Make Your Mark: Notes on Music Education

Episode 4: Neurodiversity Transcript

[Intro music]

Yusef Sacoor: Hello! You're listening to 'Make Your Mark: Notes on Music Education', a Music Mark podcast where we discuss inspiring projects, hot topics, and key challenges circulating around music-based work with young people. And if you're enjoying the intro, outro and transition music for this episode, make a note that it's from Able Orchestra, a youth ensemble and musical project allowing music-making on equal terms, specifically supporting those who are neurodivergent and people with disabilities.

Welcome to episode four of Make Your Mark: Notes on Music Education. I'm Yusef.

Emma Cragg: And I'm Emma!

Yusef Sacoor: And we'll be your hosts for this episode. Today, we're diving into the topic of neurodiversity.

Emma Cragg: We're joined by Catrina Lowri, founder of Neuroteachers, Clair Mccoll, Music Mark Trustee and Music Hub Manager for Octagon Music Hub, and Danya Rushton, a current student at the Royal College of Music.

Yusef Sacoor: Our guests will share their personal experiences with neurodiversity, exploring how neurodivergence impacts their musical learning and others. We'll discuss how teachers can better support neurodivergent students by listening and responding to their needs.

Emma Cragg: The conversation raises an important question: despite increasing awareness of neurodiversity, are changes happening as quickly and meaningfully as they should be?

Yusef Sacoor: We hope you enjoy this discussion, and as usual, you'll also find plenty of resources to help you learn more.

Emma Cragg: Hello and welcome! Today, we're going to be talking about neurodiversity in music education, talking about how neurodiversity can affect young people and how we can make sure music educators can be supporting them as best as possible. So, before we dive into the episode, I'd like to ask our guests today to give a quick introduction to who you are and what it is that you do?

Clair McColl: Hello, yes, I'm Clair McColl. I'm a trustee with Music Mark, but I work currently as the hub manager for the Octogan Music Hub for Dorset and Somerset.

Emma Cragg: Great, thank you. It's great to have you with us. Catrina, can I come to you next?

Catrina Lowri: Yes, my name is Catrina Lowri. I am a neurodivergent teacher. So I have a diagnosis of bipolar and dyslexia and I have recognised traits of ADHD, dyspraxia and auditory processing disorder. I come from a teaching background, and I am the director and founder of Neuroteachers and we work with nurseries, schools, colleges and businesses to improve inclusion for neurodivergent people.

Emma Cragg: Amazing, thank you. It's so good to have you here with us today. And last but not least, Danya, can I ask you to introduce yourself?

Danya Rushton: Hi, my name is Danya and my pronouns are she/her. A bit about my background. I was born and raised in London. None of my family are musicians, but I've always enjoyed going to the theatre and have always loved singing. I started learning the violin when I was eight years old, and I got the opportunity to have a few short group lessons learning the viola because the orchestra was short of them. And after my first lesson, I remember going home and saying I preferred it to the violin. I then began having singing lessons as well. I then went on to attend the Junior Royal Academy of Music and the Purcell School of Music, and I was also part of the National Youth Orchestra for four years. And now I'm currently studying at the Royal College of Music as a viola player and a second study singer.

My connection to Music Mark is that I'm part of the This Is Not A Rehearsal Steering Group, which focuses on raising awareness on the climate crisis and sustainability and how it affects music education. I've also been part of the ABRSM Youth Advisory Board for the last two years, where we learn and discuss how to make taking exams and music education overall more accessible to everyone. And from the start of this year, I've also become an ambassador for the Benedetti Foundation which focuses on building an inclusive, fun and creative space in music education.

Yusef Sacoor: That's amazing. Thank you guys. And thank you, Danya, that's an incredible CV that you've got! And it actually kind of leads nicely onto our first question really, which is, what's your relationship with neurodiversity? And what do you think the impact has been on your own music education journey? So, I'm going to ping that straight back to you, Danya, if you'd like to answer that question.

Danya Rushton: So I was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder in my first year of secondary school, and that was after having a really challenging experience of primary school, I found primary school so challenging. And throughout secondary school, I continued to find things challenging. And actually I had an EHCP put in place for when I was in sixth form. And in year 12, I was also diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. So even now my profile continues to impact my experiences in music education. But that's why I'm really delighted to be here today to talk about it and explore the ways which we can make education more, music education more accessible.

Yusef Sacoor: Thank you. And I think I'd ask the same to Clair really, what's your, what's your journey? Obviously you had a much later diagnosis, but you probably realised that it probably already had an impact on you both personally and in your professional life and who you work with.

Clair McColl: Yeah, I mean it has been so interesting. I think it's interesting with this question, my relationship to neurodiversity. It's like, well, I didn't have a clue what it was in any way whatsoever until sort of 2019/2020, or just in my own case, my son had been struggling with his transition going to university. And then by coincidence, my husband, who's a nurse prescriber,

he's like an advanced mental health practitioner, got a job with the ADHD service in Devon. And I often think if he had not decided to go for that job, how very different my journey would have been, necause I can't think why I would have discovered that. But perhaps, basically, I think I discovered this just before there was an enormous increase during the pandemic with people realising they were experiencing difficulties. And I think, I suppose, what could be analogous with my son's experience of going to university and me being stuck at home during lockdown is that all of the external scaffolding and systems that helped keep us on track were removed. And I think, you know, as a layman's theory, I think that's partly why we've seen such an increase in awareness since the pandemic, because all those train tracks that we all go along were removed and we had to fend for ourselves. And that's where a number of people realised that they were struggling.

So, I mean in terms of how it's impacted my music education, I have a very non-traditional background and I don't have any grade exams, I don't have a GCSE or A-level in music. And I think, now I can look back and say, well, being able to go home and do self-motivated, self-directed practice, for a learning goal that was probably quite frankly a bit arbitrary to me, and I didn't understand what these dots and squiggles, what relationship that bore to my own musicality and my own love of music... Those two things just seemed in different spheres, but now I can look back with a very different perspective. So I'd say, recalibration is a word I use a lot, where as a 41-year-old, to look back at their whole education and particularly their music education you just reassess it through a different lens with the knowledge that we have now. And I suppose I feel quite passionate about advocating for the music education sector as a whole to do that. I think a bit of recalibration, reorganisation is required in order to make sure it can be more accessible for more young people.

Yusef Sacoor: And I'm sure we'll get onto the advocacy work and effective ways of helping. But yes, we'll finally go onto Catrina.

Catrina Lowri: Right, yes. So as I say, I have five different neurodivergent conditions. So, I was first diagnosed with dyslexia, which is probably the one that affected my education the most simply because I'm, I'm turning 50 this year, so I was educated during the 80s and 90s. And the word stigma doesn't even go far enough to describe how bad it was to suddenly have this big brown envelope from an educational psychologist at the age of nine and then immediately be sent to what they used to call the remedial class, which was down the bottom of the school field. So, I desperately wanted to learn music. It was always around me. My dad was an amazing hobby musician, you know, guitar at grade eight, classical, he could pretty much pick up any instrument he wanted to, and I desperately wanted to be able to be good at it. And at that time, cause I was living in a borough of London, there was free funding to be able to learn a musical instrument, but you had to audition to do it. And I auditioned for pretty much every single musical instrument there was and never got through to it because I couldn't really follow what I was supposed to do in the audition. Eventually, I did manage to get through and learn the cello, but I never got past grade one. And actually, my younger brother, who's neurotypical, we had a school orchestra, and I was in year six in third cello, there were three cellos, and my brother, who was two years young below me, was first cello. Right. So as you can imagine, there was an awful lot of shame and humiliation involved in the fact that, basically, what I didn't understand was... You know, like you were saying previously, Clair, about the squiggles and all that kind of stuff, I didn't know they were meant to be the things I was supposed to do with my fingers. Nobody actually told me that. Had they, then it probably would have made quite a big difference and I might have been able to learn it. But I've always felt like I have music in me, but I am not

naturally a musical person. I, maybe I am, but I've never really been given the opportunity and I've subsequently been diagnosed with another four neurodivergent conditions, which means that I haven't had the opportunity to do that, though as a teacher, I've always seen the importance of learning music and I actually think it could be hugely beneficial to neurodivergent people if it were taught in the right way, to be honest, which hopefully it is more now because the fact that there's this podcast is raising awareness, isn't it?

Emma Cragg: Thank you so much for sharing that. I think that's a really interesting point. So, as you've kind of mentioned, it might be that neurodiverse students might interact with music lessons and music teaching differently to neurotypical students. So what differences are there that music educators should be aware of, and how can we make sure that music educators are supporting those neurodiverse students?

Catrina Lowri: Yes, thank you, actually. I'm really interested in answering this question. Like I said, I always feel like I've been music adjacent. My husband is neurodivergent and he's got a music degree and he's a qualified music teacher. I think for him, it was massively important throughout his development. And I've seen how beneficial this can be. So, what I'm quite interested in is just to talk about different ages and stages.

In early years, there's a lot of evidence to say that teaching music is very good for teaching executive function and self-regulatory skills, which are hugely important for all children, but massively important if you are neurodivergent to get those executive function skills, to understand the cause and effect, to understand turn taking, etc. Music is a really great, engaging way of getting in. So I think from the preschool perspective, it would be a great kind of intervention to help neurodivergent children hone those skills. In primary, I've seen it used amazingly for teaching literacy, thinking like syllabisation in English, and for example, actually there's a lot you can do teaching phonics through song lyrics, et cetera, and rhyming. It just come naturally when it comes to teaching music. Equally, things like rhythm, time signature, et cetera, very good for teaching numeracy, things like even fractions, et cetera, become part of it. And that is a great way in for neurodivergent children who may experience the world in quite a different way. And then at secondary, when children go through puberty, it's a fantastic way to express yourself and particularly children who may find it more difficult, because they're, they're still experiencing the full range of emotions, but their experience of emotions is not typical. It's a great way to be able to express what's going on for you and those really massive emotional and neurological developments that go on during puberty, I think it has a lot to offer. Like I said, I didn't have the best journey with music, but I don't hold it against music, let's just say! And I just felt like it was quite important in answering that question to talk about the strengths and the great things about it rather than thinking at it from a sort of barriers point of view.

Emma Cragg: Yeah, thank you. I think that's really, really interesting, considering how music can be there to support young people who might be struggling with some things, supporting their development in different ways and aspects of learning. So, thank you. Now, Clair or Danya, do either of you have anything on that that you'd like to come in with? I can see you both nodding ferociously!

Clair McColl: I was going to say go ahead, Danya! But yeah, that's the other thing, I better say the thing before I forget the thing! A classic executive dysfunction element... I think, to follow on from what Catrina was saying, because I think I like the way you responded because you're talking about how music is a tool and a vehicle. But what you've just described isn't the typical perception of what a music education class is, or certainly the formal instrumental tuition.

And I suppose my only answer to the question, basically it's that neurodivergent people are not one big group. So my only response is, well, you need to speak to the individual, and see what their challenges are, what their barriers are. Because like you say, there's several, what, six or eight conditions that fall under that banner of being non-neurotypical. And each individual will have a different mix. I keep using an analogy like a mixing desk, to use a musical analogy. Like I might be like 50% ADHD, but I reckon I'm like 10, 15 % autistic and a little bit dyspraxic because I bump into stuff enough to know that, maybe just a smidge. But dyslexia and dyscalculia haven't really been something that have impacted me, I think. So I think my slides would be right down. So, there just isn't, even if we just took ADHD, there just isn't one typical response for an ADHD person. And they're going to have had a very different relationship with their condition. It's going to have held them back or made them fly in various contexts and settings to different degrees. And that is going to be different for every single individual. So because I didn't want to email and go, “You know, I don't think that's a good question actually.” It's about opening up this discussion where there just isn't a thing. It's about the individual in front of you. And that could be, that would be the same answer for lots of other conditions that are nothing to do with neurodiversity. It could just be what they're going through. I think our language around all these conditions is really negative. I don't feel, well, I say I do feel disordered, but that's another story. It's like, I don't feel less than. But all the language around it really does just reinforce that. You know, tnd that's the whole idea of the social model of disability is, there is a perception that we're the problem, but we're not, the system is the problem. This is how my brain came out from day one. So yeah, whilst I think things are so, so, so much better, there is a huge distance to go. I think we are absolutely at the start of this journey. But like you say, how positive that there's so much more conversation and awareness around it all now.

Yusef Sacoor: For sure, and I think that what you're picking up there is really interesting. Just off the back of what Catrina was saying with the barriers that you faced getting into music as a young person and I was wondering with you, Danya, why music? What happened for you that made it work for you and made you get to where you are today? What drove that and how did people facilitate your journey?

Danya Rushton: Before I properly answer, I want to say everything I'm gonna say, I'm gonna share today, it's based on my personal experience and what's worked and what hasn't worked for me personally. First of all, first of all, I completely agree. It looks really different for other people and it's important for music educators to recognise that, so for example, autism is a spectrum. So that means there's no single approach that's going to work for everyone with that diagnosis. So, what's helpful for me might be completely overwhelming and unhelpful for someone else. So that's why I think something that's important is taking the time to understand each individual's needs. So ideally this would be based on guidance from professionals and their recommendations, like those from diagnostic reports or EHCPs where relevant. And it's really not about lowering standards or making excuses. It's about giving neurodivergent students the right conditions to thrive. So the thing, I think the first thing I want to say is that, again, from my experience, music educators need to have an awareness of neurodivergence and accept that it is a genuine diagnosis rather than a temporary phase that a student can work around or will eventually grow out of. So, educators need to be made aware of the students with individual profiles and what challenges they personally are going to have. And I mention that because of the number of times I've found myself in a place where it felt very anti-neurodivergent.

So I've even done auditions where the panel were not made aware of my needs. So not only were the reasonable adjustments not put in place, but I actually received some accidentally discriminatory feedback on things that I couldn't even help because they had judged me as a neurotypical person. And okay, another thing, sounds obvious... If you are sent information about students in advance, please read it and if you're likely to forget things then please make a note of it because I've had situations where, you know, teachers have maybe forgotten or not read it and then it puts me in a really uncomfortable position when I'm in say a classroom setting. And then secondly, I'd say make sure you fully understand the different forms of neurodivergence. And perhaps the biggest thing I'd say is learn that reasonable adjustments are in no way giving the student an advantage over others.

From my own experiences, I've asked for some reasonable adjustments on tasks, that on their own would put me at a disadvantage to others, but my requests have been declined, with the reason being because it is then unfair to other students or that it puts you, meaning me, at an advantage. And it's really infuriating because by not making adjustments for people with neurodivergence, it's putting neurotypicals at an advantage. And my advice for people who are not neurodiverse, who are dealing with neurodivergent individuals, do not assume or act like you know them better than they know themselves. In my experience, some teachers have habits of thinking that they have plenty of experience, so therefore they know what they're doing and often compare another student they've had to another and then expect the same methods are going to work with them. And although I know people mean well when they say just wait and take your time with things, when a neurodivergent person has expressed that they are going to really struggle to do something, that is the point where staff or educators need to put some sort of adjustment in place. So like for me, one of the challenges I've faced is not being able to form a chamber group because it's something that, it's so student-led. So it's very much reliant on friends you have. So for someone like me who doesn't really have friends and actually can't make them and really struggles to talk to people at all, it feels, it feels really hopeless, especially when I'm being left on my own to sort it. And in situations similar to that, from the perspective of someone who struggles when having to chat to people or to work in groups, I'd really encourage educators that if they want their students to work in pairs or groups at any point, allocate those groups yourself. Because for anyone, regardless of actually whether they're neurodivergent, anyone who struggles to make friends or talk to people, the line we dread hearing is, “Okay, get into groups of, insert the blank”, because that's when we know that we're yet again going to be the last one standing around hoping someone comes over to us, and a lot of the time never happened. And honestly, that feeling of embarrassment and that we want the ground just to swallow us, it never goes.

Emma Cragg: Thank you so much for sharing that, Danya. And I'm really sorry to hear about some of these barriers that you are still facing and things that are still happening, that are making that difficult. Clair, is there something you'd like to add?

Clair McColl: I think it's just reflections on some of the things Danya was saying there. Because the two things I've written down is, one is just judgement and competition. It's almost just a reflection on our sector as a whole. It's a, it’s a big part of that. I just thought at the start of what Danya was saying about, oh you know, you're disadvantaged or advantaged. And it is just that thing of when you look at it in the round, I'm not for a moment saying that auditions and all the rest of it shouldn't happen and that there is, there is a place for that hierarchy. However, if it's always there, for one, it just seems so unnecessary. It just feels like there's a particular emphasis on the sort of scrutiny and competition and judgement of young musicians. And when

that's happening without an awareness and good, you know, really very solid knowledge of all these things we're talking about, that is deeply unfair and discriminatory. There are some elements that really are so broken, you're not quite sure how, like it really would mean dismantling the whole system in order to actually make it fair. But it's recognising that all these systems and structures, there are, you know, these are power units and there are hierarchies and there are forces working against those who are disadvantaged from being successful. And some elements of that as a sector, we really, really could do something about. But I'm talking about really quite big, radical change there. Whereas I think we're still very much at the stage of let's try and make sure that all the teachers that are actually in front of some young people are better informed and know about the right language and the right accommodations. But there is a much, much bigger thing.

Like, there is something that I've heard a number of late diagnosis people talk about, which is that they grew up believing that the fact that they were disorganised or that they were late or however that presented, they grew up believing that that made them a failure, like a moral failure. They are less, they are less of a good person than all those other people. And when that's reinforced day in, day out and that you're having to adapt and accept that day in, day out, you're simply not going to have, you know, how is your talent going to flourish when you're dealing with that? So, it's like there are massive societal things and music education things before we get to a place where everyone is actually on a level playing field and they can actually put their energy into their composition, their work, their talent, rather than just coping generally.

Catrina Lowri: Yeah, I mean, what it is, is fundamentally, we're all neurodivergent and we're all articulate, educated women who are able to advocate for ourselves. If you had somebody who either wasn't that articulate because of their neurodivergent need, like say if they had developmental language delay, and they found it really difficult to express themselves, you know, or verbal dyspraxia, so they weren't able to get the words out of that particular moment, then they might've played the music perfectly well, but they can't answer questions about it, for example, because they were put on the spot and they weren't prepared previously. Or if you had somebody who, maybe had the extra intersectionality of not coming from a more educated background, so wasn't used to even questioning authority, plus put neurodivergence on top of that, plus put on the fact that, we do tend to be quite rulesy, not to homogenise Clair, but you know, neurodivergent people do like a boundary! Then I can really see how that would be a massive disadvantage. And one of the problems that I come across, you know, as being a remote business, I'm a teacher, I got a master's degree and I get assumed competence quite a lot. They assume that you're a certain level of competence. So I can stand and talk about neurodivergence in front of 600 people no problem at all, but ask me to fill in a form and I will go to bits. And there's a not understanding, but you can do this so why can't you do that? And I can see how that would be a big problem in terms of musicians, especially if, as you're saying there's that many barriers. So what I personally do is I have like a passport basically. So if I go and work with someone, they have a one-page profile on me saying what my needs are. It gets sent out by my PA before I go somewhere so that they know, you know, don't give me any surprise forms. I don't do any physical handwriting. If you need me to read something, it has to be given to me in advance. I need a quiet room to have my lunch in, those kinds of things, just basic stuff. And that helps an awful lot. And I just wondered, Danya and Clair might be able to comment on this, whether that's something that would be useful for particularly young musicians coming through.

Danya Rushton: Definitely that is so useful. Actually being able to have those adaptations that we need would be so good because I often will say, is there a quiet space and a lot of the time there isn't. But yeah, it definitely would be helpful to have that.

Yusef Sacoor: There's something really interesting in what you're saying, Danya, and what you actually said in your previous answer, and that you still seem to face an awful lot of people essentially ignoring your stated needs.

[Transition music]

Yusef Sacoor: What has got better since your time in education and what feels like it's stayed the same?

Catrina Lowri: I think it's good idea for me to answer first, because I'm like super old and I've seen it all! No, really, in all seriousness. There are, there's a lot of good things in so far as people are aware. We had Autism Awareness Week and everyone felt terribly aware of the fact that there was autism, which was lovely. I'm sorry, I don't mean to be facetious about it, it's just, I know it's acceptance and everything like that, but in some ways, there's a little bit of virtue signaling and flag waving that goes on with these, these sorts of awareness days, etc. And I just feel like really inclusion is not the caboose that's added on to the end of the train, it should be running through everything, it's the passengers. And we should be getting to that stage now, and sometimes I get a bit tired, particularly when it's the end of term when I'm explaining quite basic things.

Again, what has improved? I would say since I set up Neuroteachers, which was five years ago, nobody really knew the word neurodiversity. I was having to spend a lot of time explaining what that meant, that it was different kinds of minds and brains. Now people do know what it means, but they think it's newfangled. And they also think that, you know, "Oh my goodness, it's so massively overdiagnosed, you've only got to read the back of a cereal packet and you get a diagnosis these days", which is ridiculous because, as we can attest, I didn't get my ADHD diagnosis - and it's not a full diagnosis, I've just got recognised traits - and I only got that last year. And bear in mind, I'm a neurodiversity specialist. I knew I was ADHD for at least 12 years. It took me five years to even go forward for a diagnosis, to kind of psych myself up to it, and then it took me several years to even get in front of a psychiatrist, and even then she said, "Well, you can't have the full diagnosis because you have bipolar", because they commonly co-occur. So we wouldn't know which was the bipolar and which was the ADHD. So that's really fun. So I think that there's a lot more awareness. There are people who think that they know what reasonable adjustments are. But as Danya was saying, there will be people who make assumptions, that because they have previously taught a child who is dyslexic and they used yellow paper,so what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna photocopy everything onto yellow paper. Or people will cross the room to tell me, "Oh are you dyslexic? Use coloured overlays." And I don't have visual stress or Irlen syndrome, so it's not going to work for me. So people will make assumptions that, "Oh, I taught an autistic child last year and they needed ear defenders when we were out of the practice room, so therefore they'll need ear defenders too." It is very individualised. So really, if you want to know how somebody needs to be supported, ask them or ask those who know them the best, and that would be ordinarily the parents or carers.

So we've come a certain way. But I think because now it's out there and people know about it, people assume that it's a newfangled fad, and I get told all the time that it's fashionable. And I go, "Oh wow, I'm bang on trend! That's so lovely, oh my goodness, go me!". But without being

facetious about it, with autism, ADHD and other neurodivergent conditions, we were always there. We just didn't have a word for what we were. And we weren't diagnosed. And, you know, in certain parts of the world, like for example, in Egypt, there's only three psychiatrists. So your chances of getting a neurodivergence diagnosis are very small because there's no one there to diagnose it. So, the figures still look ridiculously skewed, but actually the number of people is 20% as it always has been. So there's, there's a lot of assumptions that go on. But I do think things have improved a smidge, but there's quite a long way to go.

Yusef Sacoor: Thank you, Catrina, and be facetious all you want, I was really enjoying it! And yeah, it does very much seem like the left-handed graph from when they stopped forcing people not to be left-handed. Clair, did you have anything to add on that? And maybe from a personal perspective as well, what's improved? And also, as someone working specifically in music education, how are you treated as a staff member, not only how do you see people working with young people?

Clair McColl: It's a tricky one because even though, you know, I do the job that I do, but I am mainly shackled to my laptop, sometimes in my shed, sometimes in the office. So I am not out there on the front line, and I haven't tried to learn music since I was about 11 really, so I think I'm the first to say despite everything and despite being here, I just don't consider myself an expert in this thing because I don't really know what it's like for kids out there. I agree with so much of what Catrina was raising because there's the societal problem first, before we even get into the specifics of music and musical learning, there is the fact, like you say, there's so much cynicism. I heard someone say, "Oh, it's all because of the phones", et cetera. I'm far more concerned about the fact that it's believed somewhere about 25% of the UK prison population is believed to have ADHD, if you think about the emotional volatility and impulsive behaviour that can no doubt end up with people, in criminal, prosecutory proceedings and everything, that's a bigger problem. I'm heartbroken at the loss of talent and potential when you're addressing things like that. Never mind, can we cope in an exam or an audition to go to the Guildhall? This is such a widespread societal problem, and as you say, we have always been here. If you think about ADHD, it's something in the sort of 2 - 4 % area. But like you say, neurodivergent conditions overall is about 20%. Yet it is so, so, so still misunderstood.

I just can only repeat that I think we're absolutely at the very, very, very start of this journey. I just wouldn't say for a moment, "Hey, everyone, it's fine. We're sorted! Call in the gang." We are literally at the stage of, you know, if you compare it to feminism, it's like going, "Hey, do you know that women exist? Did you know that?!" Brilliant. There's then a huge number of steps before we get to equality, acceptance, and neurodivergent people not having to work harder and jump through more hoops, and bend and twist and shape themselves in order to conform.

I think there's something in that traditional formal perception of what music education is, where a person has to be able to squeeze themselves into that particular sausage machine. And if you can, if you are the kind of person that can fit through this template, then you can succeed and go on to the next stage. And that's what's wrong with this, in my mind, is the system and how we make people conform in order to achieve musically. When in fact you could change the system, or be far more open and have far more diverse pathways, so that people would be able to go through the template that was right for them, without having to mask or, you know, experience enormous anxiety or just the labour. There is a huge amount of additional emotional and mental labour that many young people are having to do in order to meet the very set rigid expectation in some cases. So, the solution to that could be many, many things. I praise everyone for the effort everyone is making, but there is so much further to go. I can't be too celebratory about it

Danya Rushton: Yeah, it still has a very long way to go. And at least there is slightly more awareness of neurodiversity. So that has led to some changes in how musical activities or lessons are carried out. I think in terms of what's better now, there are more schemes for people with a disadvantaged background, which gives people with neurodiversity an opportunity to participate in things that they wouldn't have felt welcome to attending previously, in hopefully a more inclusive environment. There is some development in access arrangements in terms of being flexible towards, for example, removing certain standard requirements. So for me, that would mean removing memorisation and making the panel aware of stimming which can affect movement in performance. And I think because of this, examiners and educators need to be able to see past a performance being good just because it's technically accurate and because it's memorised. And I think there is more training available for educators to understand how to best support neurodivergent learners. And, emphasising having different and flexible teaching methods rather than just expecting the student to fit your one and only method. And, I think for me what's been a significant change is that people are starting to recognise that not every musician learns or communicates in the same way, and there's more willingness to have conversations about things like access needs, sensory sensitivities and challenges. But being completely honest, I feel that a lot of the change has been quite surface level or just inconsistent generally. Like there's genuine understanding and flexibility from some people overall, but it really still feels like you're expected to just fit in with how things have always been done. And, for me personally I feel that I've had to advocate for myself just to be included in the same way as everyone else. So yeah, things are changing but real progress I think will only happen when individual needs are recognised without the judgement and when support is built in rather than something you've got to fight for yourself.

Emma Cragg: Thank you, Danya. It's really interesting hearing each of your perspectives on this and talking about your experiences. As a neurotypical person, I perceive discussions about neurodiversity that are happening and I wonder if seeing that rise in awareness, as someone who's neurotypical, makes me assume that more adjustments are being put in place and being met. So then to hear from each of you how they actually just aren't being met and this change isn't happening. It's just really interesting to hear that and to hear about the surface level nature of the discussions are going on. So thank you for sharing that.

Catrina Lowri: I think the phrase that kind of stood out from what both Clair and Danya said was fitting in, right. So, I don't know whether you're familiar with the American researcher, Brené Brown, but one of the things that she talks about, she talks about shame and empathy. And I think shame and empathy are very important when it comes to understanding neurodivergence and self-advocacy, but also allyship in general. So, fitting in is the opposite of belonging. And one of the amazing things that the arts and music specifically can do is to give you a sense of belonging and to give you an attachment to your own particular culture or a movement or, you know, a genre, et cetera, and it can really speak to you and give you a sense of belonging. Whereas what is being described here is that there's this need to fit into a, I think Clair even talked about moulds. And that's the opposite of belonging. So what we want is for children and for the next generation to feel that regardless of who you are and how you show up, you belong. And I totally agree with what, both of my colleagues on the panel were saying that we need to be moving towards that sense of belonging.

Clair McColl: Just to follow on from that point, and again, it's not to go on about my own thing. I discovered I had ADHD at the same time that I took on my first senior leadership role and was a manager. And just to use it as a different analogy, we simply have expectations of what people in

that role will be like. Even just in the last few weeks after five years, I'm still saying, “Ah, no, see, I can't do that straight away, and I need to do that differently, and we need to have a different dynamic.” Like I'm in charge, don't get me wrong. However, I'm going to need some help. If something's not clear, I need to ask colleagues to ask clarifying questions. I think there are a huge number of people in our lives, all five of us could say “Oh they were slightly unpleasant” and we might have a name for them in our head, I won't repeat, you know, and then you look back and go do you know what they could have been struggling, they could have been anxious, maybe that person was on the autistic spectrum and I had no idea, they had no idea. You know, I'm really conscious that we just have all these expectations and like you say a fixed idea of how other people, other human beings with certain titles or roles in our lives are going to behave and respond. And so this awareness of neuro -, it’s just so much bigger than just, “Oh, now we know neurodivergence is a thing.” It's really like all of our brains are so different. And at some point, there was a sorting hat process took place, that said that these people are rubbish and don't rely on them, and it's that bit that's unfair. It's really about... this is where my ADHD brain goes, where did I start this sentence?! But yeah, it's just really about understanding all of our expectations of people that we interact with, and us having a preconceived idea of what that means and then being shocked or surprised when it's different. Because I couldn't agree more about belonging. You know, that's one of the values within the local authorities I work for. And to me, feel like music and engagement with music in a way that suits the young person is almost, you don't have to make any effort. You know, it’s like it's such a quick thing. Supporting young people, to show that you care about what they care about, is such an incredibly powerful dynamic. And music can be such a shortcut to doing that, but so many of our musical systems don't work that way.

I just know that I spent my whole career until 2019 thinking, “Well, I can't be a head of that. I'm not going to get that job because I didn't go to the Guildhall and I don't have grade eight.” But what I can say is I've become emboldened since doing this role that now actually the experience that I have had actually makes me rather well qualified to be working in this field at this time. You know, when this conversation is happening. Because up to that point, I've had colleagues say it to me, they're like, “What you? Head of Service? What, really?”. Because I didn't have all these certificates, but we've tricked ourselves into thinking that was the important thing. And I think dismantling those preconceptions will enable many, many, many more thousands of young people to feel successful in music and be able to take those next steps, once they realise, and once we hurry up with developing more inclusive and progressive pathways for all different types of music maker. I think then we'll see this thriving, thriving sector, whereas I do feel like we're making it harder and harder for some young people to engage and be successful in music.

Emma Cragg: Thank you so much, everyone, for sharing, it's really important to hear about each of your lived experiences and how that is impacting your everyday lives, so thank you.

[Transition music]

Emma Cragg: I think it would be really interesting to talk about some resources for those listening who are either currently working as music educators and would like to be supporting their students who are neurodiverse better. And also maybe some more general resources for people who are just interested in learning and understanding more about neurodiversity.

Catrina Lowri: Sure, well I think one of the best places to go is to look for people who have lived experience. So I mean it's really great if you're listening to this podcast already because you know you've got three of us on the panel who have lived experience. It's great to hear from

Danya as well who's going through the education process at the moment with music. So the first resource I would say is your students and their families. Because if you don't know how someone would like to be spoken to or about or supported, then ask them is probably the easiest thing to do. And the next, if you're going to go for looking at resources, I obviously will direct you to my own! So I'm on social media, I have lots of videos, blogs, et cetera, I'm @Neuroteachers on pretty much all platforms apart from Twitter, because it's disgusting. But you can look me up and I have lots of videos on that. Not specifically about educating music, but they are about education generally, and I do talk about things like the sensory system sounds, noise sensitivity, other sensory things that may affect music and also, classroom management, behaviour, differentiation, et cetera. So you can certainly go to that.

But in terms of books that I think would be really useful, if you wanted to get a better understanding about the lived experience of autism, there's a really great book by Pete Wharmby, who's a former English teacher and autistic advocate, it's called Untypical, and it's about his lived experience as an autistic person. And he also talks to a lot of other autistic people in there. I would personally recommend the audiobook because, you know, as a dyslexic person, that's how I like to read. And, but I think because it's, it's narrated from his perspective, that would be a really great one. There's another book that's just come out, I've not listened to it yet in full, but I've just seen synopses and so on, it's just come out. It's called The SEN-Betweeners, which is about those children who are too able for most special school settings, if you see what I mean, in terms of, they would be able to do GCSEs and formal qualifications in music, for example, but at the same time can't cope with the mainstream system because they're finding it really stressful. So that would be another really great resource to look at. And again, the author of that is autistic herself and she has two autistic children. But I think anything that you look for that has the lived experiences of a neurodivergent person would be the best place to start. Alternatively, also, looking at large charitable organisations, which may have resources on their website, such as the National Autistic Society, the ADHD Foundation, British Dyslexia Foundation, etc.

Emma Cragg: Thank you, Catrina. That's a really useful list and we'll make sure that all of those books and websites that you've mentioned are listed in the show notes so people will be able to find them straight away. And also just to say, I do receive your newsletter from the Neurodiverse teachers and it's got some really useful things in it, so I would also recommend that! Danya, can I come to you next? Are there any resources that you're aware of that you think people should look into?

Danya Rushton: Yeah, actually, I would say read or listen to people's lived experience of being neurodiverse. So, even if it's just a post that pops up on Instagram, just read about it. Like it's a faster way without having to get a whole book about it. And then it's just, it's a bit more to the point. And then often they'll draw comparisons between, you know, the assumptions versus what it actually is and stuff like that. For autism awareness, I'd recommend the Aucademy website, as there are lots of resources on making the world a more neurodivergent-friendly space generally. And they deliver training focused on how neurotypicals can learn to understand the neurodivergent language. And there is also the option to book a one-to-one consultation to talk to a member of the team. I did one of those once and these sessions are, they're aimed at giving people the space to discuss their experiences with someone who likely has lived something similar, or they may even be able to help you understand things about yourself that you might not get. And I think the best way to improve your awareness and understanding on how to support a neurodiverse student is just to ask the, the learner what helps them learn and

ask them what things you should avoid doing. Of course, some young children may not be able to have a conversation like that. So in that situation, just watch them is what I'd say. Just watch. So don't assume that it's just a shy student, or that a student isn't making the effort to interact with their peers. Because at any stage of a person's life, they may be neurodiverse, but they, they just don't have a diagnosis. And so obviously just because they don't have a diagnosis does not mean that they're not neurodiverse.

And I think educators should understand the balance between pushing a student to reach their full potential versus making them uncomfortable. An example I have of myself is that I was and still am extremely afraid of speaking in a classroom setting or a large group setting. So often teachers like to do that thing where they pick on a student to answer when, when they're not participating in class discussions. For me, this was something that has ended up being a lifelong trauma for me, to be completely honest. Like even now, I cannot speak in a classroom. Now, even when I know the answer, because I just can't answer on the spot. Of course now, because I have a diagnosis of autism, I can, understand why it is, so, I can always make the educator aware somehow and basically tell them not to pick on me to answer. But thinking about it also from the perspective of a child who didn't know or understand that they were autistic and couldn't verbalise that, so that type of situation continued. So I grew more and more anxiety and fear about being in a classroom and just sitting there waiting to be picked on. And on top of that, now knowing that I have ADHD, it makes me understand that I struggle to focus and actually I needed regular breaks. But again, because it wasn't spotted when I was a child, a comment I often received after not being able to answer a question on the spot was, “You weren't listening.” And I'm sharing this because I still feel troubled thinking about this even as an adult now. And so my point is, don't assume it's just a lack of effort or bad behaviour from the student. If you have concerns, then either speak to them, or their parents, and I'd say explore the possibility of them having neurodivergence before you start punishing them for traits that they actually may not be able to help. And just remember also, there is a difference between someone not wanting to do something and someone who can't do something. Telling someone just to try isn't always the way forward because often they can't.

Emma Cragg: Thank you so much for sharing that, Danya, for speaking so candidly about your own experiences. And then finally, Clair, any resources that you'd like to signpost towards?

Clair McColl: I think similarly I'm gonna list some books and things but I think I used the phrase just recently Danya, the number of times still now as an articulate senior manager type lady I still have to say “Do you know what, you asking that of me is like asking someone with a broken leg to run up that hill”, like it just is, but I realise that that's a power, like that's helpful, to keep saying things like that because that is still such a common thing. Like you say, the idea that you're being punished for having the brain that you've got, it just breaks my heart, to think how many thousands and thousands of students have been put off, not just music education, but other learning because of this kind of punitive approach that some educators have. And we know progressively, we're kind of collectively better than that, but it still happens so, so much.

To think about resources, I can recommend some other bits and bobs. Like you say I've got Pete Wharmby’s book on my audiobook. One that I think is really accessible and quite enjoyable is actually by a comedian called Pierre Novellie and it's called Why Can't I Just Enjoy Things? But I really felt that he's done a sterling job of making it really accessible and really clear, like giving analogies of what it's like so that neurotypical people can understand. To give a brief one, the idea that autistic people struggle when plans change. And he just used the example of, “If my friends say we're going for a Chinese, I have spent all day decorating the inside of my brain with

what that's going to be like." He said it's the equivalent of holding a birthday party for a 50th. You know, "I've put all the bunting up, I've got all the decorations, I'm ready. They turn up and say, no, pizza." That's the equivalent of saying, "No, hang on, the party you have to hold in 30 seconds time is now a christening." He really, really paints the picture of trying to describe the experience and the difficulties that people face. And there's so many very simple, straightforward things to prevent someone going through all of that. But yeah, Pierre Novellie is a cracker.

Catrina Lowri: I think that's, that's a really good one as well. Anything that can translate the neurodivergent experience into language that neurotypical people will understand, because our social experience is naturally going to be different and the world is a social place. But you know, we have differences... in our sensory experience is different, our executive function skills are different. Therefore it follows that our social experience is going to be different, so we don't necessarily get stuff like that. And in fact if you said to me "Should we go for Chinese tonight?" I'd say "no, because you haven't given me enough information for me to be able to say yes". So you'd need to say "We're going to go for Chinese tonight at seven o'clock, there'll be four of us there, we've pre-booked it, here is a link to the menu online, this is what it's going to be like, this is the kind of music that's going to be playing, this is where the parking is, this is how far away it is from the parking", then I can say yes. But if you just say, "Do you want to go tonight?" I'm going to say no. Because I have to follow that up with 963 neurodivergent questions. But it's much easier for me to just say no, because it's exhausting even thinking about that, cause like you said, I've decorated the whole picture of what that's going to be like in my head beforehand. So that really does paint that picture.

The other thing that I was going to say is that, I keep coming back to perceived competence is "why don't you just try?" which is what Danya said. Because me trying is the equivalent to you climbing Mount Everest, because my try is 60,000 times more difficult than your try, even on a good day. And even though like I said, assumed competence, I have a PA because I have Access to Work, so I have a PA. And my PA filled in my Access to Work application. So I couldn't even apply for the money to get a PA without my PA filling in the form to apply for the money for the PA, just to give you some idea of what that's like. But yes, I have a master's degree and yeah I'm writing a book. But I'm writing the book using accessibility tools and AI to help me. I'm not physically writing it. I haven't physically written stuff in years. I don't physically write anything anymore. I haven't done that in years. And if you ask me to, then I'm going to say no. But, and then people will wonder why I get upset as a 49-year-old woman about me being asked to put pen to paper without knowing that I'm going to do it in advance, I can't do it. If you tell me I'm going to have to fill that in when I get there, then I can do it. But this is the thing, isn't it? We're talking about young children here who can't advocate for themselves in the same manner as I can. And I'm professionally neurodivergent. People hire me on the basis that I'm a neurodivergent teacher, so they know what they're getting because I have a website and social media explaining who I am. I'm very overt about what I am. Whereas if you're talking to an eight, nine-year-old child who's picking up a cello for the first time, thinking of myself, then she or he might not be able to know what they don't know. And so saying, "why don't you just try" is too open-ended a statement to make. Break it down into something really small and just say, okay, let's just pluck this string or let's just pick up the bow. You know, let's break it down into small parts, but that's for the adults to do, the child cannot just try something because just the fact that they showed up for the lesson was them just trying.

Clair McColl: I think that's it, there's so many things here. Like you said, this is a really nuanced, complicated area. And that's what I, I think we've all hinted, it's like, it feels like the

developments that have happened are great and we're not knocking them, but they're quite surface considering the depth and complexity of all these things. And as you say, how they interact with each other. And I think just going back to sort of, not exactly resources, for me it's other approaches. You know, Danya emphasised the importance of talking to young people. You know, there should be far more youth voice initiatives and far more opportunities for young people to lead and develop their own programmes so that they are being designed and put together in a way that works for them. And I think some of things you were just saying, Catrina, it's that self-exclusion. There's a whole bunch of people that aren't even getting near what we're talking about because they won't raise their hand because they know, because they've experienced difficulties, bias, shame, embarrassment in every area. So they're not going to the thing. There's so many people that are self-excluding because all of these extracurricular things are hard, so they don't step up. And then there's a dominance of a pedagogy of correction in music education. And like you say, the technical ability, the ability to memorise. Whereas I think in 2025, I'm not saying it's never helpful, but it's probably not as essential as it once was. It does sometimes feel like we're making young people jump through hoops, just kind of arbitrarily, because they're not actually essential to the life of being a musician or the act of being musical.

But I just feel like I have to shout out things like the Sound of Intent qualification framework that just provides more accessible opportunities for far more inclusive for a far more broad range of young people. And things like Arts Award where, I'm sure lots of people hear that roll their eyes a bit, but you know, it's such a versatile framework. A young person can take that wherever their interest leads them. And it's got that contextual, you know, in its more advanced forms, a contextual learning experience where someone might want to, you know, put on a gig and create a piece of music to achieve a certain thing and that can be recognised and they can be accredited for that, because that way of learning and expressing themselves simply suits them better. And I think, you know, that's my little dream nirvana world is that there's a real choice of different frameworks and different ways of being successful that can be recognised and equally valued. This is my next thing, you know, as someone who finds themself in a room full of very, very diploma heavy and advanced classical backgrounds of lots of my colleagues, you shouldn't feel that you are less than because your musical background is different and your way of learning is different. It's just this key thing of just different, not less. But again there's other great, great books that promote things like that. We're All Neurodiverse by Sonny Jane Wise, Unmasking Autism by Devon Price, Girl Unmasked by Emily Katy, so, so many that are all in my little audible thing. I may or may not have read them all, but you know, I know that there's good stuff and there's a lot of wisdom and lived experience in there.

Yusef Sacoor: Thank you so much, Clair. You've rounded off perfectly. We've touched on some really great things, progress versus lip service, the barriers that still exist today, and actually really, really good points that I found particularly interesting about advocating and making space already for people who are undiagnosed and how important that is. So unfortunately, that's all we've got time for. Thank you so much to Danya, Clair and Catrina, and thank you to everyone who's listened today!

[Outro music]

Yusef Sacoor: Well, that was a great discussion. We had some great insights, and they’re amazing guests with an incredible pool of knowledge. But also unfortunate to hear just how far we have to go when making our spaces more inclusive in music education.

Emma Cragg: Thanks again to Catrina, Clair and Danya for sharing their experiences and for speaking so candidly. We hope you learnt a lot from this episode, as usual check out in the show notes for all of the resources, and we'll see you again next time!