

Royal Northern College of Music Brass

Why is the RNCM reputed to be one of the best music colleges in the country? From the very outset of my observations, the RNCM building known to me as a trumpet student studying under Howard Snell almost 20 years ago has undergone huge transformations.

Throughout this period of time the RNCM has been driven by three very different personalities who have individually made their mark on the College of today - Sir John Manduel, Edward Gregson and Jonty Stockdale.

The existing principal of RNCM, Jonty Stockdale, took over his role in August 2008. Before joining RNCM he was Head of School of Music at Victorian College of Arts in Melbourne Australia. He brings to the RNCM a diverse training and education taken from western classical and contemporary music and jazz as well as experimental research based electro-acoustic music. A new ethos has emerged and more extensions to the building have taken place in this short time, securing a home for the orchestra I now play for - Manchester Camerata

Sir John Manduel, the reigning monarch of my era, devoted much of his energy to the Opera world and the opera theatre; however, perhaps the biggest visual change to the RNCM estate took place during Edward Gregson's tenure. Edward Gregson, himself an established composer, oversaw the erection of the Library Building (in 2000), which now hosts an impressive six studios, all of which can accommodate large ensembles, bands and orchestras.

The library building of 2000 has taken the place of the 'Lloyds Building' - a derelict pub very dear to my heart mainly because it became second home to many famous brass players over the years, each decidedly bagging a room every day to practice and, alarmingly, not drink! In fact, it was a very sad day when the building was finally demolished; it felt like we had lost much of our heritage.

Onwards and upwards though. The RNCM replaced this loss with a building boasting around 80 tutorial spaces and practice rooms as well as four large performances venues - the old Lloyds Building was in comparison no match for this.

Hartley Hall, Halls of Residence, in which many students - including myself - spent many a happy time, has also been replaced by the Sir Charles Groves Halls of Residence, right on site. No more are there six mile bus rides into college with hangovers, or excuses for being late, or missing lessons - or at least there shouldn't be!



Brass and percussion students at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester.

The students' rooms in Groves Halls have a pod type structural build and are soundproofed so that students can practice all day and into the night without likelihood of complaint.

I should imagine one of the great attractions to RNCM now is just that - the fact that you can live on site. It is a complete campus armed with a lovely café bar area which also attracts the general public and a busy refectory serving meals all within a two minute walk from your living accommodation. The library is also attached to the Halls, so once more enabling students to work close to home and make the most of the facilities.

The separate wing built on the Oxford Road frontage of the College is now dedicated to my own orchestra, Manchester Camerata. It hosts a rehearsal studio as well as offices, staff and library. I think I am right in saying it's the only one of its kind hosting an orchestra in such a way in this country, second to France. There are at least 20 practice rooms and two large professional studios in this wing alone which are made available to the students on a booking system.

The studio, practice and social facilities here overall, I suspect, are unrivalled anywhere else - the building is central to the city, University, concert halls and theatres and it has a huge student life day and night with plenty of culture to

Helen Quayle

explore. What more could you ask for a student away from home for the first time and studying music?



The RNCM is more than a Conservatoire, it is also a thriving Arts Centre in its own right surrounded by a number of

Orchestras including the Hallé, BBC Philharmonic, Liverpool Philharmonic, Opera North and Manchester Camerata.

Indeed the impressive line up of teaching staff, partly derived from the local orchestras and world-famous brass bands gives a definite drive to the place, in addition to many visiting freelance teachers from further afield and overseas. They add a very cosmopolitan flavour into the mix and deliver a wide range of teaching styles which can be tailored to fit any student's needs – an important ethos of the college.

There are an enormous amount of varied performances taking place within the college week after week and it really has become a Centre of Excellence for all genres of music with a cutting edge that creates upon entrance a real buzz about the place...

As well as the impressive list of outside artists delivering concerts in the Concert Hall or Opera theatre at RNCM throughout the year, a Monday lunchtime



John Miller - Director of Brass Studies.

**Dr. Nicholas Childs.**

concert series is run and presented entirely by the students, developing skills of orchestral management and concert programming as well as the big one - performance!

In addition to this, every second Thursday lunchtime a Concert Orchestra delivers a new programme of music which is rehearsed and performed in two sessions, just as the music profession would demand. There are regular musical themes throughout the year, to which the RNCM Symphony Orchestra, Opera, Chamber Orchestra and Brass Band chip in, delivering spectacularly diverse concerts.

The past two years have seen an expansion in Brass Band activity with the appointment of Nicholas Childs as Musical Director, following Howard Snell and James Gourlay. Black Dyke Band is now officially "in residence" and many of the tutorial staff come from the best bands in UK, in addition to Steven Mead, Roger Webster, Mark Frost and many brass band notables.

The ethos of the Brass Band and the Brass Ensemble is intended to be both outward looking and forward thinking. This is certainly highlighted in the unique programmes performed recently within the RNCM and in the Festival of Brass each January.

In January this year, the Brass Band performed new works by Adam Gorb and Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen, forever pushing the boundaries of new compositions for brass band forwards.

One wish for development is the expansion into more outreach work of high quality - watch this space.....

In an interview with John Miller - Director of Brass Studies of RNCM

since 1999, John explained more about what makes the College tick.

HQ *There has always been somewhat of a divide in the past between orchestral brass and the brass band world in colleges and they are often run as two separate schools. Is this something the RNCM has worked hard to dispel?*

JM Well, the fact is that the RNCM is an integrated College, offering a B Mus and other degrees whether you play cornet, violin, or you are an opera singer. As in all Conservatories, the emphasis is on performance to a professional level. But students can supplement this with an individual pathway, including a choice of professional studies, to cater for orchestral playing, big band, jazz, teaching, composition/arranging and of course brass band. These days, student led learning can

lead towards employability. For instance, ex RNCM student Gavin Higgins came here as a talented tenor horn/French horn player. But his choices led him to becoming a composer in significant demand. There are so many examples of students having their eyes and ears opened here, and pursuing careers they would never have imagined. Therefore the divide you mention is rather old fashioned. But nonetheless students who are passionate about brass band life follow this with great satisfaction - most current students play in outside contesting bands and I sometimes wonder where the UK's best bands would be without "The Northern".

HQ *What do you look for in a student who is applying to RNCM?*

JM A combination of aptitude, attitude and potential, as well as a passion for music and performance is desirable. The courses here are mostly hinged around creative performance, and I continually see that this real enthusiasm and dedication is the quality which opens many doors....

HQ *What courses are on offer to the brass student and what are my different options?*

JM The heart and soul of study is the B Mus course, which I have described above, with its various pathways. But in addition to this we have a wide range of post-graduate courses, including a new and interesting one, a PGCE with specialism in instrumental teaching, which has attracted wide interest. In the RNCM, the courses try to reflect changing employment practices, and echo the realities of culture in UK and abroad. Therefore things can and do continually change.

HQ *How much playing would I feasibly do at RNCM?*

JM I have seldom had experience of players coming to me and complaining that they are idle. There are many opportunities within all the different genres of music at the college for performers to get involved - brass quintet/quartets, tuba/euphonium ensembles, trumpet/trombone choirs as well as other conventional ensembles such as brass band, orchestras and jazz bands. Look at the notable success of the trombone quartet, founded here ten years ago, and of Scherzo Brass who recently released a lively CD. Many of the cornet players love playing in the Big Band - this is reinforced by visiting jazz tutors on trumpet, trombone and flugel horn. A regular visitor, trombonist Jiggs Whigham, has to



Royal Northern College of Music.

beat players away with his trombone slide because he is so popular.

HQ *Is it easy to swap courses once embarking on your preferred path if it isn't suiting the student?*

JM I think that what you are really asking about here is whether you can change your instrument. Not surprisingly, some cornet players are interested in the trumpet, partly because of professional opportunities. Likewise, some tenor horn players have moved over to French horn, one recently converting for one final year and achieving impressive results. Many euphonium players are gifted trombonists and a recent class has been introduced which is catering for this student-led wish. Overall, I seek to respond to students who have a particular musical curiosity. Tom Hutchinson (principal cornet with the Cory Band) is actually a very strong Trumpet player on the quiet - he played prominent roles in performances of *Mahler 1* and *Alpine Symphony* whilst at RNCM. My aim is that the student receives holistic learning, and that students are guided by the staff to make the most of their strengths and talents. I always endeavour to develop what a student engages in.

HQ *Are there many Professional Access schemes available to students whilst attending RNCM?*

JM There are many professional access schemes throughout and within the college which vary in content, including arts management, experience in stage management, education and outreach work in the community, as well as highly valued professional access schemes within the Hallé Orchestra, BBC Philharmonic and Manchester Camerata. These schemes often involve stiff competition to get a place.

The RNCM also offers an early musical education for the under 18's at the Junior School taking place each Saturday throughout term time.

At present there are 32 brass students ranging from as far away as Sheffield, Lancaster, Southport, Rotherham, Stoke, Lytham, Harrogate and St Bees Cumbria. The teachers here are mostly taken from the freelancing world, all of which adds on yet another dimension to RNCM. These include Tracey Redfern, Neil Fulton, Tom Osborne, Lesley Howie, Mark Bousie, Ros Davies, James Garlick, Ewan Easton and Les Neish.

Les Neish is a former fellow of the RNCM junior school and is pleased to be putting something back into the system. Les jointly conducts the Brass Ensembles alongside Juan Ortuno and each year they perform

at RNCM Festival of Brass as well as many junior in house concerts. A solid connection to the senior college is made by regular performances of all the students to John Miller and other senior music staff thus helping to track a student's progress and development. Some choose to continue their musical development in Manchester, following in the footsteps of Les.

Ending up back at RNCM and watching the place grow and develop over all of these years has left me with a feeling of wanting to go back and start all over again. The role of the musician has changed immensely and RNCM really has the finger on the pulse when it comes to careers and helping to achieve them. The broad education it now delivers, the buzz and the business focus about the place now makes me want to experience it all from a different angle... a more mature one of course!

Helen holds a trumpet position with Manchester Camerata and has sustained a 20 year career in professional freelance playing and education work in the orchestral sector. She delivers high quality programmes for many other diverse arts and music organisations and is involved in developing training opportunities for classical musicians in this field.

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