

WALTONS NEW SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Founded in 1994, Waltons New School of Music is an acclaimed music centre in the heart of Dublin city. The school's Director, John Mardirosian, took time out to tell Gráinne McCool about some exciting new online developments designed to work with the implications of Covid-19.

Harry Long teaching an online Tin Whistle Taster



Photo : Riona Long

Gráinne: “How did Waltons New School of Music originate?”

John: “My wife Aideen and I were living in New York City in 1994 when Aideen’s brother Niall, who is Managing Director of Waltons Music, invited us to Ireland to start a music school. I was an editor with a publishing company, and Aideen worked as a freelancer with several others. We loved New York, but we had a young son and neither of us thought the city was an ideal place to raise a family. So we agreed, came over in July and started up Waltons New School of Music just two months later, in September 1994.

“Both Aideen and I have strong music backgrounds, but neither of us knew the first thing about running a music school. In some ways, I think our ignorance actually helped us think outside the box a bit. At the time, Dublin’s two main music schools, the Royal Irish Academy of Music and the College of Music, were exclusively classical, and both focused their attention on younger students, although many things have changed since then.

“Aideen and I knew about a wider range of music tuition in the US, and for a wider range of ages, so we decided to focus on three things. First, offering serious music tuition not only in the so-called ‘classical’ instruments and classical voice but also in a range of genres jazz, pop/rock, world and of course Irish traditional. Second, taking each genre equally seriously, and keeping in mind that the different genres have much to learn from each other. For example, classical music has a long tradition of pedagogy behind it, but since the Romantic period it has lost something vital that used to be central to it, the art of improvisation, which of course is the essence of jazz. And the amazing ability of traditional musicians to pick up tunes heard only once and generally play by ear has much to teach classically trained musicians. And third, we knew that many adults in Ireland still subscribed to the myth that you can’t really learn to play an instrument or sing if you’re over a certain age.

“So the school grew surprisingly quickly by offering serious music tuition in a range of genres, encouraging students to explore other genres and welcoming so-called ‘mature’ students. But whatever our aspirations, its teachers, who make or break a music school, and I think we have some wonderful ones.”

Gráinne: “Why the ‘New’ School?”

John: “There’s a well-known college in New York called The New School for Social Research, and we liked the name. But we also wanted to indicate that we were taking a new approach to music education here.”

Gráinne: “Has Covid-19 had an impact on how you deliver music lessons?”

John: “It certainly has! Even before the lockdown went into effect on March 27th, I decided that the situation was becoming too unsafe to safely deliver what I call ‘in-school’ tuition. I initially announced that the school would be closed from March 14th to March 28th, but when the lockdown was announced I knew it would be a lot longer. We had to work quickly in order to set up all of the school’s administrators to work from home and to get online tuition up and running, for both teachers and students.

“A number of our students, and a few of our sixty teachers, were initially sceptical of online tuition, which was all we’d be able to offer in our third term, after Easter. However, it was so gratifying to see not only how well teachers rose to the challenge of adapting their approaches to new technologies and the entire school administration adapted to working remotely, but also how appreciative people were at being able to continue their or their children’s music tuition during the lockdown. In some ways, I think it became a lifeline for both students and teachers.

“One interesting benefit of online teaching is that people who live far beyond commuting distance from the school can now study with us, and we’ve had online students not only living in other counties but in other countries as well. One of our teachers had ‘partner’ or two-person saxophone lessons with one of the students living in Dublin and the other in Mexico!”

Gráinne: “Tell me about your new online Irish Music Tasters.”

John: “We’ve offered Irish Music Tasters, which are one-hour immersions in Irish traditional music for absolute beginners, for over twenty years. We offer Bodhrán Tasters, Tin Whistle Tasters and an Introduction to Irish Music, which covers its history, forms and instruments and includes demonstrations of several of them. As you know, many great Irish musicians are multi-instrumentalists, and participants in the Introduction to Irish Music are always impressed when the teacher demonstrates three, four or even five instruments with equal facility.

“Hundreds of people from many different countries have taken Irish Music Tasters, but they all did so at the school in Dublin. After the lockdown, I realised that if we offered the Tasters online then many people who love Irish music but now can’t visit Ireland to experience it at the source could experience it face-to-face with a great Irish musician and teacher from anywhere in the world. So we now have the facility to immerse someone living in Chicago or Berlin or Tokyo in authentic Irish music.”

Gráinne: “With the new term about to begin, what changes have you had to implement?”

John: “To start with, we’re offering both in-school tuition and online tuition this year. For in-school tuition, we’re making the school as safe a space as possible. So we’ve made a number of changes to how it functions,



Éamonn Galldubh teaching an online Bodhrán Taster

Photo : Derbhil Galldubh



Photo : Hu O'Reilly

An Irish fiddle lesson at the New School

including 15-minute breaks between all lessons and classes, and we've invested in a lot of safety equipment. We've also developed a comprehensive Covid-19 Safety Policy that lists the protocols we expect all students, staff and visitors to follow.

"Unfortunately, there are a few things we simply won't be able to do this year. For example, we have several long-running ensembles and a large choir that we can't run safely in the school, and the technology to allow ensembles to collaborate online without any lag just isn't there yet. I'll also miss our monthly Trad Slow Sessions and Friday concerts, although we'll be doing what I call 'virtual' student concerts this year.

"Online tuition will serve three purposes. First, all the additional breaks between lessons and classes as well as the fact that we can only use our larger classrooms for in-school tuition mean that we won't be able to cater for all of our students in the school itself. Second, online tuition will cater for our more vulnerable students and students caring for vulnerable people. And third, as I mentioned, it will allow people who live much too far away for in-school tuition to study music with us."

"I firmly believe that music, far from being a luxury, is more essential than ever these days"

Gráinne: "Do these changes bring any advantages to how you will teach from now on?"

John: "I don't think we'd have seriously considered online tuition if it wasn't for the pandemic. A silver lining to Covid-19, if you can call it that, is all the creative ways that arts organisations and performing artists have responded to the restrictions imposed on how they work. So just as the way we live and work will likely change because of Covid-19, the way we deliver music education will also change."

Gráinne: "Have you seen a surge in interest now in creative arts such as music since the lockdown earlier this year?"

John: "As I mentioned before, I think music became a kind of lifeline for many of our students, as well as teachers, during the lockdown, and I think this happened with all the creative arts. I firmly believe that music, far from being a luxury, is more essential than ever these days. It helps us come to terms with what's happening, lifts our spirits, provides solace and reminds us, as the one truly universal language, of our common humanity."

Gráinne: "What do you see as the immediate future for music from a music school's point of view?"

John: "Like all music and arts organisations, we're going to be in survival mode for quite a while. But for the vast majority of musicians, music has always been a precarious occupation. Think of all the great Irish musicians over the years who had day jobs and couldn't possibly have survived on music alone. While Covid-19 has made the lives of musicians that much more precarious, people who are serious about music will always find ways to keep making it. Ireland has a rich and deep musical tradition that has survived recessions, depressions and even famine, and I'm confident that it will ultimately survive this."

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