

# ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2025

# ambition & quality

My name is Nathaniel Dye, and it is possible, maybe even likely, that my reputation precedes me as a music teacher.

It certainly takes a village of teachers to produce star musicians, but I'm proud to say that two members of the Ezra Collective have been through my stable. Right at the beginning of my career, I can't claim to have taught them much, but I've dined out on that association ever since I got over the shock of seeing them on TV.

Following a brief change of scenery, travelling the world with a plastic trombone and busking amp, I found my niche in the Primary classroom and haven't looked back, with notable success at Nelson Primary School in East London, which was not just nominated for but won the Music and Drama Education Award for 'Outstanding School Music Department' in 2023.

And like many a musician with a 'portfolio career', I've made music education into a hobby, conducting the East London-based community Brass Band - Pavilion Brass - and leading Newham Music's Jazz Collective. The latter has gone on to grace the stage of the Royal Albert Hall at the Music for Youth Proms and produced several students who have gone on to junior music colleges, with the bursaries that are generally required in our deprived corner of East London.

And if my reputation precedes me in other ways, you will know that the next part of my story is marked by tragedy. Because just as news of our award nomination came in, so did confirmation that I had been diagnosed with terminal bowel cancer. And (along with my senior leadership team) I held that trophy aloft following two rounds of chemotherapy, interrupted by major surgery.

Since diagnosis, around three years ago, I've achieved all sorts of accolades in recognition of all sorts of adventures, including an MBE in the 2025 New Year's Honours List. But I still consider my greatest achievement (and test of character) to be my return to teaching for a term in between cancer treatments.

It was quite something to win an award for the 'outstanding' nature of my primary school music department with just one dedicated music teacher (me!), supported by Peris, class teachers and SLT. But it's fair to say that this support for, and dedication to, music in the school had a lot to do with our success. At network meeting after network meeting, I heard colleagues cite 'lack of support', especially from SLT, as a barrier to success. Ok - I couldn't get away with presenting

rubbish performances at concerts. But I was under the eye of a head and deputy who don't just sing in a choir together but are also orchestral musicians. This dedication to music brought with it five choirs, an orchestral programme (completely subsidised, apart from a token deposit), and a workforce of class teachers willing to lead weekly singing assemblies.

So, by the time I came along, the first question was along the lines of 'what do I have to add here?!" But it turns out that I had plenty of ambition to bring to the table. It was like no one had told me I'd left secondary school and as a music specialist, I was able to add four different kinds of Whole Class Instrumental Tuition, projects, a whole year group band, play based EYFS programme, 50 strong orchestra, differentiated extracurricular ensembles, two rock bands and South Indian Music Programme, hosting an ensemble open to the whole borough.

Yes, there is a level of ambition, vision, and drive required not just to provide that kind of music, but also to do so well. But I would contest that it requires no more than the average Secondary Head of Department, who doesn't tend to last very long in post, without these qualities.

Nonetheless, it's true that this small East London primary school is still producing great things without me (retirement is all but done, bar the paperwork).

So, maybe a good measure of ambition and quality in music education is in the legacy. I certainly hope so. And, given my situation, I am often left wondering what our profession will look like going forward. So often, we talk about barriers: to learning, to teaching, to GCSEs, A Levels and Grade exams, to overall programme delivery, to music services, local authorities, or even now to MAT level. It's fair to say that we are all up against it - and for all sorts of reasons.

At a recent meeting, hosted by the ABRSM and involving several key decision makers, I was asked to provide some positivity to what had, thus far, been quite a bleak consensus - that funding was woefully inadequate for the delivery that every interest group and organisation was keen to deliver. When holding the purse strings, it's perfectly natural to see the financial barriers first and foremost, but what about the children, the teachers and the music being made?

Well...I'm afraid to report that I really struggled with this and still do. There are, of course, amazing success stories throughout music education. Whatever roles we take on, I'm of the opinion that we're all engaged in the same job: to break down barriers to opportunity. As a student, I was fortunate to take advantage of everything a music service offers. And as a teacher, I've been fortunate enough to help provide musical opportunities to students who wouldn't otherwise have had them. How gratifying is that?!

But this will never be enough. Because when providing opportunities for all, some incredibly difficult choices need to be made. Especially in the current climate, where doubling all available and imaginable resources wouldn't be enough, we unfortunately must choose which opportunities to provide. And who to provide them to first?

The recent curriculum review indicates a clear priority, with its focus on the Classical tradition. Yes - this is always important and always will be. But surely, we can all agree that there is more to music than Bach, Beethoven and Bruckner, no matter how engaging we can make our schemes of work.

Likewise with reading Western Notation. We've always made a case for the value in this, and probably always will. But as far as I'm concerned, there is a good deal of value in developing aural abilities beyond the page - be that in close collaboration, harmonic imagination, or simply

acknowledging that it is more than possible to be a brilliant musician without taking any steps at all towards learning a centuries-old abstract language, much of it as dead as Latin.

The curriculum review cites a problem at the heart of our education system - one that a 15-minute talk can't go far in addressing but desperately needs to be acknowledged. That of instrumental tuition. It should go without saying that 1:1 lessons will almost always result in more progress than, say, 1:5 or in whole classes. It is the prime example of 'doing music' as an activity to engage in and tick off, especially at the Primary level.

How many ukulele ensembles are active in the UK, let alone being financially viable?! How many students continue to learn an instrument after a couple of terms of whole-class violin or trumpet? And if, by some absolute miracle, a lucky few find themselves in a Primary school with well-thought-out progression routes, how many of those we teach - without the support of a nice elitist prep school or middle-class upbringing - will even present themselves to their Year 7 music teacher as having learned the cello, say from Year 4? No wonder so many instruments are now classed as endangered species - how many secondary schools, let alone music services, have a spare 3/4 size cello sitting around?

Likewise, with the transition to Key Stage Four: What, exactly, is Key Stage Three for? It's statutory, after all and our colleagues in Drama and Dance would dearly love to have their subjects stand alone in the National Curriculum. Is it to inspire and enthuse a significant proportion of students towards further study? To equip every student (within reason) with the knowledge, skills, understanding, abilities and commitment to be able to take music at GCSE? I'd hope for both, but how often do we come across music departments going through the motions with 'difficult' Year 9 classes that don't really provide anything for anyone present?

I haven't taught Year 9 for a while, but the transition from Key Stage 2 to 3 breaks my heart. This is to the point that I'd spend hours in the summer term talking to all the secondary Heads of Department I could and, sometimes literally, singing the praises of the brilliant young musicians that they would be welcoming into the next Academic year. For a few whom I simply couldn't imagine giving up on, I made it my business to find them scholarships. I promise you that this is worth it. Some of these students have gone on to perform concertos and all sorts.

But not every student can expect that kind of support.

When I asked a young but very ambitious Secondary Head of Department about barriers and opportunities in music education, I received an answer that certainly caused me to stop and think:

'We are working in a postcode lottery, and it's all very much luck-based in terms of ending up with the teachers and schools that care. How can we advance [our practice] to ensure that all students get those opportunities?'

We can't be the only two music teachers who place the vocational aspects of our profession above such vitally important qualities as sheer effort, subject knowledge, accumulated musical and pedagogical skills, or leadership. I very much doubt I'm talking to anyone here who doesn't care about providing the very best musical opportunities for all our young people all the time. We have a limitless supply of ambition already!

But how to achieve that holy grail of varied enough opportunities, without spreading ourselves too thinly? A less formal way to describe my job is that I aim to make all my students feel like rock stars, perhaps not always literally, but definitely left in no doubt that they are musical and

belong as musicians. After all, not everyone can be captain of the football team. Some of us can gain the power, purely through the manipulation of sound waves, to make people really feel something. That is magic. It's extraordinary, invigorating, tragic and just plain life-affirming.

That is the quality of music we must aim to produce, not just as musicians, but as music educators. Our students are in the privileged position of not only learning about music but also being musicians in their own right. How can we achieve high-quality musical outcomes for our students? By providing opportunities for them to be musical through formal and informal learning.

By letting the teacher's ego take a back seat and choosing when to intervene, we can ensure that what we see from our students on stage is the genuine article, not an academic imitation. It's why no rehearsal of mine will ever remotely resemble a lesson. Because if I have any secret to this gig, it's to make it real...providing genuine musical experiences that students can be proud of.

The coffers are dry, and our national teacher shortage runs into the thousands. No amount of rearranged policy from curriculum reviews can paper over those cracks.

But if we continue with the simple aim of producing future musicians, we will have done our part.

No, one teacher alone can't change the world, but I am certain there is value in changing even a tiny part of it.