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Does elite music teaching leave pupils open to abuse?

Ian Pace

Daily Telegraph, February 20th, 2015, published online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/11425241/Philip-Pickett-Does-elite-music-teaching-leave-pupils-open-to-abuse.html>

As ex-Guildhall teacher Philip Pickett becomes the latest elite music teacher to be jailed for raping students, the renowned pianist and teacher Ian Pace asks if we need a fundamental change in the way we teach music to put a stop to exploitation and abuse

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The Oscar-nominated film Whiplash pictured above portrays the intense and at times abusive relationship between aspiring jazz drummer Miles Teller and his teacher JK Simmons.

By Ian Pace

2:42PM GMT 20 Feb 2015

The case of conductor Philip Pickett is about more than just one individual sex offender. Pickett was one of the leading names in the subculture of "early music" in the UK, well-known to anyone with even a casual interest in that music. His activities were far from unknown to many musicians, but some felt honour-bound not to report someone who had helped their career (and might hurt it if they stepped

out of line), or who they admired so much as a musician. He remained apparently protected for decades, able to act with impunity.

This was not the first major conviction of a leading "early musician"; in 2007 the renowned conductor Robert King was found guilty of 14 counts of sexual assault against boys as young as 12, and jailed for 45 months. After around half this time, **King was released and was able to pick up his conducting career** pretty much where he had left it.

There has been a steady stream of reports and trials concerning sexual abuse by classical musicians since the early 1990s, then in 2013 **the terrible case of Michael Brewer**, former Director of Music at Chetham's School of Music, who was jailed together with his ex-wife Kay for the sexual abuse, from age 14, of **Frances Andrade, who tragically took her own life during the trial**, acting as a catalyst for others to come forward about abuse at Chetham's and elsewhere.

As organiser of **a petition calling for an inquiry into abuse in music** I have been made aware of many horrendous allegations (a great many of which have not yet become public), including further afield in the US, France, Belgium, Germany, Italy and Russia.

In the last few months, **the musicologist Geoff Baker has recently published his findings** of numerous allegations of sexual abuse within the massive El Sistema music educational project in Venezuela, whilst the composer Bunita Marcus, in an interview with an Italian journalist, **has spoken about repeated sexual and physical assault at the hands of late composer Morton Feldman.**

'Arrogant, narcissistic and bullying'

Musical institutions are often found to have dismissed allegations (and sometimes dismissed or threatened allegers) prioritising their own reputations, a pattern which continues following convictions.

These institutions rarely reach out to the victims who are as much a part of their legacy as the successful musicians who adorn their publicity materials.

The perpetrators are also frequently found to be arrogant, narcissistic and bullying individuals convinced of their own superiority to other human beings, who only serve to boost their egos or serve their careers.

Such behaviour and attitudes are far from unusual amongst musicians, and I believe that in this context sexual abuse is often an extension of more widespread mistreatment and psychological abuse used as a strategy for domination. But all of this is frequently excused on account of the mystical aura of these musicians' artistry; some of their acolytes, furious at their idols being treated as no longer special, will jealously defend them come what may, and direct vitriol or character assassination towards anyone who disagrees.

In this rigidly hierarchical and anti-democratic culture, it should be no surprise that some musicians have had little problem flourishing under dictatorships.



The Guildhall School

of Music and Drama was founded over 130 years ago

Exploitation and fear

There is a vast imbalance between the numbers of those who receive a high level musical education, and the numbers who would ever be likely to find the limited amount of work available.

Amongst the many with the basic competence which can be achieved through good training, the few who are successful do so via the patronage of various key individuals - conductors, artistic directors, sometimes composers, radio producers, key critics – and gaining access to the wider networks they inhabit.

Teachers also have a magnetic power to some students, and some exploit this to rule by fear, intimidation and humiliation, as portrayed, albeit somewhat crudely, **in the film *Whiplash***, and more subtly in *The Piano Teacher*.

All of this places young musicians in a hugely subservient position which is easily exploited by the unscrupulous, something which Pickett understood as well as did Max Clifford.

Those who have experienced abuse of whatever type can fear reporting or even objecting to it, because of the dangers for the careers to which they have worked all their lives if they rock the applecart.

There are many decent musicians who would like to see much of this change and a more humane field of practice take its place. But just as many, alas, who see nothing wrong with a system from which they have personally benefited, or who view such matters as of trivial importance compared to the exalted 'purely musical' realm they inhabit.

With all of this in mind, I believe a controversial question needs to be asked: can the classical music world be trusted to self-regulate, and stop abusive exploitation of patronage? Or is now the time to consider a new level of regulation and demands for transparency at all levels, whether about the choices of who plays in the pit for a West End musical, or who gets major concertos or Proms commissions?

Pianist Ian Pace is a teacher at City University and a campaigner. [Read more on his blog.](#)