

ENTREVISTA

ADAM OCKELFORD

Dr. Ana M. Vernia



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Adam has had a lifelong fascination with music, as a composer, performer, teacher, and researcher. While attending the Royal Academy of Music in London, Adam began working with children with special needs (he realised that several of them also had special musical *abilities*) and became interested in how we all intuitively understand music, without the need for formal education. Adam pursued this line of research and was awarded a doctorate in music from Goldsmith's College London in 1993, in which he set out his 'zygonic' theory of musical understanding. This theory has proved to be a valuable tool in music theory and analysis, in music-developmental research, and in exploring the relationship between music therapy and education. After leaving college, Adam Ockelford started his career teaching at the Linden Lodge School for the Blind in London. He then worked at the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), initially as Music Education Advisor before serving as Director of Education. He now works at the University of Roehampton in London as Director of the Applied Music Research Centre. He is also Secretary of the Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research ('SEMPRE'), founder of The Amber Trust, a charity that supports visually impaired children in their pursuit of music, and a Trustee of Live Music Now, a charity that uses music to foster social change.

Ana M. Vernia. You are now a very important person in the field of music research and its benefits, especially in autistic children, but how did music come into your life?

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My mother played the piano and her father (my grandfather) was a church organist and choirmaster at a large parish church in Nottingham, a city in the East Midlands of England. We had a piano in the house that my mother played, and my older sister played the recorder, so there was always music around, and it seemed a natural thing to do. However, there was no spare money for piano lessons, so I began to teach myself. In the end, though, my parents thought lessons were a priority, so I started from the age of 10.

AV We know that music has many benefits, as there is much scientific research that supports it. Do you think it is important that music be taught to people in special education, by music specialists?

AO That's a really good question. First of all, I think that music should be part of the curriculum of *all* children, but particularly children with special needs and disabilities, because for them it may be even more powerful in terms of helping them develop language and social skills, and for their wellbeing. Their teachers ideally need a high level of musical skills and special education skills, because being a good musician doesn't mean that you'll necessarily be good at working with children with special needs, and being a good special needs teacher doesn't mean you'll have the necessary musical skills. So ideally, you need both. However, that is a rare combination, and the professional development courses that I run are to support teachers who are special needs specialists to acquire the music education skills they require to teach children with profound or severe disabilities. The other training I do is to teach advanced musicians how to work with children with learning difficulties. In summary ... we

need to bring both skill sets together

AV You have many research articles and have participated in many international conferences. What is your perception regarding musical research?

AO That's interesting. I think music education research isn't always very well known outside the field of music education. That's a shame because some of the research that music educators do could have value in other contexts. One of the things I've done all my life is to try to bring different areas of music research together. I started out as a music theorist, and the time (40 years ago) there was little or no connection between music theory and music psychology. But now, with some of the new disciplines like empirical musicology, and my own sub-discipline of 'applied musicology', music theory, music education and music psychology research have come together, which is a good thing.

AV I have had the opportunity to see you working with yours blind and autistic students. I have been able to observe that you are a great player at the piano, with a great capacity to adapt to your students. What would you say is the key to being able to connect well with students with special educational needs?

AO Funnily enough, I was talking about that with someone today. In general, the single most important quality is empathy, I believe – to have some insight into how the child is perceiving the world. To connect musically with many of these children it's really important to use your ears. You have to use the ideas that the children offer. With very profoundly disabled children that just may be a little vocalisation or a slight movement of a finger.. I was working today with a child who was scratching a tambourine. I got the other musicians who were present in the session to copy the sound, and then to improvise a piece around it. I could see in the child's smile that he understood, although

he couldn't talk. He could appreciate, though, that the sound he'd made had had an impact on me, because I was copying him. But beyond that, he was at the centre of an improvised musical texture. It's those kinds of connections that really are the most important thing, but you can only do that if you can play by ear and if you can improvise. In the session today, there was a flute player, who seemed to have been very traditionally educated. She's only 17, so she's still at school. I asked her to improvise and she was amazing! As the children moved, she made up phrases to match them and it was lovely to see. I sort of think those kinds of empathic skills are really hard if not impossible to teach. You can teach people sign language, you can teach people Braille, but it's really hard to teach them how to be empathic.

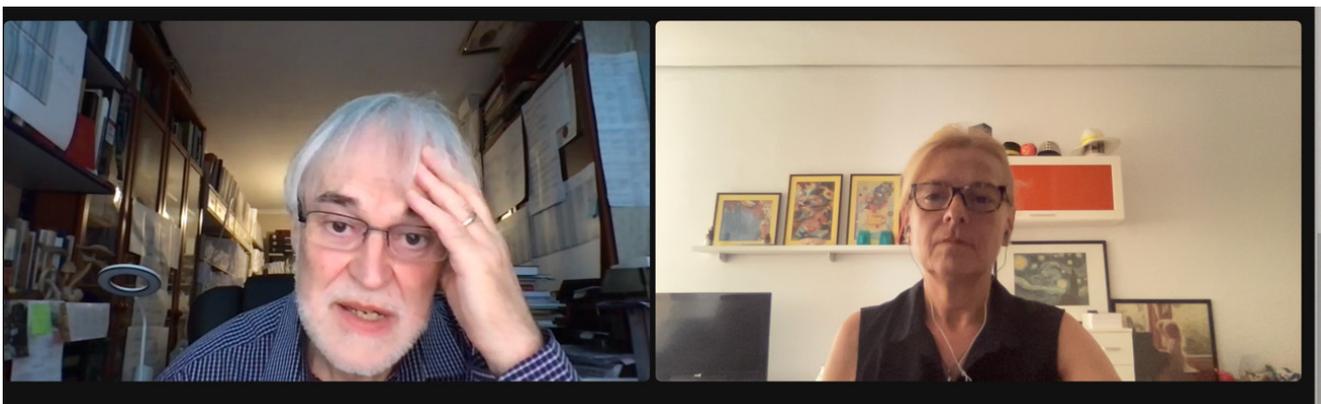
AV You have a very good relationship with the parents of your students with special educational needs. From your point of view, do you think that families currently have facilities to access special music classes?

AO My main focus is always on the child, because they're the most important person. But their families are really important as well so, when I'm working with a child, I always work the parents in the room. Partly that's for safeguarding reasons, because the children are very vulnerable and quite unpredictable. I like the parents to be part of the musical relationships that I develop with the children. I don't

believe in having a private relationship with the child. The child needs to know that our relationship extends to their parents and siblings. One of the biggest problems that parents face is finding teachers who can work with their child. It's very difficult, but some of the resources and training courses that I've set up over the years have tried to give music teachers ideas and strategies for working with children.

AV In each country there is a different reality to learn music, there are conservatories, music schools, and even universities. If you had the power to change things, what would you change or improve about your educational system?

AO When I went to music college 40 years ago, the idea of being anything other than a performer or a teacher in private schools was not one that anyone had thought about. But even at that time I was interested in working with children with special needs. My tutors at the conservatoire thought I was mad and said why do you want to waste your time doing that? I think what's good is that that has all changed, so most conservatoires universities in England now have modules on their courses to do with music in the community, music for a wider social impact. Students may spend a term working in the community or working with children in special schools, or with older people with dementia. Most musicians now have a portfolio career that includes activities like these. Musicians say that 'making music for a social impact' enrich-



es their 'mainstream' performances, helping them to communicate better through music. In summary, things are improving we've still got a long way to go.

AV Before saying goodbye to the interview, what would you recommend to ARTSEDU-CA readers about music education and what would you say to music teachers?

AO Coming to understand how to work effectively with children and young people with special needs actually makes you a much better teacher for everybody. When I first I started teaching, I think when I was about 15 partly, because I had to earn money to buy the oboe which was the instrument I played at the time. I taught a lot of 'typically developing' children for a number of years, and then moved to working with young people with special abilities and needs. I was aware that because you have to think much harder about how to work with someone, say, who's autistic, it makes you a better teacher all round. It makes you more empathetic, it makes you more child-centered. Unfortunately, there is still a lot of poor music teaching that is quite formulaic, where teachers just do what they've always done and the pupils can take it or leave it – and most do leave it! There are few adult performers. So, clearly, music education could be improved, and people would keep going for longer. The children I work with who are autistic or who have other special needs don't tend to give up. They keep going, and I think it's because, as a teacher, I have to be more considerate of their wishes. I think if that's the case because someone's autistic, shouldn't it be the case for everybody? Every child deserves really good, thoughtful, imaginative teaching, and I think if all teachers worked at least a little with children with special needs, they'd become better teachers. I think the quality of music education as a whole would improve.

AV Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your reflections and knowledge with us.

