

Interview with Pauline de Snoo 3.9.14

Paul Walker

(As well as being the hard working editor of "Concertina World", Pauline is a performer, composer and teacher of the English concertina. She is a resident tutor at the Swaledale Squeeze and has produced multi-media instruction manuals, a CD and DVD.)

PW: I'd like to start by asking you what the word Academy means for you. You've named your website Concertina-Academy and it's the word I associate with your very individual approach to the concertina (in a most positive sense).

When deciding to make a website I first was looking for names that were already taken since that ruled out some options and since teaching has been my special interest the word "academy" seemed to cover lots of subjects. Not only teaching but also a place where anything of interest can be shown and from which other people can learn. My teaching involves more than just pressing buttons and reading music. I use different methods to get people to really play and feel the music in a way they will enjoy. I guess this has become an even stronger wish since I had to work hard and do a lot of research to discover this for myself when I was studying at the Conservatoire in 1999 - 2004.

PW: Just to clarify: the word "academic" to me implies a rigorous, systematic theoretical approach (though not without passion). Is that what you mean when you say your teaching is, "More than just pressing buttons and reading music."

Rigorous sounds to me stiff. But indeed a systematic approach which includes all details from the beginning. Teaching people to "type" the written music, which is something I felt to have learnt when I started to learn to play an instrument and which is also the method commonly used in our teaching system, is not the best way in my view. That is why I use a combination of the ideas of Kodaly and Dalcroze (also see next question).

It means incorporating all aspects from music from the beginning. With a new pupil I now start with children's tunes with just two notes. Then a pupil has to sing, name, analyze, play and so on these tunes. Then I add another note and so on.

The results are so much better. It seems slower but actually is faster and the pupil has far more skills within a shorter time. I have developed my own teaching ideas after I finished the Conservatoire.

PW: The phrase "Dalcroze Eurythmics" pops up on your CD sleeve. Could you explain what that means? (See review Concertina World 459 "Concertina Scape, September 2014".)*

Dalcroze was a teacher at the Conservatoire in Geneva (Switzerland) who discovered that although his students were great technical musicians, they could not play with real feeling and lacked some other skills as well. He then devised methods to improve on this. While I was studying the Concertina at the Conservatoire I too had this problem. One of my teachers, Cobi Berculo (a very good violinist), gave me a biography of Jacqueline Du Pré. I then bought two other biographies about her and discovered that her first teacher was her mother who was also a Dalcroze teacher. Since Jacqueline was a fantastic cellist I decided that this method ought to be good and looked up Dalcroze on the internet. So I ended up taking a summer course in Canterbury (UK). There I discovered why this method was so successful. Karin Greenhead became my inspiration and teacher for my final year at the Conservatoire and made me reach the best result I could have dreamt to reach in my final exam.

The Dalcroze Society (<http://www.dalcroze.org.uk>) in the UK combines Dalcroze and Kodaly which is a great recipe for music teaching.

Without this I could never have played the music I did in my exam after only having studied the concertina for 7 years. I started to play 1 July 1997 and had my final exam at the Conservatoire in May 2004. Before that I only had 1½ years of piano lessons. Then playing all pieces but one from memory in my exam in 2004.

PW: You surprised me at the Swaledale Squeeze by saying that you regarded the 48 key English concertina as the "standard" model (whereas I'd always assumed the 56 tenor treble was preferable). Why is that?

The reason I say this is because that was the standard for which was arranged and composed in the beginning when Giulio Regondi was famous and shortly after the invention of Sir Charles Wheatstone. If for example there were too many variations in an

instrument it would lead to hardly any compositions for each instrument. Now there are many compositions for flute, piano, violin and most other instruments. Now a piano for example is always the same and there are millions of compositions for it. But if there were thousands of different pianos with different numbers of keys there would be fewer compositions to choose from to play. One could not play all the music on these different pianos.

Now when a piece is written for a concertina with more than those 48 keys I cannot play it or I have to arrange it or rewrite it. If everybody had to do that for all those other instruments it would become hard for these instruments too to become recognized as a popular instrument. I think it is one of the reasons that has made it harder for the concertina to find a place. Composers do not know where to start if they want their music played by as many people as possible. So I tell them to stick to the 48 keys.

PW: Douglas Rogers (who I believe was your main teacher at the Fontys Conservatoire in The Netherlands) is on record as saying that there is a misconception that the concertina is a folk instrument. Would you agree with this perhaps controversial view?

Indeed Douglas Rogers was my concertina teacher in those years and he has supported me all through my studies. Together with Cobi Berculo they did a very good job and Karin Greenhead was the cherry on the cake for me. But my piano teacher Jeroen van Vliet in those years also was very supportive and gave lots of good advice although his speciality was jazz music.

Douglas is correct about the repertoire because the English Concertina was first played in the classical repertoire by Regondi and all the other classical musicians of those days before other repertoires discovered the instrument. However in my view the classical repertoire was in those days in reality folk or popular music of that time. Most people then could sing or hum the operatic tunes that were famous in those days. And that was also a large part of the repertoire being arranged for concertina. Now the classical musicians often find that part of the repertoire of minor quality in a classical sense.

I have been playing more folk music since 2004 (after having lessons from Alistair Anderson, very inspiring) and I find that in general children's songs and folk tunes are short and easy tunes

that one can learn faster and easier from memory. However if one is good at that music one can take a step further if one is interested and go for music that becomes gradually more complex. Then one can slide into classical music seamlessly (both older and modern).

If one grows in music the seemingly more difficult music becomes easier. It is like a child who learns to talk. First one word, then add another one and so on. Then it goes to school and learns even more words and also writing and reading. Then it depends. Some continue to study and become very learned scholars. They can write and speak very complicated language. That is the classical music. Some stop their education earlier and stick with jobs that require less education but maybe other skills. That would be the folk music or popular music. And there is jazz. But even jazz has evolved over time as do the other styles. Language also changes over time. Old English compared to present day English even if you do not change the spelling ...

But all have their own qualities and all are part of life and necessary. Respect for each other is always required. Not an easy thing to reach though as it turns out.

PW: Tell me about your current repertoire. Have you any recommendations for players from other genres to try?

I play some of the old (*classical*) repertoire but I have managed to get composers to write new music for me. The first to have a new piece composed for him was Douglas Rogers (Song of the Sea by Oliver Hunt in 1985). He then commissioned Keith Amos to write three more pieces.

I was lucky to also get some more new pieces written and/or adapted for concertina. Not all has yet been recorded though.

I have tried and still aim to play music from the different periods in order to have a variety in repertoire. To play in only one style (older or modern) is not very interesting in a concert. Some people in the audience prefer one and others the other. You want to please all and give them an example of what can be done with the instrument.

My advice to other players from other genres is to open your mind and give some things a try. But take it step by step and do not go in the deep end because you will give it up when it is too difficult at

first. See above my ideas about the learning process. When people want personal advice they can always ask me.

PW: You may consider this a foolish question. But what genre would you say your compositions/repertoire belong to? The selections on your CD "Concertina Landscape" seem to me to be perhaps modern classical/jazz, whereas a more recent composition, "Where To" (2009) seems jazz-tinged contemporary?

Except for the title piece "Concertina Scape" I had no hand in composing the music on that CD. So the diversity is great. It certainly is modern classical music and since the composers also have very different backgrounds and are new to the instrument, the result is very eclectic. You can hear a lot in that music. However if you analyse classical music you will find that some of the big composers a long time ago already used so called "jazz chords". It is more a matter of combination how the music will sound eventually.

When I composed quite a large number of songs in 2002/2003 I was myself very much influenced by jazz music while I was studying classical music at the same time. And also at the time I was regularly in the UK for concertina weekends. That has made my compositions a mix of all these styles. I never have much thought about it. I just sang the songs and wrote down what I sang.

PW: Your DVD, "Playing the Concertina" shows you performing with various ensembles. Where do you perform live and for what kind of audiences?

When I have performances they are usually in the area where I live and mostly with my pianist Chris van de Kuilen. Only occasionally with others. It really depends on the opportunities one has.

Mostly the audience is very diverse. But when it is announced well in local papers and so on I do get people who are interested in the concertina and afterwards all want to have a chat with me. Makes one feel like a popstar. They actually wait in groups for me. Good feeling.

PW: What are your plans for the future musically speaking - any more CD's in the pipeline - do you plan a book of your musical compositions?

Several projects in hand at the moment:

- v I am working with Chris on a CD with recordings of the older music from the Victorian Age. The music that I feel is best for the concertina.
- v At the same time I have been and continue working with Alex Wade on recording duets but due to distance and time that is a slower project.
- v Then there are the new duets by Ineke Hoff. I am working out a publication of all her compositions in a book with CD. That will be ready in 2015.
- v And at the moment I have got together a group of concertina players in the Netherlands. We try to get together regularly and it seems to work. The music we play is very eclectic but I manage to get them to do a greater variety of music whilst improving their playing skills. I can never stop teaching it seems.
- v Also I am still thinking and working on a volume two of my tutor. At the moment lots of extra material comes with volume one on the extra CD. But I want to give it some more thought on how to shape it and it needs lots of recordings to go with it. But it will come... Lots to do.

Pauline's website is: <http://www.concertina-academy.com/>

[As a footnote- I found Pauline's DVD fascinating. As a concertina obsessive of over 30 years, I still found much that was novel e.g. the Chinese Shengs in the Horniman museum and details of Wheatstone's original patent for a bellows-powered fiddle! Also interviews with several musicians I need to track down - most notably the jazz concertina of veteran Pietro Valente.]

* Cd "Concertina Scape" with contemporary music, review in CW 459)