

# A summer of music

Dartington's summer school provides an opportunity for musicians to make music; and act and dance... By Peter Kingston

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If there is a moment when Rose Heatley begins to feel a twinge of doubt about having signed up for this music summer school, it comes when she is told to start howling. Or rather the woman opposite her begins yowling - a flesh-creeping, bum-clenching, primal "Ayee" that sets the windows in the tiny rehearsal studio shuddering for the next two minutes.

All Heatley has to do is join in responsively with an appropriate call of her own. It is to be their improvised, wordless howl duet. And the task is being made no easier by the accordion she is carrying.

For any keen young drama student, howling on cue in front of a group of strangers, even if it includes a distinguished theatre director, would be a breeze. Drama students are often born without the embarrassment gene that makes the rest of us freeze in terror when, for instance, the pantomime dame dives into the audience looking for a volunteer to haul up on stage.

But for the middle-aged administrator of a small charity, to be launched at this so soon after lunch is quite a different order.

"What did you think about it?" the composer Deirdre Gribbin asks her, as the last lupine ululation fades away and the voice of the woman in the neighbouring practice studio can be heard once again trilling through the soprano arias from *The Messiah*.

"Not madly enthusiastic, I must be honest," comes the reply, with a nervous laugh.

But Heatley is clearly no quitter. She is looking forward to five days of this sort of work, culminating in a public performance by herself and the rest of the small group who have signed up for *Composition and Performance: The Theatre of the Accordion*, one of a myriad of courses at this year's Dartington international summer school, in Devon.

The course publicity blurb, which months earlier had intrigued three accordion players and a trio of composers enough to persuade them to sign up, explained that they would be working with Deirdre Gribbin in examining the "theatrical possibilities inherent in the creation of new works for the accordion". As a frame for the pieces the composers and players would create, they would follow the text of the novel *Accordion Crimes*, by E Annie Proulx.

"There is an emphasis on the delivery and presentation of a work within a theatrical context," the course blurb had added. An unwary accordionist might not have seen lurking under this somewhat windy prose the clear warning that squeezing notes out of their instrument, however prettily, would not be good enough. Oh no. It was a near cert that speaking and acting would be required, if not singing and dancing too. And spotlights.

After a career in the civil service, Neil Sanders is an old hand at deciphering verbiage and had some idea of what lay ahead. But it was a little scary nonetheless, even though he has been playing the accordion for 15 years and has sailed through all the grades.

"I've never spoken on stage before, but I don't have a problem giving lectures," he says.

Heatley started squeezing accordions five years ago with the aim of having fun and not doing any grades. For her, the notion of working not only with a composer of Gribbin's stature, but

also with Gribbin's husband, the director Lou Stein, who founded The Gate Theatre in London, and the accordion virtuoso Dermot Dunne, on producing a viable public performance in less than a week was formidable.

"It sounded very interesting, not the sort of thing I've done before," she says. "But I thought I could learn from it."

And that, in a nutshell, is what impels thousands of people each year to have a bash at learning something new and strange to them. Not to get a job. Not to win promotion in the one they've already got. Not to earn more to buy a bigger house or car. Not to gain a few yards in the much-trumpeted "knowledge economy", but because it sounds interesting. It is learning for its own sake.

This is the season when the British traditionally flick through brochures for evening classes.

But with every year, the prevailing wind from government seems to be shoving people towards the sort of learning that is designed to boost their employment prospects. That is the message picked up by Alan Tuckett, director of Niace, the national organisation for adult and continuing education.

The white paper Learning Age, produced when David Blunkett was education secretary and which led to the formation of the Learning and Skills Council, was admirable in its recognition of the importance of pure learning. But documents issued by government since then have paid it dwindling attention, says Tuckett. The most recent "mauve paper", Success For All, a consultation document on reforming further education and training, pays lip service to "learning for leisure and personal development" in the first paragraph, and then doesn't mention it again.

"Blunkett's white paper was wonderful about it," Tuckett says. "It recognised that people learned to explore, to satisfy their curiosity as well as make a difference to their jobs." In subsequent documents, learning for its own sake has suffered from "a sin of omission", he adds. "When you ask about it, it is all included as 'community-based adult learning'."

Government's failure to give a stronger public support to something as distinctive as learning for its own sake puts it in danger, Tuckett reckons.

"It's just that if you don't name something, eventually it withers. I have a fear that that would happen to adult learning for its own sake."

Whatever the fate of pure lifelong learning elsewhere, its flame burns ever fiercer during the five weeks that Dartington runs, up until the last day of August. The demand to attend at least 20 concerts a week, and to observe or participate in masterclasses, chamber music coaching, orchestral workshops, choirs big and small, not forgetting West African drumming, Balinese gamelan, gospel singing and junk music, all led by first-rank musicians, including a sprinkling of very big names, has been as heavy as ever this year, says its artistic adviser, Gavin Henderson.

Also a sell-out was The Theatre of the Accordion, which pulled in more than 100 people at 10.30pm on the Friday. "It was totally different from what I was expecting," said one woman in the audience. "Everybody came out of themselves and did things which they wouldn't normally do. It was fantastic." Or as they say on theatre billboards: a howling success.