

SALLY-ANNE HUANG

Sally-Anne Huang, Chair of the HMC, talks music education and partnership, in conversation with Tim Garrard.

Sally-Anne Huang is High Master of St Paul's School and the Chair of HMC



Tell us about your own educational journey (primary, secondary etc.).

I grew up in Bolton and went to a state primary school called Claypool which is still there! And from there I had the opportunity to apply to go to Bolton School which was the highest profile local independent school. My brother had got there on the direct grant scheme ten years before, but we were not a family with independent education in our background. My parents both went to grammar schools and then, because the grammar schools didn't exist at the time, they looked at independent education for us.

And I'm hugely grateful to Bolton School. I think it was the most formative time of my life, in that I was taught an awful lot of stuff. I did music lessons there; I learnt to play the flute there! But I learnt to like knowledge for its own sake. And I've met a lot of Bolton School alumni - particularly the women - and we were definitely taught that it was our job to go out and rule the world. And we never questioned it! So, Bolton School was hugely important.

I got to go to Oxford where I read Classics and English, and then I decided to become a teacher. I hadn't wanted to become a teacher; I'd wanted to become a journalist, but then when I did college journalism I realised that you had to invade people's privacy, and it didn't suit me! So, a very last-minute decision, I decided to train to be a teacher because I felt depressed about not talking about Shakespeare anymore. I did my PGCE at King's, and have remained in teaching ever since!

You are a passionate advocate of the Arts. We've really enjoyed that! Why are you this way?

The arts have been a massive part of my life. There was always music at home. My mum played the piano. My dad was massively into things like big band and swing, so there was always Glenn Miller and Louis Armstrong in the background.

On my 13th birthday, my parents took me to the RSC and we randomly saw an unknown Kenneth Branagh as Henry V, aged 23, so I lucked out! I came out thinking that this is life changing, so theatre for me has always made me think; it's taking me out of comfort zones; it's allowed me to imagine other things. It's just a massive part of life and I can't imagine life without it.

In lockdown I felt this even more, that when people were stuck at home they needed the National Theatre's online productions; they needed their music to be playing; they needed to be reading literature. And it really demonstrated to me: I have a huge respect for science - my goodness, I know we need that - but, also, as human beings it's a primal thing: we need the arts and our mental health suffers if we don't have them. And life is massively enhanced by the arts, as are our relationships.

So, whilst I know that our pupils on average will make more money if they do Maths or Engineering degrees, I know how much we need the musicians, the artists, and the writers for life to be worth living. So, as an educational leader, I think we have to be pushing these things as well.

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How does this tie in to your work with HMC, and what are you hoping to achieve as Chair this year?

It's a huge privilege to be Chair of HMC. I feel very conscious that I was elected by my peers, so it's been a massive privilege to advocate for and represent other heads at this time. Even before Covid-19, I always thought that I would use this time to advocate for the arts because they were underfunded, particular in the state sector.

Children should do what they love, and they'll probably be the best at it because they love it. So, I was always going to try and have a performing arts focus and, as you know, I was already talking to you and Simon and to MTA about how we can get these institutions working together.

HMC schools have a voice; they have experience; they're champions of these things. If I can leverage some of that and expand it to other people, particular through cross-sector partnerships, then that's the right thing to be doing. So, I started off trying to build a relationship with MTA which is pushing at an open door. Simon came to speak at conference and we had fantastic feedback from HMC heads who want to respond to his challenge as to how we can help music to flourish. And of course, in a Covid and Post-Covid world it's even more under threat than it was beforehand.

So, it's vitally important, and I want to use this year to initiate partnerships and projects. It ought to be about some kind of legacy and I would be really pleased if I could make a difference by setting up relationships that could run well beyond my time as Chair whether I'm directly involved or not.

What does meaningful partnership mean to you?

For me, partnership is exactly that. It isn't outreach, and it isn't one party saying we are really good at this and we'll come and help you because you need it. I learnt most about partnership, I think, during my time as Head of JAGS where I was part of the Southwark Schools Learning Partnership which is one of the oldest state and independent partnerships in London. It was formed in 2003 as part of the London Challenge so, by the time I got involved, the relationships were really established.

I think all partnerships do depend on structures because you need a framework and you need goals. Increasingly we're under pressure to measure our impact, and that's a good thing. So, we're never just doing this to signal our virtue; we can actually see the impact, so all of those things matter. But I think the single most important thing is relationships. Once human beings work together and concentrate on what they have in common rather than any differences, that's when all kinds of magic can happen that you didn't necessarily predict!

So, I think it starts off with frameworks, and targets, but it ends up being about people.

What can MTA members expect to see as a result of MTA and HMC working together in partnership?

In some ways it would be helpful for us to know what MTA members would like to see happening. I think a greater involvement in events would be good, so perhaps HMC could be more directly involved in the MTA Conference. A network of events and projects, and hopefully some music coming out of it as well!

We'd like pupils at all schools to work together. We've started off with some very specific things with the 'Bach to School' idea - just the name alone makes it worth doing! The idea is to involve lots of HMC pupils, and I've challenged HMC Heads and their Directors of Music to sign up.

I'm sure MTA can benefit from HMC's resources, and experiences, and communities, but there is absolutely no doubt that HMC will benefit from talking more with other MTA members about good practice in schools. I know already, having had to reopen again after the first lockdown, that there was incredibly informative good practice coming out of MTA that I stole as an HMC Head! So, it's about sharing good practice as well, but my hope is that before the end of this academic year we'll have more formal things to announce about how our relationship could move forward into the future!

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