

INTERVIEW

“Music to the ear”: An interview with Paul Whittaker

Paul Whittaker

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ABSTRACT

Paul Whittaker is a profoundly deaf musician who has devoted his life to encouraging other deaf people to engage with music and challenging others to think about how they hear and perceive music. In this interview with Shirley Salmon, he talks about his background and experiences and some of the difficulties he has faced.

KEYWORDS

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Paul Whittaker was born in Huddersfield in 1964 and has been deaf all his life. After getting a music degree from Wadham College, Oxford and a post-graduate diploma from the RNCM, he founded Music and the Deaf, a charity he ran for 27 years before leaving to pursue a freelance career. Paul has signed many shows and concerts across the UK, including with The Sixteen and at the BBC Proms. He continues to promote music and deafness and currently runs seven signing choirs. He was awarded an OBE in 2007 and holds two Honorary Degrees. [\[paul@paulwhittaker.org.uk\]](mailto:[paul@paulwhittaker.org.uk]) **Shirley Salmon** MPhil, PGCE, BA, taught music and movement to deaf and hard-of-hearing children for many years and has published on this topic. She has lectured at the Orff-Institute, Mozarteum University Salzburg, focussing on Music in the Community and Inclusive Pedagogy since 1984. She is president of the International Orff-Schulwerk Forum Salzburg. [\[sdaysalmon@gmail.com\]](mailto:[sdaysalmon@gmail.com])

Note: This interview took place through a series of email exchanges starting in January 2019 when the idea of an interview was first proposed.

Shirley Salmon: What was your first contact with music? What memories are especially important for you?

Paul Whittaker: I grew up in a musical household, despite being born deaf. My mum played the piano and both parents enjoyed listening to music, so the radio was always on and records were being played. I was also taken to church from a young age so must have been aware of music there, though I don't actually recall any specific pieces from that time.

I can remember that the four records I liked playing most when I was little were: “I'm Down” by the Beatles (the B side of “Help”), “Moses Supposes” (from the “Singin' in the Rain” film soundtrack),

a Max Bygraves recording of “Tulips from Amsterdam,” and the first movement of Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata,” played by Solomon. That was a fairly eclectic collection for a very young child!

When I was five years old, I began having piano lessons and two years later I joined my local church choir. I don’t recall any difficulties with either of those things though; with hindsight, I suppose it must have been rather more daunting for the teacher and the choirmaster than it was for me, faced as they were with someone who couldn’t hear. If there were any issues they never complained (to me at least).

I can still remember various simple pieces from my first piano book, but the most vivid musical memory as a youngster comes from when I was about eight years old, when the “West Side Story” film was on TV one Sunday night. I didn’t stay up to watch it all, yet some of the music – particularly the balcony scene with Tony and Maria – really grabbed my attention. As the years went on, I got to know the whole score in detail and was privileged to be the sign language interpreter for the 50th Anniversary UK theatre tour. It’s still one of my favourite pieces of music – a work of genius – and I met Leonard Bernstein in 1986 and Stephen Sondheim in 2010, two events fixed in my memory.

From the ages of seven to 12, I was immersed in sacred music, I suppose through being in the church choir, and a love of that repertoire has stayed with me. Being a chorister is a superb musical education, with three rehearsals each week and two services on a Sunday. A choir also gives you the joy of making and sharing music with others; it’s fun to do music alone, but far more fun to do it with others.

It was through the choir that I became interested in playing the organ, which I started when I was 12. I wanted to start earlier but was told it wasn’t possible as my legs were not long enough and also I didn’t have my Grade 5 piano exam! When I finally did start lessons, they were on a huge five-manual instrument in Wakefield Cathedral. Shortly after that I started playing for services; by the time I was 14, I was playing for four different services in three churches every Sunday, one of which I was choirmaster at as well.

Of all the instruments for a deaf person to play, I’d say the organ is one of the hardest. With a piano you depress a key, the hammer hits the string, the vibrations travel back up your arm, and every note feels different; with a string instrument, you apply the pressure of a bow on the strings; with wind and brass, you control the flow of air; but with an organ, you switch the blower on, pull out a stop, press a key, and sound is produced from a distant location. It’s far harder to feel the vibrations with an organ, and you’re usually separate from the sound source and dealing with a challenging acoustic. Despite this, I do love playing the organ but always need someone to tell me if I am using an appropriate registration and playing for the acoustics of the building.

Shirley: I find it remarkable that you had so much exposure to music and could experience many aspects of music. How did you perceive your deafness growing up?

Paul: To be honest, I never gave it much thought at all. I’ve always felt it is far easier to cope with any kind of disability if you have it from birth or from a young age. With hindsight, I realise that I probably did miss a lot of information when I was growing up, but it didn’t bother me at all at the time.

Being born with a hearing loss, I have no detailed aural memory of music – I could hear certain sounds but these were distorted – but there must be sounds that my subconscious retains and recalls.

Until the age of seven, my hearing loss remained fairly stable, but it deteriorated rapidly over the next four years and by the age of 11 I was classed as Profoundly Deaf.

When I was 12, I decided that when I grew up I wanted to help and encourage other deaf people to make and enjoy music and, prior to that, wanted to get a music degree from somewhere. This was when I first started to encounter resistance and prejudice towards my deafness.

Over a two-year period, I applied to 12 Universities and was rejected by all of them, despite already having three music diplomas: their view was quite simply that deaf people couldn't possibly be musicians. Eventually, in 1983, I was accepted by Wadham College, Oxford, and spent three wonderful years there in an environment that couldn't have been more supportive and helpful. In many ways the Oxford music course was ideal for me, as tutorials took place in either a one-to-one or two-to-one basis and lectures were given in fairly small groups and rooms, so communication was never a major problem.

I've been fortunate in not coming across too many blatant examples of prejudice in my life and the best way to deal with it is to prove people wrong. Looking back, I am very proud of what I have achieved. I know I've changed the lives of many people by introducing them to music, and being awarded two honorary degrees and an OBE for services to music shows I must have done something right!

Shirley: It was very fortunate that you eventually got a place to study music in a supportive environment. Of course, it is impossible for me as a person with hearing to imagine how you, as a Deaf person, hear music. Can you describe your perception of music?

Paul: Until I went to Oxford, I never actually considered how I heard and understood music; I had always been deaf and always been a musician, so it was a perfectly normal thing for me to be doing. Even now I can't really explain my musical skills and knowledge, analyse exactly how I conduct a choir, or describe why I enjoy going to concerts. *How* I do it isn't important to me, but it obviously is to others, who love to ask me questions about it.

For example, I was once asked if the clothes I wear make a difference when listening to – or, more correctly, perceiving – music. I'd never considered this at all and, at the time, I could not give a reply. Having thought about it since, the answer must be "yes" because the more heavily clothed I am the less sensitive to vibration I become, though it's still debatable how much of a difference it actually makes.

What I can confidently say is that I rely entirely on two things – vibration and score-reading – and that being a pianist helps tremendously. With a piano you have a huge range of pitch and a very physical instrument, plus the need to read both treble and bass staves. As I explained earlier, you feel the vibrations of each note travel up your arm and through your body and, over time, develop a physical sense of pitch. With my hearing aids, I can pick up about five octaves from the bottom of the piano, but knowing what those notes are, and the music they create, is only possible when I see the score. Without my hearing aids, I can't hear a single note.

As for 'hearing' other instruments, there is wide variation. A violin is totally inaudible most of the time, the exception being the very lowest notes. A cello is pretty good, at least in the lower register, because its pitch lies within my best residual hearing range. The woodwind family is, in general, fairly

easy to perceive; the clarinet is best because of the clarity of its tone (especially the warmth of its lower register) and the lowest range of the flute is also very appealing. I find brass instruments hard to perceive, even within an orchestral mass, with the possible exception of French horns. I dislike brass bands because the homogeneity of sound means there is no variety in the colour, tone, or texture of sound, so it's very boring to me. Despite being struck, percussion instruments vary widely in terms of what I can hear: timpani are obviously great, but triangles, cymbals, and tambourines are largely inaudible.

Score reading is something I don't recall ever being taught and from a young age I've been able to follow them without much effort. When I was at university, my tutor and I once discussed this. He told me one day that I was the easiest student he'd ever taught, and that was because of my deafness and, therefore, my reliance on reading a score. I responded by commenting that surely all music students could read a score and found it unbelievable that most, apparently, cannot do so. It's such a fundamental thing to me that I suppose I just assumed that everyone could do it.

Shirley: It is interesting to hear that your perception of different instruments varies so much. Do you think it is possible for people with hearing to understand how deaf people perceive music?

Paul: Hmm, that's a tricky question. My answer has to be: "partly, but you can never really understand and appreciate it because you're not deaf."

Ruth Montgomery, a deaf flute player, has said, "Music is not about hearing any more than language is," (cited in Fulford et al., 2011, p. 448) which makes the point that music is so much more than just hearing. It is a way of communicating with other people and expressing yourself, not just because we need to interact with other human beings, but because it is creative and intrinsically rewarding.

Another deaf musician believes, "I think musicality is something that exists irrespective of hearing" (Liz Varlow, personal comment in Fulford et al., 2011, p. 448). This sounds like a big philosophical statement, but there are clear scientific reasons why it is true. The way we understand music is much more complicated than our hearing mechanism. Music can remain unaffected by appalling cases of physical or mental health, where singing or playing music can be the only things that a person can either remember how to do or, indeed, the only way they can communicate.

Oliver Sacks' book *Musicophilia* (Sacks, 2007) and Dan Levitin's *This is Your Brain on Music* (Levitin, 2007) contain many stories that demonstrate how music is processed in many different parts of the brain. It should be no surprise that our ability to hear (with ears) does not have a great effect on our ability to be musical. What is more surprising (and frustrating) is the persistent idea that a "deaf musician" is a contradiction in terms.

On Evelyn Glennie's website (Glennie, 2020; see Fulford, 2013), we read:

The definitions of the category 'deaf' – i.e. not being able to hear sound - and the category of music - which is sound - are mutually exclusive. My career, like that of Beethoven and a number of others, is an impossibility. There are only 3 possible explanations, I am not a musician, I am not deaf or the categories of music and deaf must be incorrect.

Evelyn is right. Just because someone is deaf doesn't mean they hear nothing and that's especially true today with cochlear implants and hearing aid technology, although neither are fantastic for listening to music. Music is much more than what we perceive with our ears. People who lose their hearing later in life do not lose their musical abilities. People who are born profoundly deaf may still have an inner sense that they are musical. They may want to learn about music, they may find that they are good at music, and they may then grow up to identify as musicians.

The necessity of seeing the printed music in front of me often prompts people to ask why I bother going to concerts, what the attraction is in paying money to sit in a concert hall reading a score and not hearing the performance in progress. I admit that sometimes I do read the score and ignore the performance, particularly if I am listening to a work for the first time and do not have enough knowledge or memory of the score to concentrate on the sounds coming from the platform. If, however, I go and listen to a work where I do have knowledge of the score, I put the vibrations I perceive together with my own internal vibrations arising from what I see on the page before me and thus detect differences in interpretation.

Shirley: I think it is true that many people still only associate hearing with what we perceive through our ears. Are there some types of music that are difficult for you access?

Paul: Being deaf and so relying on the notated score does cut me off from some kinds of music. Electronic and avant-garde are major no-go areas, as the use of unconventional notations means that I cannot even get a visual impression of the music. Improvised music naturally presents difficulties and, although I enjoy Jazz, I can only perceive rhythmic variations not melodic ones.

Having to rely on the score does sometimes frustrate me. Without a score it is impossible for me to understand and enjoy a piece of music, but actually buying them is expensive and not every piece of music is available in print anyway. Even with a score it's not always easy to follow it in a confined space, in a concert hall, with people sat on either side and in front, and good lighting cannot be guaranteed!

Occasionally I am asked about other challenges. Conducting an orchestra (or some other group of instrumentalists) is an obvious one, yet I'd love to have a go, simply for the experience. Certain playing techniques or the use of unusual tunings are other barriers. The musician in me always wants to know what a composer is trying to say or express but there are times when I have to accept that it's just not going to be possible, and gracefully accept defeat.

Shirley: You have a strong musical background and training that has given you access to many types of music. From my experience, living for a long time in Austria, it is rare for children who are deaf to have access to music education at school in comparison to children who are not deaf. Your background was obviously a big influence in establishing Music and the Deaf (MatD). Can you tell us more about it?

Paul: This was the charity that I founded in 1988 and ran for 27 years, before leaving in 2015 to pursue a freelance career.

As I mentioned earlier, when I was 12 years old, I had this idea of finding ways of helping and encouraging deaf people to both enjoy and make music as I did. The initial vision was to have an actual building where we would run courses and classes of all kinds, along with staff who would work across the UK to lead and establish projects.

As I got older, I realised that this was an expensive idea! Instead I did all the work – going out speaking, leading workshops, devising, collaborating on projects with other arts organisations, and doing signed theatre and concert work – and, as time went on, found others to assist with both the delivery and the admin of it all. There was certainly plenty of doubt from others, but I knew it could succeed, and it did.

The main aims were, very simply, to encourage and support deaf people – and those who live and work with them – to make music. I was never bothered about someone's degree of deafness, their communication method, whether someone wore hearing aids or not, or the age of anyone; I just wanted to find ways of making music and educating society at large about music and deafness.

There was never really any clear plan or strategy; it was very much running with an idea and finding like-minded people to achieve it. As well as working with deaf people, it was vital to educate hearing people about music and deafness, as they were the ones who controlled, for example, education policies, schools, music colleges, budgets, arts venues, and organisations.

Within the Deaf community itself there were big challenges. For older people – many of whom had for decades been banned from using sign language and forced to learn to speak – music was a very negative thing as, in their minds and experiences, it was inextricably linked to speech therapy and therefore 'bad.' There was also what I'll call the 'political' brigade who saw music as a purely hearing thing and made no secret of their distaste for it in a 'Deaf world.' Each to their own, but there should always be tolerance and respect.

Shirley: You ran the charity MatD for 27 years and have encouraged and supported deaf people to access and make music. What are you focussing on now?

Paul: With the exception of music workshops, which I very rarely do now (with one exception that I'll mention in a moment), I still do talks, motivational speaking, and some signed theatre and concert performances, but my main area of work has become signed song. I currently lead seven sign language choirs, advise a few others, create lots of resources, and work with various music organisations to develop this skill.

It is good that arts organisations are becoming more aware of diversity and accessibility, and actually taking it seriously. For too long it was merely a box-ticking exercise (and, for some, it still is), but the general trend has been positive.

It's frustrating, however, when organisations and venues use interpreters, project leaders, whatever, who are hearing and do not have the music skills and knowledge required for the job. I see this as a part of a wider obsession with qualifications rather than with competence and experience. If you're doing a music and deafness project, you need a deaf musician to help you deliver it!

For the past nine years I've been very fortunate to work with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra (MCO) on their "Feel the Music" project (<https://mahlerchamber.com/learning/education-and-outreach/feel-the-music-programme>), leading workshops and bringing music to deaf children in

various countries around Europe and further afield. This has been a great joy for everyone involved and has become a fundamental part of the MCO's programming.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, when singing has been discouraged, I've actively promoted signed song as an alternative, and this had been widely welcomed by many. I've made over 200 videos for various choirs, schools, music services, and arts companies, and done projects with the Stay at Home Choir, Oxford Bach Soloists, London Symphony Chorus, Chorus of Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and many others. Hopefully, this will continue once concert life begins again.

Shirley: Your experience and background, as well as the information you have given about the perception of music, have potential implications for music teachers, music therapists, and musicians working with deaf children and adults. What information do you think they might need and what advice would you give them?

Paul: I'm curious as to what these implications might be! Hopefully I challenge – in a positive way – the way they think about music and process it. My experiences have shown me that many teachers are nervous, even scared, of having a pupil who is different (in whatever way) and that reaction is almost always prompted by fear. For some it's been the lack of control or authority that frightens them; yet every pupil, every fellow musician we meet, should really be seen as an opportunity to think afresh about our view of music, how we respond to it, how we make it.

Obviously, if you want to find out what a deaf person thinks of music and how they process it, find one and ask them. It may sound harsh, but there is no way that a hearing person can ever really know what it is like to be deaf and every single deaf person will process and enjoy music in a different way, just as every hearing person does. The 'one size fits all' approach to music education, music therapy or community music is lazy, unhelpful, and potentially damaging. I've encountered far too many young deaf people who have wished to pursue music but whose hopes have been thwarted by the negative and intransigent attitude of examination boards, for example. It has to stop.

Be open; be inquisitive; explore musical journeys and ideas alongside your pupils, not as a superior but as a friend; be challenged; admit you don't always get everything right!

Shirley: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Paul: The most common question I am asked is, "How do you hear music?" and I've developed the habit of turning the question round and responding, "What is music? How would you explain it to someone who can't hear?"

The usual answer to that is silence as, for most people, they rarely stop and think about it. Music is something that goes in one ear and out the other, they know what they like and what they don't like but haven't really thought about what it is. Eventually they might try and explain it by talking about pitch or melody or vibration or emotion. I've had two great answers to this question that I'd like to share with you.

In one MCO project I asked this question to one of the players who immediately responded by saying, "I can't tell you, but I can show you," and did just that. His point was that music isn't something

we explain, it's something that we do; we make it, play it, share it, and it moves us.

The other answer came in the Autumn of 2020. I had filmed some songs in British Sign Language for a school in the UK to learn, and the pupils sent me 'Thank you' cards and letters to show their appreciation. Among them was a drawing which included the words, "You hear best with your heart, not with your ears." I couldn't agree more.

I'm also often asked if I feel I would be a better musician if I could hear, to which I reply, "I doubt it." Obviously, being born deaf I have nothing to compare this to, so anything I say is speculative. If I could hear then maybe conducting an orchestra or ensemble would be more possible, as would accompanying someone. Communal music-making might be less tiring as I would not have the same pressure and strain of lip-reading and watching all the time.

On the other hand, if I could hear then perhaps my understanding of music may be reduced. If I had been able to hear in the past, then I doubt I'd have developed the awareness and appreciation of music that has come from having to get to know music from the printed page. My deafness makes me who I am and whilst I'm not proud of being deaf (it's hard work!) it defines me and is a fundamental part of me.

Being deaf is not a barrier to the enjoyment and appreciation of music, as many would believe. A way over and around every barrier can be found with determination and effort. Thankfully, people no longer tell me that I am "too deaf to do music." I have discovered my own way of 'doing' it: it may not always be what others understand as 'music' but it is far from the sound of silence that they may think it is.

Shirley: Thank you for the interview.

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Ελληνική περίληψη | Greek abstract

«Ηχεί σαν μουσική στα αυτιά»: Μία συνέντευξη με τον Paul Whittaker

Paul Whittaker | Shirley Salmon

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Ο Paul Whittaker είναι ένας κωφός μουσικός με βαριά βαρηκοΐα που έχει αφιερώσει τη ζωή του στο να ενθαρρύνει άλλα κωφά άτομα να ασχοληθούν με τη μουσική και στο να προσκαλεί τους άλλους να σκέπτονται ως προς τον ίδιο τρόπο που

ακούν και αντιλαμβάνονται. Στην παρούσα συνέντευξη που έδωσε στην Shirley Salmon, μιλάει για το υπόβαθρο και τις εμπειρίες του και για κάποιες από τις δυσκολίες που έχει αντιμετωπίσει.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ

μουσική, κώφωση, μουσική αντίληψη, απώλεια ακοής