

As an aspiring clarinettist or saxophonist, should you choose university or conservatoire? It may depend on where you ultimately want to end up, writes Alastair Penman



CONSERVATOIRE OR UNIVERSITY?



One question I am frequently asked by students leaving school and wanting to pursue a career as a saxophonist or clarinettist is where – or if – they should study next. Conservatoire or university? Or, to avoid mounting student debt, should they launch straight into a career while taking private lessons?

This article aims to discuss the most important considerations at this pivotal career stage, drawing on my own experiences of studying at both university (St Catharine's College, University of Cambridge) and conservatoire (Royal Northern College of Music). Perhaps the most important message is that although you will doubtless have many people trying to influence your decision (parents, school, partner, music teacher and so on), and their opinions may well be valuable in informing your choice, the ultimate decision is your own. It is important to take ownership of the choice you make so that you don't ever feel regret or resentment about being pushed in one direction or another by external forces.

Another point worth making – and one that is often hard to ignore – is that you should try not to be swayed by offers of scholarships or financial rewards for attending a particular institution. Many conservatoires and universities will offer scholarships or unconditional offers to the students who perform best at audition/interview in an attempt to influence their decisions. While it is flattering to be offered a scholarship you should consider whether the institution is essentially trying to bribe you into going there. A few thousand pounds might seem like a large sum of money when you're 18, but as a percentage of the total cost of a three or four year degree it is less significant. And if you view it in the context of your career earnings, which may be influenced by where you study, it becomes insignificant.

So, on to the first important question: should you consider conservatoires? A piece of pertinent advice I received was that I should only consider going to conservatoire and pursuing a career as a performer if I couldn't imagine doing anything else with my life, and if I really couldn't live without performing music. The world doesn't have a shortage of clarinet and saxophone players, and music is a very tough profession in which to earn a living. You should strongly consider whether your desire to be a performer outweighs your desire to earn money, and what your potential might be in other career paths. That's not to say it isn't possible to earn money as a musician, but orchestral and chamber musicians and even many soloists are unlikely to ever earn as much as an accountant or lawyer. In fact, many music graduates don't go on to pursue careers in music, turning to

jobs in admin, finance and law, to name but a few. If you're not completely set on a career as a performer, then I would suggest that conservatoire might not be the best option, and it would be worth considering university courses in music or other subjects. This informative video from the bass clarinetist Michael Lowenstern explains how much musicians can expect to earn from various aspects of their work (visit <https://youtu.be/aQhQt9m2O7o> or search YouTube for 'Michael Lowenstern' and 'How much money do I make?').

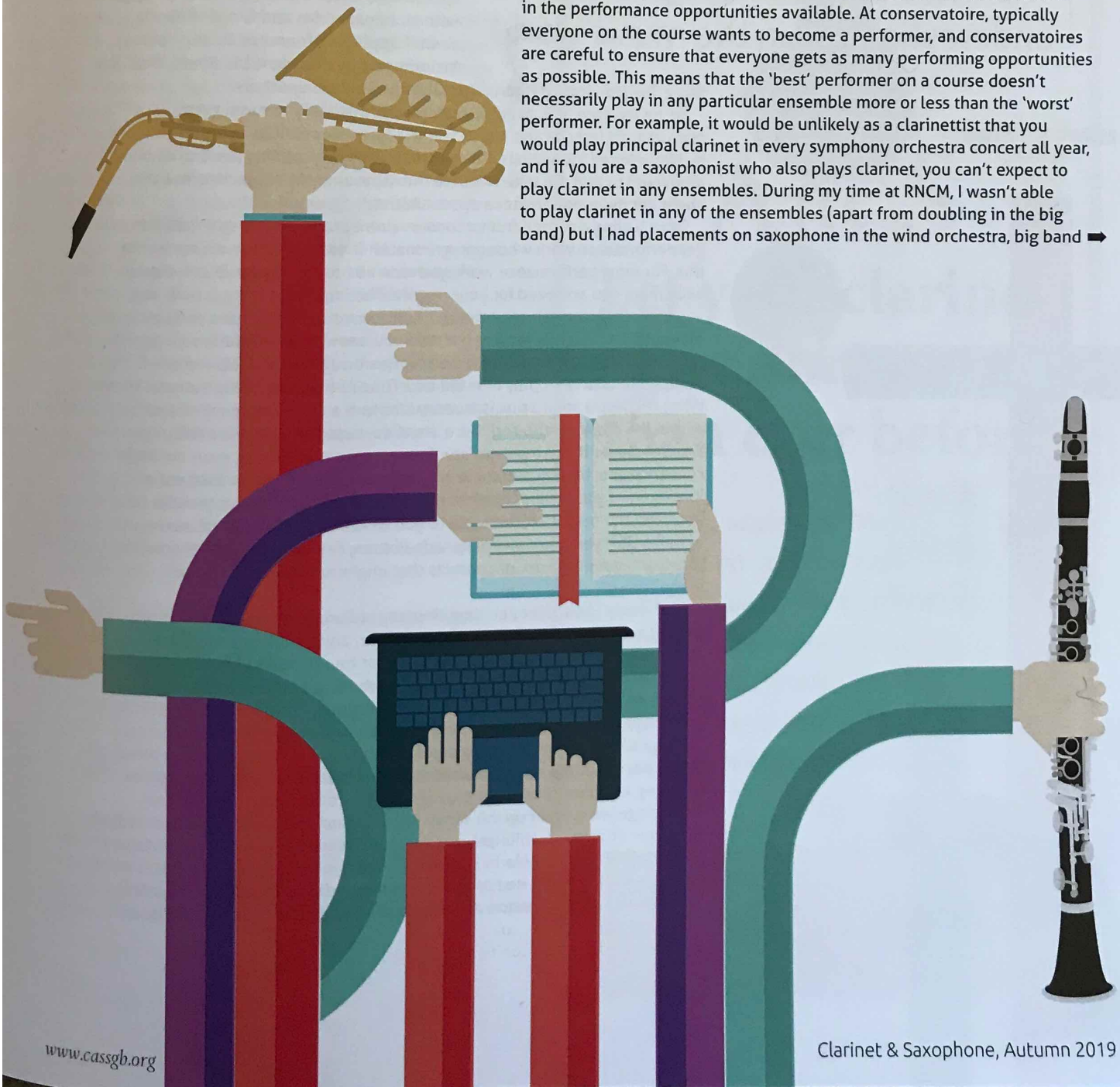
You might be wondering about the differences between conservatoire and university music courses. At conservatoire, the main focus is on performing, and you will receive weekly lessons on your main instrument and sometimes on a second instrument. Alongside your principal study lessons, you will be involved in chamber ensembles with placements in larger ensembles. For clarinetists, this will most likely include symphony orchestras, wind orchestras, wind quintets and clarinet ensembles. Classical saxophonists will be placed in wind orchestras, saxophone ensembles and possibly jazz ensembles at some colleges, whereas on a jazz course, placements will be in big bands and smaller jazz combos. You'll also have instrument-specific classes,

masterclasses from visiting tutors, and technical and repertoire classes. Most students will learn with one main teacher and receive occasional lessons from visiting tutors. Alongside the performance elements of the course, academic lectures will cover subjects ranging from theory and harmony to improvisation and historical performance.

While most conservatoires have a fairly similar course structure, there is a much greater range within university music courses. Some courses are heavily performance based and not dissimilar to conservatoire courses, whereas others have a heavy academic bias with limited performance elements. Some universities will allocate you to an instrumental teacher and some will provide funding for you to organise your own lessons. Some may not have any provision for instrumental lessons. Even if your institution doesn't provide lessons, it doesn't mean you can't organise your own. When I was studying at Cambridge, one student arranged for a well-known clarinet teacher to visit on a semi-regular basis to give private lessons to those who wanted them.

If you wish to pursue a career as a performer, you must consider who your teacher will be when choosing where to apply. It is essential to have a teacher you respond well to, whether arranged through the university or not, and it is well worth booking a consultation lesson with any teacher you are thinking of spending three to four years studying with. It is also important to point out that at conservatoire it is expected that you will do around three hours of practice a day, whereas at most universities you will find yourself in the minority if you spend this much time in a practice room.

One of the big differences between universities and conservatoires is in the performance opportunities available. At conservatoire, typically everyone on the course wants to become a performer, and conservatoires are careful to ensure that everyone gets as many performing opportunities as possible. This means that the 'best' performer on a course doesn't necessarily play in any particular ensemble more or less than the 'worst' performer. For example, it would be unlikely as a clarinetist that you would play principal clarinet in every symphony orchestra concert all year, and if you are a saxophonist who also plays clarinet, you can't expect to play clarinet in any ensembles. During my time at RNCM, I wasn't able to play clarinet in any of the ensembles (apart from doubling in the big band) but I had placements on saxophone in the wind orchestra, big band →



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and saxophone orchestra. Additionally, I was fortunate enough to play in a symphony orchestra concert thanks to being requested by the conductor. The only audition I took for an ensemble placement was when the college put on an opera with two saxophone parts. Everyone in the department wanted the parts, so screened auditions were held and I was fortunate to win the soprano/alto saxophone seat.

In contrast, many university ensembles are run on an annual audition basis, often with no restriction on the number of ensembles you can join. Thus, if you are a good enough player on any instrument, you should get opportunities to play it. However, it is important to note that universities vary hugely in the

number, variety and quality of ensembles they offer, so be sure to research this. In my own experience, whilst studying at Cambridge I was principal clarinettist with CUMS 1 (the main university orchestra), played clarinet with Cambridge University Chamber Orchestra (CUCO) and depped with Cambridge University Symphony Orchestra (CUSO). Additionally, I played lead alto sax with the Cambridge University Jazz Orchestra (CUJO), Swing Band (Fitz Swing) and Big Band (Selwyn Jazz) and also performed on saxophone with CUMS 1, CUCO and CUSO. Alongside these established ensembles, I did countless gigs with jazz ensembles and function bands, as well as playing for musicals and operas including *Fame*, *Parade*, *42nd Street*, *West Side*

Story, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and many others.

So, on the face of it, at conservatoire you are likely to have more instrumental lessons and more time to practise, as well as being surrounded by like-minded individuals. At university you will probably need to be more motivated to find the time to put in the same amount of practice, but you might get more performance opportunities.

Does having a degree from a conservatoire put you in a better position to get performance work when you graduate? There is no clear-cut answer to this. For most performance work, you won't be asked where you studied or what mark you achieved for your degree. The important thing is how well you play. That said, a huge amount of performance work comes through word of mouth, and it really is all about who you know. Much of the work I do still comes through contacts I made both at Cambridge and RNCM, and one of the saxophone quartets I play in is led by a friend I first met in the National Youth Wind Orchestra aged 14. It is true that there is a certain amount of snobbery within the music world, and there are always people who will think of you as a lesser player if you have not studied at a conservatoire, or even the 'right' conservatoire, but equally there are those who may think you are not as intelligent if you haven't been to university. The main thing is to make full use of all the resources available to you wherever you choose to study, and to make sure you meet and play with as many fellow musicians as possible to expand your network of contacts that might help you secure work in the future.

One worry I had after deciding to study at Cambridge was that this was ending any chance I had of a career in music, and I think this is a common misconception. I believed that having spent four years studying engineering while my peers spent four years studying the saxophone meant I would be four years behind with no chance of catching up. Fortunately, it is perfectly possible to have a career as a musician even if you don't study music as an undergraduate. Despite having studied engineering, I was able to go on to take a postgraduate course at conservatoire, and I was by no means alone in taking this path; a surprisingly high number of science students from Cambridge went on to do the same. Bear in mind that it is much easier to study medicine or physics while playing an instrument on the side than it is to go to conservatoire and dabble in brain surgery. It is worth mentioning at this point that any budding physicists should research the unique joint course offered by Imperial College London and the Royal College of Music, which allows



students to simultaneously study physics at university and music at conservatoire.

If you decide to take a postgraduate course in music, the audition panel will consider your previous experience, and if you have studied at university they will not necessarily expect you to have reached the same level as someone who has studied at conservatoire. They are more interested in your potential and drive than your current performance level. I have a number of clarinet and saxophone playing colleagues who studied at university before conservatoire, and I don't think any one of them regrets or resents this path. In fact, many believe it gave them a wealth of performance experience and made them into a more rounded musician, thanks to the higher academic content and variety of performance opportunities. One illustration of the success enjoyed by students studying at university followed by conservatoire is the City Music Foundation Awards (an award supporting young artists at the start of their careers, of which I was fortunate to be an inaugural recipient). Out of the 31 solo artists since the scheme started in 2013, 10 of us (including two saxophonists and one clarinetist) studied at the University of Cambridge before taking postgraduate degrees at conservatoire, although this is perhaps also an indicator of the flourishing music scene in Cambridge. Of course, it is possible to study at conservatoire first and then go on to university, but this is a less common path, usually reserved for students more interested in research and academia than a performance career.

A final option is to not go into higher education and instead try to launch straight into a career as a musician while taking private tuition. Although this will save you a vast amount of money in the short term, you have to consider where your work will come from. However good a performer you are, it is important to have a network of contacts, and for most people this comes from studying at a higher education institution. The value of networking cannot be underestimated in the music world, so I would usually suggest that the experience of higher education and the contacts you will make there are worth the cost. Bear in mind also that as a musician you may never earn enough to fully pay off that student loan...

This article has (deliberately) not given a definitive answer as to where you should study. You have to make this choice yourself and research all aspects carefully before applying. The main elements I would be sure to consider are:

- How strong is your desire to pursue a performing career?
- Who will your teacher be?
- Are there good ensembles to play in?
- Will you be surrounded by like-minded individuals?
- Do you have the motivation to practise for three hours or more per day?
- What will you do if you don't make it as a performer?

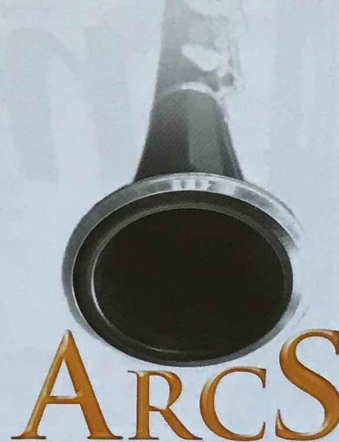
Finally, best of luck to everyone applying to conservatoire and/or university! The main thing is to find a teacher who inspires you and an institution at which you feel at home. I hope to follow this up with an article on audition and interview tips, so watch this space. ■

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