



NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

QUALITY REVIEW 2001

PEER REVIEW REPORT 2001

Quality Review Exercise Report

1. Introduction to the Department

Introduction

The teaching of music at Maynooth is a long and distinguished tradition, dating back to the late nineteenth century. In the last three years the department of music at NUI Maynooth has undergone rapid and dramatic expansion in part as a result of changes to the Irish highers. A permanent academic staff of six full-time members, even with the help of extensive teaching assistance, servicing an undergraduate student body of 300 inevitably has pushed the academic infrastructure to the limits. While this situation is unquestionably in part an indication of the Department's excellent and well-deserved reputation, a major theme emerging from discussions during the quality review is best summed up in the frequently repeated phrase: 'bursting at the seams'. Nevertheless, this establishment remains, from most points of view, the premiere department in the Republic of Ireland, a remarkable tribute to the energy, commitment and enthusiasm of the staff. It is quite clear that the staff is passionate about many aspects of their syllabus and views their student body with equally passionate concern. The atmosphere in the department is of a strongly inclusive nature. The caring, informal, co-operative nature of the staff is profoundly appreciated by the student body and leads to a remarkably close and mutually productive relationship. Beyond these healthy internal dynamics, the department makes a vital contribution to the well being of the college in terms of performance and performance opportunity. These features extend into the local community, drawing an outside audience into the University; this, in itself, has considerable value in presenting a friendly and constructive face to the public.

A number of full-time members of academic staff can and should be described as leaders in Ireland, most notably in musicology (Drs Barra Boydell, James Garratt and Professor Gerard Gillen), music technology (Dr Victor Lazzarini), performance (Professor Gerard Gillen) and as members of national committees (Professor Gerard Gillen). There is the potential for areas of distinctiveness and the Department has indicated a desire to vest these in centres (see recommendation 1, section 3).

The comments below are made against the background of a very positive image gained during this visit. There are some serious problems to be tackled by the Department and University, but the effort will be worthwhile since there are strong foundations here and the clear potential for successful development.

Section 2: course issues

2.1.a: course* aims and objectives

The degree course aims and objectives are understood by the staff with admirable completeness and clarity. Moreover, the overall aim of the department to establish itself as a centre of excellence in teaching, independent learning, scholarship,

composition and performance¹ is quite explicit in its mission statement. The same level of clarity does not seem to be shared by the student body who, in conversation, appeared uncertain about both aims and objectives. Although there are details relating to content in the module outlines given in the student handbook, there is a need for greater clarity. The module outlines are generally reliable on content, but give little indication of outcomes expressed in terms of aims and objectives (see recommendation 2, section 3).

*Both assessors had a certain difficulty understanding the application of the word 'course' in the self-assessment document. At times it was used for the degree in its entirety, at others for individual modules or years. For the purposes of clarity in this report the qualification 'degree' will be added to 'course' when referring to the degree course as a whole. Individual semester-length 'courses' will be referred to as modules.

2.1.b: structure and content of teaching

The course is well thought through with provision concerning aspects of technical work being particularly full. The history provision, however, could be viewed as being on the narrow side. MU 103 and 215 are clearly successful in providing a broad survey, but the focus in later years tends to be overly specific with little emphasis on pre-1750 music apart from that of Bach. There must surely be room for composer and repertoire-specific modules such as MU333, but this should be balanced by a broader range of modules which could profitably include, if possible, more on opera and earlier musics. There also seemed to be a desire for some focus on Irish music apart from the traditional provision (notably from BA students who are not specialising in single honours music), perhaps vested in module on classical developments in Ireland. This said, the coverage of the development of instrumental music through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is clearly effective, and the twentieth century seems well catered for (see recommendation 3, section 3).

Both reviewers noted with concern the balance of work within the MA in Music (Historical Studies). There appear to be modules to be taken as part of the degree programme; this being the case, the thesis length of 30,000 to 40,000 words seems excessive. A 40,000 word thesis would constitute a research M.Phil in most UK universities; a so-called 'minor' thesis would be more likely to be in the region of 15,000 to 20,000 words.

A clear difficulty has arisen from the increase in numbers of students and their level of attainment. The Department is to be praised in its attempts to provide students who require added exposure to the grammar and history of the western classical tradition in MU 106 A and B, but this may not be adequate to fit them to the requirements of more advanced technical and historical modules (see recommendation 4, section 3).

2.1.c: course information

The student handbook is relatively full with details of a general nature relating to the Department, staff information and issues relating to the mechanics of the degree course as expected. There was some question that the present alphabetical arrangement may not be the most helpful or instinctive for users (see recommendation 5a, section 3). Certain aspects of the contents could be more explicit (see recommendation 5b, section 3). Degree course information (i.e. the undergraduate degree course outlines) could benefit from being expressed more in

terms of aims and objectives, and how the latter could be achieved (see recommendation 2 and 5c, section 3).

2.1.d: course delivery

In general, the students and graduates available for conversation showed very warm approval of the lecturing staff and enthusiasm for much of the technical and historical teaching. The digest of student responses in appendix 4 were less conclusive: although it was clear that in most cases there was general approval for most aspects of the degree course, it would be more encouraging if the balance between 'strongly agree' and 'agree' were more extensively in favour of the former.

There is an issue over inadequate listening backup to modules (see recommendation 6a, section 3).

Library provision is inadequate for many modules; this needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency and the general state of library holdings has important ramifications for all aspects of the degree course and the future of the Department (see recommendation 6b, section 3).

There is a timetabling difficulty relating in particular to BA combined arts students necessitating the repetition of classes (see recommendation 6c, section 3).

Given the huge increase in student numbers, it is clear that the Department's infrastructure is under severe pressure. Practice rooms are wholly inadequate and may, in fact, represent an infringement of health and safety regulations as does the size of the main lecture room which at present is unable to contain large first-year classes without students sitting on the floor. Apart from safety considerations, a failing infrastructure is severely deleterious for student and staff morale (see recommendation 6d, section 3).

2.1.e: course assessment

The marking scheme system in operation seems in general sensible and relatively uncomplicated; attempts to bring it too much into line with other subjects in the Humanities or other Faculties should be resisted since the requirements of the subject are very specific and often quite dissimilar from other arts or science areas.

No examination material beyond the question papers was available for scrutiny. While external examiners' reports seemed to indicate a level of attainment comparable with comparator institutions (though in general the external examiners' reports were over-formulaic and lacking specific detail), it seemed a pity not to be able to consider completed, marked scripts in relation to degree course aims and objectives.

Some disquiet was felt over the nature of examination content: questions often seemed designed simply to test knowledge acquired rather than the candidate's capacity to manipulate knowledge in reasoned argument. To an extent in first-year examinations this is both understandable and desirable, but the tendency to foster more extensive argument on the basis of newly acquired knowledge would perhaps enhance the nature of second and third-year examinations, and provide students with additional transferable skills.

The extent to which papers and assessments are double marked might be considered more carefully. There is a perceptible move against excessive double-marking in many UK humanities departments, though a system of double-marking by sampling is certainly regarded as an important adjunct to assessment. Given the staffing constraints in operation at present, such developments would need to await an increase in available staff (see recommendation 7a, section 3).

Both assessors felt that the Department's 'criteria for assessment' in some areas could be more specific (see recommendation 7b, section 3).

2.1.f. Course administration

Degree course administration is clearly conscientious and effective, though communication to the students concerning the shape, nature and aspirations of the degree course can never, in our experience, be too explicit. Suggestions concerning staff review may be of relevance here (see paragraph 2.5 on staff development below).

2.2 Communication

No comment.

2.3 Support Services

2.3.1-3. The University central support services and the potential for study abroad seem entirely healthy.

2.3.3.1. The urgent need to improve library resources has been dealt with in recommendation 6b, section 3.

2.3.3.2. Recommendations concerning practice/rehearsal rooms and larger teaching spaces have been made below (see recommendation 6d, section 3). The question of equipment provision also needs urgent attention with the supply of adequate sound reproduction resources in individual staff rooms (a *sine qua non* where teaching and preparation at tertiary level is concerned) a priority (see recommendation 8a, section 3).

Of major importance is the question of technical back-up. As the self-assessment document states (p. 36), the University has made a substantial investment in music technology. A laboratory facility of this extent requires suitable technical backup, and very few music departments are without some sort of technical support given the extensive use of technology (sound delivery systems, electronic keyboards etc.) in day to day teaching (see recommendation 8b, section 3).

2.3.3.3-4. See recommendations 6b-d in section 3 below.

2.3.3.5. See recommendation 8a section 3.

2.3.4/5. It is evident that staff-student relations are excellent and staff are to be highly commended for this state of affairs. Their open-door policy, while undoubtedly attractive, may tend to put staff under considerable pressure given the present staff-student ratio. The Department might consider adopting an 'office-hours' policy in which the staff are available at known times. This might well conserve staff time,

raise the status of staff availability and prevent staff indigestion resulting from impromptu visits during lunch hours.

2.4 Research

Research activity in the Department is clearly, for the most part, in good heart. There is a broad range of research, including performance, composition and historical musicology, and a clear sense of its role in relation to teaching and Departmental development. There is a healthily developing postgraduate research culture, although some attention may need to be given to the extent of the MA requirement (see 2.1.b paragraph 2 above). While it would be good to have more Ph.D. students in the working environment, the pool in Ireland generally is not large though it does seem set to expand. Maynooth is in a good position to profit from this expansion and should consider marshalling resources and developing a publicity strategy in order to attract students.

2.4.4-5/6. Inter-disciplinary activity is becoming more popular and certainly effective in the areas of performance, historical musicology and music technology. The Department could well consider developing partnerships in collaborative projects with other university departments in Ireland and UK. Where Music Technology is concerned there is also the opportunity for developing collaboration with computer science colleagues within Maynooth and links with new initiatives, academic and industrial, in Ireland and abroad. The hosting of visiting composers has always been an important aspect of electro-acoustic composition across the world.

2.4.7. The research activity and output of many members of permanent staff is distinguished and certainly deserves support.

2.4.8. Enhancing the research output of Departmental staff is clearly a major priority. At the head of such a policy must be the question of staffing; thus, the appointment of new staff must be predicated on research as well as teaching excellence. Internal structures can also assist research excellence: the establishment of a research committee is undoubtedly an important step, as is this committee's annual review. However, research aspiration must go hand in hand with rational planning, thus the Department might consider integrating annual research presentations into a more global annual review with a view to meshing research plans with Departmental aspirations. Far too often across the sector, well-founded research intentions founder for a lack of integration into more general planning.

Sabbatical leave is a vital plank for research. Indeed, completing and initiating areas of research endeavor can only be satisfactorily achieved by means of extended leave. A policy on sabbatical leave needs to be developed, supported centrally and operated with a clear role within the workings of the Department. Many Departments have a rolling cycle of study-leave for research active staff. This is certainly desirable, but must be balanced against teaching needs. If staff-student ratios do not permit such a programme, more carefully targeted access to sabbatical leave for staff with specific research goals must be put in train.

The establishment of centres of excellence is to be applauded, but it is an initiative that needs extensive developmental planning. The search for larger research grants is a vital part of this kind of development. The staff of the Department should be encouraged to press for external funding of this kind; at present, we note, that Dr Boydell has a major research grant in hand.

Concerning the Department's particular strengths, see recommendation 1, section 3.

2.5 Staff development

Staff development is, of course, a legitimate staff aspiration. Courses, however, are of variable usefulness and need to be chosen selectively and with care rather than adopting a blanket approach to attendance.

More broadly there is much to vesting two days of staff time each year in an annual review. It seems that an away trip¹ was planned for the Department in the last academic year, but could not take place owing to ill-health. The idea is a good one and may allow more broad discussions concerning curriculum development and new teaching initiatives to take place.

The staff might also consider visiting other departments in Ireland and the UK to observe developments in teaching and assessment, performance and composition initiatives. To an extent much can be absorbed in external examination visits, but a less formal forum for the exchange of ideas is certainly of enormous mutual value (Maynooth has much to teach colleagues) and has, in recent years, greatly benefited the sector in the UK.

2.6 Relationships external to the Department

2.6.1. There is a clear indication here of service to the community expressed in committee membership, but the extensive activities involved in Departmental performance, including those that impact on the wider community, perhaps inhibit more extensive participation in university committees.

2.6.2. The staff's participation in musicological and professional societies is extensive and healthy.

2.6.3. External examinerships tend, in the nature of the activity, to fall upon senior members of staff. It is clear that Dr Boydell and Professor Gillen have taken on this mantle and perform with distinction in a variety of institutions. There seems little doubt that other members of staff will be called upon in due course to become external examiners at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

2.6.4. The contribution to the broader musical needs of society by Professor Gillen in particular is of remarkable distinction.

Beyond the activities indicated above, it is clear that the Department of Music, Maynooth, provides a remarkable service to the local and national musical community in providing performances, performance opportunities and an atmosphere in which musical culture can be celebrated. This signal service deserves recognition by the College and is an object of admiration throughout Ireland.

This last point leads naturally on to one of the Department's aspirations concerning performance, namely the proposal for a Saturday Academy. This initiative would provide teaching and performance opportunities for a clearly identified constituency. While it would also place a requirement for provision and supervision on the

Department, the financial and broader cultural gains would vastly benefit the College. See recommendation no. 9 section 3.

3 Conclusions and Recommendations

1.

Areas of distinctiveness

Musicology: - Irish music and nineteenth century studies are strongly founded among the musicologists on the permanent staff in the Department. If this area is to develop into a centre of excellence there is a need for external support for resources, and study leave opportunities to facilitate publication; concomitantly, there is a need to provide a less demanding teaching regime in order to increase potential research time either by rationalisation of the degree course (in particular in the area of technical work) or increased staffing.

Music technology: a major investment in music technology has created the potential for excellence, but needs directing and developing if it is to make a significant impact beyond the local; competition in Ireland and the UK is extremely stiff.

Church music: given the college's distinguished role in this area, there is real potential for developments here. If this aspiration is to gain national and international credibility, it will require considerable focus and funding input.

In all the cases above, it is clear that research development is dependent on an upward adjustment to staffing to reflect a realistic staff-student ratio. The talent is there, but needs the time and space to develop.

2. Undergraduate module outlines give a good idea of content and offer some helpful bibliography (though many of these need a certain amount of attention, for example, updating the recommended edition of *The New Grove*, more extensive bibliography for MU115 MU212, MU215, MU219, MU221, MU310, MU311, MU312, MU314, MU322, MU325, MU328, M331, MU333). Additionally, the outlines could benefit from being recast in terms of outcomes - a statement of what the tutors intend the students to take away from the module (see recommendation 5c below).

3. The Department might consider the introduction of: a module in the history of Irish classical music (reflecting research strengths in this area); modules that would broaden the level of provision before 1750; modules that would take in a broader range of vocal music, in particular opera.

4. The Department might consider a rationalisation of technically-based modules to reflect a changing intake. Nearly all music departments in UK and Ireland are having to adjust to a lower level of technical attainment occurring in the last few years as a direct result of inadequate preparation at school level. This may require a reworking of technical modules in order to favour identification of, rather than practice of, process.

Consideration also needs to be given to some form of tiering between BA Music and BA Arts; clearly this would have implications concerning staffing (see further recommendations below).

5a. The alphabetical arrangement of the handbook, while forcing the student to read it as a whole, may not offer as speedy or as logically structured an arrangement as possible. Some thought might be given to gathering cognate areas of information under a suitable general heading: for example access to computer, language and skills modules under a single heading; instrumental practice (including organ), tuition and storage could also go under a single heading (and so on).

5b. The information on deadlines looks draconian (does this accord with practice across the University?). Extensions are to be given only in the 'most exceptional circumstances'; to be fair to the students we feel these 'exceptional circumstances' should be made explicit in order to avoid misplaced expectation.

5c. Many of the module outlines lack a clear indication of outcomes and how these are to be achieved: MU101; MU102; MU106A; MU110; MU111; MU202; MU211; MU212; MU213; MU217; MU310; MU311; .MU314; MU333; Some modules also do not indicate the precise nature of assessment: MU101; MU102; MU106A; MU111; MU112; MU117; MU201; MU202; MU210; MU211; MU212; MU216; MU217; MU218; MU220; MU310; MU311; MU320; MU323; MU327; MU329; MU333; MU341; MU342; MU343.

6a. Some consideration should be given to facilitating access to the CD collection: perhaps overnight/week-end borrowing could be arranged.

6b. Library resources need, as matter of urgency, to be addressed on a module by module basis with a view to improving the range of bibliography. Similarly, there is a need to broaden the base of the complete edition holdings, in order to reflect the present state of musicological endeavor, and periodical holdings across the board, in particular in relation to Music Technology (for example, it seems anomalous to subscribe to the *Computer Music Journal* and not *Organised Sound*, a journal in which the director of the studios, Dr Lazzarini, has published)

6c. More material on-line would facilitate access for students unable to make timetabled classes; this would also have a beneficial effect on saving staff time where remedial teaching was concerned.

6d. The question of space and practice facilities needs urgent attention. The largest lecture room in the Department is entirely inadequate for teaching large first-year classes and alternatives are either acoustically inimical or inadequately provided with audio equipment. Either some reduction in class sizes should be considered or a suitably equipped alternative space provided. The present practice rooms are inadequate in number (for a student body of only 60% of the intake at Maynooth, the University of Birmingham Music Department has sixteen practice rooms) and specification (they are housed in a shabby prefabricated structure). Similarly, there is a need for other adequate performing spaces, including, if possible, a large recital room (at present there appears to be nowhere suitable for electroacoustic presentations) to address legitimate performance aspirations. The replacing of the present practice rooms with a much extended and upgraded facility (at present the practice rooms often also double as practical tuition rooms) will not only meet health and safety regulations, but ensure competitiveness in an increasingly aggressive market (Cork School of Music has just received a large grant for a new building and Queen's University, Belfast, has recently completed a major refurbishment and upgrade of its facilities). Bearing this in mind, it is recommended that a paper on the

role of performance at Maynooth and the need for extra provision be drawn up by the Department.

7a. While recommendation 7a on assessment might not seem the most obvious place for a vital recommendation concerning staff, this next to last heading under 'Course issues' perhaps justifies its conclusion. At every stage, this well-founded degree course is threatened by the relatively small number of staff in relation to students. Giving a certain amount of double marking to suitably qualified part-time staff or postgraduates would be a creative measure, but would not answer the fundamental question. It is recommended that a suitable staff-student ratio, determined in relation to a weekly teaching allocation of 6/7 hours for each permanent member of staff, be addressed as a matter of urgency; this measure would benefit every aspect of the degree and the efforts of the present staff at every level, from teaching and administration to research.

7b. Assessment criteria seem a little vague in determining differences between categories: for example, the 70-75 band of Class I concludes with the phrase: 'Good, but lacking something found in the upper band'. What might this 'something' be? Similarly, the final phrase of iii: 'Good, but perhaps marred by minor weaknesses' is also too non-specific; it is, after all, possible that work of the highest standard is marred by a minor weakness. Since these criteria are available to students, they should be as specific, explicit and as helpful as possible. Some mention of professionalism might be included in the higher levels of the assessment criteria for performance.

8a. It is recommended that adequate audio equipment for preparation and teaching be supplied to permanent staff.

8b. Given the extensive use of equipment in all aspects of the Department's teaching, some technical backup to assist the present lecturer in music technology is clearly vital. It is recommended that a studio assistant, on either a full-time or part-time basis, be appointed as soon as is feasible.

9. It is recommended that Department and College look into the feasibility study relating to the provision of instrumental and vocal tuition on a commercial basis for local people with musical aspirations - a 'Saturday Academy'. The basis of the study should be on the relationship between financial return and the provision of facilities. The last would have to be predicated on a wholesale improvement in the infrastructure.

Concerning the Department's section entitled 'Conclusions and Recommendations', the assessors draw the College's attention to their recommendations made above. The assessors applaud the standards achieved by the Department and encourage it to keep its defence of core elements under continuous review. The Department has a number of aspirations which are well founded and offer the potential for distinctiveness, but in order to achieve this, many aspects of staffing and infrastructure (as outlined above) need attention if they are to be effectively and profitably realised. The Department of Music, Maynooth, has substance and excellence and deserves to be both sustained and fostered.