings, but these will no longer be.

The academic music sector is fractured, especially in relation to classical music. This mirrors wider cuts or proposed cuts to [English National Opera](#), [BBC Orchestras](#) and [other institutions](#), and needs major shifts in government policy if the situation is to be reversed. This may happen with a new government, but policy plans from both major political parties are presently vague. Wider reforms are needed to ensure proper provision of good quality music education at primary and secondary level, which might turn around the falling numbers of students studying music at university.

In the meantime, year-on-year departments and academics have to fight for their survival. A department which closes would take a long time to become re-established, programmes which are closed are not easily relaunched, and academics with distinguished records of publication and teaching face redundancy, sometimes at mid-career, with little chance of finding equivalent work elsewhere. There is a huge amount of evidence of meaningful interactions between scholars and external practitioners in music, especially in the classical field, which will become further impoverished as such scholarship declines.

I would never argue that no department or programme should close. Careful consideration needs to be given to the expansion of higher education and the relationship to standards at secondary level. Nonetheless, it is important that measures are taken by universities, governments, relevant professional institutions and other interested parties at least to prevent some huge reservoirs of learning and knowledge from being sacrificed to short-term measures and contingencies. We can only hope for wider reforms to preserve in the long term what is good and valuable in the sector.