

The Sir John Manduell Research Forum Series

Autumn 2025 Programme

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 24 September 2025

Discussion forum (led by Dr Tom Parkinson and Dr Michelle Phillips)

Room 102

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 1 October 2025

Dr Tom Parkinson, Royal Northern College of Music

Popular Music Education as Neoliberal Discipline

Studio 7

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 8 October 2025

Prof. Wiebke Thormählen, Royal Northern College of Music

Identities and Boundaries: Musical Interactions and Cosmopolitanism beyond the City

Studio 8

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 22 October 2025

Prof. Ian Cross, Dr David Duncan, and Katya Ness, University of Cambridge

Making Space for Accuracy: Can White Space Make Music Notation Easier to Read?

Studio 8

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 12 November 2025

Discussion forum (led by Dr Austin Glatthorn)

Room 102

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 19 November 2025

Dr Kristl Kirk, University of York

Instrumental Music Teaching with Dyslexic Students: The Development of an Innovative Risk-Resilience Model

Studio 8

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 26 November 2025

Dr Winnie Huang, Conservatorio della Svizzera italiana

The Performing Body: The Site of Possibilities

Studio 5

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 3 December 2025

Discussion forum

Room 102

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 10 December 2025

Dr Michelle Assay, King's College London and the University of Toronto

'When Puppets Sing in Tehran': Reconfiguring Iran's 'National' Opera

Studio 8

Abstracts

Popular Music Education as Neoliberal Discipline

Dr Tom Parkinson, Royal Northern College of Music

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 1 October 2025, Studio 7

Depending on context, *discipline* might refer to the training of subjects to conform to an established code of behaviour using mechanisms of reward or punishment, or alternatively, to a cohesive area of knowledge and practice with defined and accepted parameters. These usages are connected, however, in that they both describe ‘form[s] of the exercise of power within social organisations’ that maintain order and conformity (Gill, 1995, p. 411). In this presentation, I argue that the academic sub-discipline of higher popular music education (HPME), which first emerged in the late 1980s and has proliferated across UK higher education, has derived its current form through the neoliberal disciplining of cultural and educational institutions.

I use Banwait and Hancock’s (2022) *Phases of HE Marketisation* as a chronological framework to chart how educational and cultural policymaking has shaped HPME from above and below, structuring its background conditions and disseminating a lexicon of neoliberal values that have become common sense. Through analysis of policy, public debate, and interviews with HPME students and educators, I illustrate how HPME has emerged from neoliberal conditions that have simultaneously shaped the political economy of its object of study (popular music), its corresponding professional domain (the ‘creative industries’), and the curricula and institutional infrastructure through which it is taught.

Biography

Tom Parkinson is Head of Doctoral Programmes at the Royal Northern College of Music. Prior to joining RNCM in 2025, he was Reader in the Centre for the Study of Education at the University of Kent. His research interests include music in higher education, popular music in Turkey, songwriting, and education in the context of forced displacement.

Identities and Boundaries: Musical Interactions and Cosmopolitanism beyond the City

Prof. Wiebke Thormählen, Royal Northern College of Music

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 8 October 2025, Studio 8

This talk investigates the role of the British Country House as cultural centre outside of the urban sphere. The Country House, inhabited for half the year by the aristocracy and, increasingly during the nineteenth century, the political elite, was a hub of both cultural activity and of cultural control as those with financial means imported cultural goods through which they signalled their status and their realm of influence. The country house, then, can function as a looking glass magnifying the pretence of cosmopolitanism and globalism as it reflects the cultural consumerism of global goods in its Chinese wallpapers, mahogany chests and pianos luxuriously decorated with satinwood and ebony.

Music-making brought to life this import of cultural goods through regular invitations and acts of patronage: musicians, particularly those of foreign origin, would be introduced to society in the semi-private setting of musical soirees; as singing teachers and dancing masters they would enter into long-term relationships within these spaces that provided them with financial security and that provided cultural refinement for the family but that also afforded those hiring their services a sense of ownership over the musician as cultural good. In addition, such patronage cemented the country house as a local cultural centre as its owners supported foreign musicians' celebration within the nearby urban musical developments, particularly choral society activities.

This talk examines these co-dependencies with reference to several examples so as to tease out processes of 'othering' musicians along national 'types'. It highlights the significance of 'foreignness' within this cultural exchange in a semi-private sphere that exoticises opera stars in particular and promotes them as cultural goods within a wider trans-European cultural economy of goods and services.

Biography

Professor Wiebke Thormählen, historian and violinist, explores music as social and educational activity at the intersection of domestic and public music-making, with a particular focus on individual and collective identity construction. Particular interests are arrangements of large-scale works, domestic devotional music and the engagement with opera in the home. She was co-investigator on the AHRC-funded project 'Music, Home and Heritage: Sounding the Domestic in Georgian Britain'. Notable publications include the *Routledge Companion to Music, Mind and Well-being: Historical and Scientific Perspectives* (2018, co-editor), and *Sound Heritage: Making Music Matter in Historic Houses* (2021, co-editor), a collection bringing together musicologists, historians and museum and heritage professionals.

Making Space for Accuracy: Can White Space Make Music Notation Easier to Read?

Prof. Ian Cross, Dr David Duncan, and Katya Ness, University of Cambridge

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 22 October 2025, Studio 8

The ability to read and perform from written notation is a fundamental skill in many fields of music performance. While for many musicians, staff notation is both transparent and flexible, a medium that can be used fluently and imaginatively, it is frequently experienced as complex and difficult – as a form of communication it is nobody’s first language.

Stenberg and Cross (2019) showed that it is actually possible to make musical notation easier to read at sight with a minimal modification; adding white spaces to simple two-part pieces led to improved sight-reading performance compared to conventional staff notation. When reading text, spaces between words improve reading accuracy and fluency, even when added to writing systems that don’t traditionally feature them. While music reading is a more complex task, the introduction of white spaces to delineate phrases may delimit information uptake, analogous to how spaces help readers to identify word boundaries and process written information.

In this talk I will present the results from two experiments, conducted at the University of Cambridge and at the Royal Northern College of Music as part of the Score Design for Music Reading project, considering the impact of the added white spaces on accuracy and fluency and reviewing the main factors that appear to induce sight-reading errors.

Biographies

Ian Cross is a Fellow of Wolfson College, Emeritus Professor of Music and Science and a Director of Research at the University of Cambridge, having taught in the Faculty of Music from 1986 to 2021 and founded the Centre for Music and Science there in 2002. His widely cited research on music has encompassed psychoacoustics, cognitive neuroscience, experimental archaeology, evolutionary theory and the social effects of musical interaction. He is also a classical guitarist.

David Duncan is a Fellow of Clare Hall and Research Assistant at the University of Cambridge. In addition to working on the Score Design for Music Reading project he works as a music engraver for Oxford University. Previously he worked in music publishing as an editor at Edition Peters and in qualification development for the London College of Music and RSL Awards.

Katya Ness is a doctoral researcher and research assistant at the University of Cambridge, working on the Leverhulme-funded Score Design for Music Reading project under the supervision of Professor Ian Cross. Her research investigates how modifications to conventional notation can support children's sight-reading fluency and accuracy, building on her background in performance science and earlier work on how students develop sight-reading skills. Alongside her research, she is active as a teacher and accompanist.

Instrumental Music Teaching with Dyslexic Students: The Development of an Innovative Risk–Resilience Model

Dr Kristl Kirk, University of York

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 19 November 2025, Studio 8

This presentation outlines the development of a risk–resilience model of dyslexia in the context of musical training, aimed at identifying protective and promotive factors that support dyslexic students' resilience in the face of adversity and vulnerability. Dyslexia is a complex, multifaceted condition that can present significant challenges for both music educators and learners. Much of the existing literature adopts a deficit-based perspective, emphasising skill discrepancies and limitations, often with negative consequences for students' emotional well-being. Drawing on findings from my action research project, I propose a paradigm shift from a deficit-focused approach toward one that is individually tailored and strengths-based. This alternative model highlights the potential benefits of recognizing and nurturing the unique abilities of dyslexic learners. I suggest that this approach not only enhances educational outcomes across ecological contexts but may also promote self-confidence and reduce anxiety within the learning environment. I argue for the importance of high-quality pedagogical training for music educators – training that equips them with the knowledge, tools, and inclusive practice standards necessary to effectively support dyslexic students in their musical development.

Biography

Dr Kristl Kirk is a passionate advocate for accessible and inclusive music education. Her doctoral research at the University of York was inspired by her experiences as a piano teacher, with a focus on supporting diverse learning needs. A recipient of the Vinson Scholarship and winner of the 2020 PhD in the Spotlight Arts and Humanities prize, Kristl has also contributed her expertise as a member of the British Dyslexia Association's music committee for the past five years. In addition to teaching, she works as a music education consultant, regularly delivering workshops and presentations both nationally and internationally.

The Performing Body: The Site of Possibilities

Dr Winnie Huang, Conservatorio della Svizzera italiana

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 26 November 2025, Studio 5

How do you see sound, how do you hear movement, and how does one's emotive performing transdisciplinary body engender new possibilities? Through interdisciplinary Artistic Research, my work on the Musical-Gestural perspective has provided an exploratory framework in how I educate tertiary level art students on the power of possibility. This presentation explores possibility creation through Artistic Research including an embodied musical-gestural participation from the audience, showcasing the empowerment of practice-based knowledge creation.

Artistic Research is a young field rich in possibilities, allowing deeper understanding on how one can make, think, and talk about art and ultimately how artists participate and share in society. My own diverse artistic career and Artistic Research in the contemporary Musical-Gestural perspective questions creativity and possibility by examining musical freedoms within and beyond boundaries. It examines musical works which feature prominent embodied physical elements, incorporating aspects of dance/choreography and theatre/dramatic expression, from sonic art to physical gestures, and the amalgamation of these crafts to create multi-sensorial experiences for performers and audiences alike.

As art students confront the difficult transition from master–apprentice-style education to professional independent future pathways, my research provides a transdisciplinary provocation towards their identity creation. By using the multimodal learning experience of Musical-Gestural works, we move towards the establishment of a curious and proactive foundation for a sustainable artistic career. This presentation champions Artistic Research as a means for possibility creation especially for art students through celebrating the living, performing body, and the development of wonder through embodied practice.

Biography

Winnie Huang is a violinist, gestural performance artist, composer and artistic researcher. An active performer of new music, she continually works with young and established composers and regularly performs with international ensembles. Career highlights have included solo performances at the Berlin Philharmonie (DE), KKL Lucerne (CH), and the Elbphilharmonie (DE), among many international ensemble tours. Winnie's strong interest in the performance of musical-gestural pieces is explored frequently through her own original compositions and collaborating with other composers, developing highly gestural contemporary works. Winnie is a Schloss Solitude (DE) fellow in the field of 'Aural & Physical' and 'Artist étoile' for the Lucerne Festival (CH) in 2025.

Academically, Winnie has consistently taught, workshopped, and guest-lectured in Europe, Asia and Australia. She continues artistic research in the field of interdisciplinary musical-gestural performance and collaborative processes. After a few years as Junior Professor of Artistic Research at the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz Köln, Germany, Winnie now takes on a new position as Associate Professor for Research in Music Performance at the Conservatorio della Svizzera italiana, Ticino, Switzerland.

‘When Puppets Sing in Tehran’: Reconfiguring Iran’s ‘National’ Opera

Dr Michelle Assay, King’s College London and the University of Toronto

16:15–17:30 Wednesday 10 December 2025, Studio 8

An all-female *Carmen* for an all-female audience; Verdi’s *Lady Macbeth* as a puppet; the Queen of The Night ‘sung’ by five singers; these are some of the workarounds that Iranians have devised as they navigate gender politics and taboos on women’s public performance.

This paper examines opera as the genre best suited to epitomise the country’s historic apparently mutually exclusive quests: for global outreach and conservatism, for progress and tradition. Tracing the transformations of opera – from its introduction in the late 19th century as a part of the Royal fascination with the West to its crucial role in the Pahlavi dynasty’s aggressive Westernisation campaigns, to its disappearance after the 1979 Revolution and its resurrection as a ‘national’ art form – I introduce the concept of a new Iranian ‘opera’ in the shape of the recent phenomenon of **puppet operas**. This new ‘National Opera’, as its creators call it, brings together Iran’s *Ta’zieh*, the traditional passion plays with ancient Persian roots, Persian dastgah-based singing, and Western-style composition and orchestrations.

Drawing on historical sources, archives, and oral history, as well as historicising studies, this paper places the relatively new phenomenon of Iranian ‘opera’ within its politico-historical context: from 1960s ‘inter-imperiality’ through to the contested populism of post-‘Khomeinism’ in present-day Iran. I examine the emergence of this ‘opera’ within evolving gender politics and as means of surmounting the imposed restrictions on female solo singing, while assessing the ‘Nationalistic’ claims of its creators. In so doing, I argue that compared to pre-Revolutionary practice, the new Iranian ‘opera’ is more indigenous than Western, more democratic than elitist, and more accessible than exclusive, and as a result, potentially better suited to placing Iran as a major player in the Global musical scene.

Biography

Michelle Assay is a Marie Curie/UKRI Global Fellow at the Universities of Toronto and King’s College London, working on Women and Western Art Music in Iran (womusiran.com). Born and raised in Tehran, Assay trained as a pianist at Kyiv Conservatoire and later in Paris. She holds a PhD in musicology from the Sorbonne and University of Sheffield and has been a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of Huddersfield, working on ‘Shakespeare and Censorship in the Soviet Union’. She is the author of award-winning articles and chapters on Russian and Soviet music and on Shakespeare and music. Her forthcoming books include *Hamlet in the Stalin Era* (Routledge), and a co-authored life-and-works study of Jewish/Polish/Soviet composer Mieczysław Weinberg (Toccata Press). She is the founder of the Shakespeare and Music Study Group as well as the Music and Mental Health Group and has most recently launched a new Network for Global Western Art Music (in collaboration with Prof. Robin Elliott and colleagues at the University of Chicago). As a pianist she has featured in premiere performances of Weinberg song-cycles and in collaborations with the world-leading Quatuor Danel. She is a regular broadcaster for the BBC and is a critic and contributor for *Gramophone*, *International Piano*, *Bachtrack*, and *La Scena Musicale*.