



News and views from the School

Twice termly: Issue no 13

Welcome to Issue No. 13.



Greetings again. Please let me know if you know a student who has a story to tell - I'd love to hear about it. I hope you will enjoy the three articles in this issue, all contributions from students in the School worldwide.

- Leon MacLaren and Music
- Learning to Surrender
- Teaching Philosophy in a NY High School

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With very best wishes,

Christine Lambie, editor



Leon MacLaren (pictured left, composing), the School's founder, had a deep love of music. David Ward, formerly professor at The Royal College of Music in London, spent a great deal of time working with him on various aspects of music. Here David writes about Mr MacLaren's rather unusual approach to music.

Leon MacLaren and Music David Ward, London

Leon MacLaren loved music from an early age. His mother was a singer and his father was a devotee of Mozart's music. Leon studied the piano and became very proficient even to the point where he could have considered taking music as a career. He also played the saxophone and clarinet in a jazz band, yet never received formal musical training.

His interest and love of music were with him throughout his life and he clearly recognised the importance of music, and the effects for good or ill that it can have on peoples' minds and hearts.

Music Group; Listening

When a music group started in the School in London, Leon MacLaren took a great interest in it, coming to rehearsals, coaching groups or individuals with enormous care and patience. His main aim was to get us to listen to the notes we were playing or singing. To assist in this he would insist that a short phrase be played many times until everyone's listening was clear and unclouded by ideas or dreams. This was a marvellous training and a salutary exercise for one who professed to be a musician! He wanted the composer to speak through the music, not the personality of the performer.

To help with this he made reference to the qualities of sound related to the elements: sound should be audible in space, firm like the air which supports all life, clear, bright and precise like fire, sweet like water and fresh like earth. In singing, the vowels should be as pure as possible, and consonants precise and well-formed. For instrumentalists, clarity and space were essential ingredients of a meaningful performance. Great attention was paid not only to the notes but also the space between the notes and the phrases. This was an important reminder of the stillness behind the demanding activity of playing and singing. When this became the point from which the music was heard, the inner qualities and vitality of the music became more apparent and delightful.

Listening to fine music

Mr. MacLaren had a great love of certain music and a total confidence in its beauty and balance - Mozart was a central figure. Recommended composers were Vivaldi, Giovanni Gabrieli, Monteverdi, Purcell and a few others; the diet was fairly restricted. Hearing fine music was an aspect of good company we were all enjoined to partake in. Mr. MacLaren wished us to appreciate the finest in every field to help in the philosophical work of clearing the mind and bringing the being to rest.

The Octave

In the early material for part 5 of the philosophy course, Mr. MacLaren wrote a beautiful description of the notes of the octave, their relationship to each other and their respective qualities. Later he wrote the Music Book, designed to be a term's practical course looking into the numbers which govern the proportions of the notes, giving rise to the pure harmonies of what he called 'the natural octave'. Most of the harmonies in this octave are indeed very beautiful and resonate within the being, bringing peace and balance.

Composition

Mr. MacLaren sensed a need to take up composition to fill 'a gap in the musical work of the school', as he put it. In order to find a 'new' sound he composed in modes rather than the more familiar keys and he explored the different qualities of these modes to express the inner qualities of the words as he heard them. He was fond of using the RE mode in which the RE-LA interval features strongly.

The most substantial piece that Mr. MacLaren wrote was the oratorio 'In the Beginning' for seven solo singers, choir and small instrumental ensemble. After beginning with the opening of St. John's Gospel, it includes words from Isaiah, Leviticus, Psalms as well as the words of Jesus at the Last Supper.

Other compositions by Mr. MacLaren include a three-movement setting of the Eesha Upanishad and some verses from The Hymn of Creation from the Rig Veda, translated in part by the composer. Conducting all of these pieces on various occasions, I spent many hours rehearsing under Mr. MacLaren's very demanding direction - invaluable experiences if not always comfortable!

Challenging

He was writing for the musicians in the School; a varied collection, some very competent, others almost beginners. He wanted to stretch people's limits so, for example, he wrote some very high parts for the sopranos to sing or included awkward notes and rhythms for the instrumentalists. He divided the music up into bars of nine, which often does not fit the natural stresses of the words or phrases. His aim, as always,

was to get us to listen to the words and not be mechanical in our delivery.

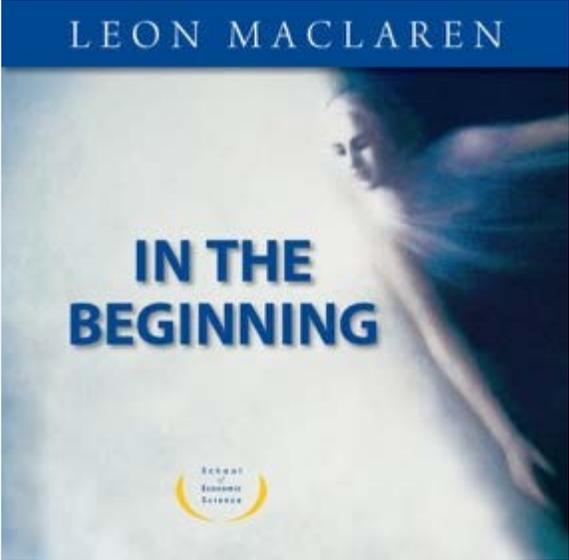
Composers Group

A small composers group formed and Mr. MacLaren would meet with us occasionally. He was quite ruthless if there were passages which he felt were not expressing the inner content of the words and it was a salutary experience to have one's cherished compositions torn to pieces or at least severely criticised. However, he was generous and supportive to the music he admired. There have been several concerts of the resulting new music. This group still meets 2-3 times a term and work continues on setting fine texts to music and studying the octave and the Music Book.

Legacy

His work on the octave, and his Music Part One book, has been a source of inspiration and study, especially to those composing. For performers, perhaps especially for pianists, the emphasis was always on clear articulation, remembering the spaces between notes, as well as at the beginning and end of pieces. Insistence on really listening to the sounds, bringing the qualities of the elements to mind, keeping in touch with the instrument, with the other players in an ensemble and, most importantly, the audience, was all done through listening.

We were privileged to work with a man who really listened and who heard the inner qualities of sound so clearly. He was also very conscious of the effect that music could have on the listeners, not only the music itself but also the way in which it was played.



Top Tips

Items recommended by readers

- 1. In The Beginning:** This CD was recorded in January following a major performance of Leon MacLaren's oratorio, as described in the article above. This is unusual and reflective music, available from the School bookshop - email sesbookshop.
- TED talk:** Human rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson shares some hard truths about America's justice system, starting with a massive imbalance along racial lines. These issues, which are wrapped up in America's unexamined history, are rarely talked about with this level of candour, insight and persuasiveness. Go to [TEDStevenson](https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan-stevenson)
- 3. TED talk:** Richard St John's 8 secrets of success in a 4 minute clip. Go to [TEDSuccess](https://www.ted.com/talks/richard-st-john).

Shennon and her husband look after the branch of the School in St Catherine's near Niagara Falls, Canada. 12 years ago she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis; she was then in her mid-30s.



Learning to Surrender

Shannon Morris, Toronto

It was a devastating and hard diagnosis to accept, as it has no known cure and can afflict the body in any number of ways.

My body has managed quite well over the last decade but over any drug I have ever been given, I value the benefit of meditation for the body, not mentioning the mental and spiritual benefit. With relapsing/remitting MS, some

symptoms stay after an attack and some will disappear. Fatigue, balance issues, pain, tingling numbness, loss of co-ordination, and what I will call 'brain fog' also come and go, and worsen when an attack occurs.

Reflection

I attribute the ability to handle the symptoms to meditation and to reflection. I have a reflection practice in the afternoons, where I sit and let my attention rest in the area of the navel; added to this was an affirmation my brother had given me a year earlier. It went as follows:

I am in the temple of quietness. Peace fills my body, peace fills my heart and dwells within my love. Peace within, without, everywhere. Infinite peace surrounds my life and permeates all the moments of my existence. Peace unto myself, Peace unto my family, Peace unto my nation, Peace unto my world, Peace unto my cosmos.

I found that not only did this time given to reflection help me experience stillness and peace in my being, but also in one instance, the entire affirmation became an unfolding experience of the infinite quality of peace and love, found in the smallest, minutest part of creation, and in the overflowing infinite circle of life that has no end. Both were infused with grace, and because the small could always get smaller and the large could always get larger, they became the same.

Pain

During the fall of 2011, as well as experiencing the usual change of season, fatigue and dizziness, I started to have pain in my lower back. It affected my ability to sit, stand, or walk for any period of time. I saw my GP, neurologist, naturopath, massage therapist, chiropractor and an osteopath. All gave some insight into the issues, but none of them could help clear it up.

When this new manifestation of pain appeared, I found my mind unsettled and worried during reflection. I remember clearly thinking I could not tolerate the idea of chronic pain with no relief in sight. In that moment of fear and bondage, by the grace of the Absolute, the idea of surrender came to mind.

What if I surrendered it all this moment? To me this meant, what if I was silent on the subject and gave up all the ideas I held about myself, the story about my illness, my pain, my inability to deal with it? Could I surrender Shannon's pain and just experience pain?

Surrender

Pain has a particular energy and vibration in the body; it has a very definite sensation, but without my story it was bearable. In that moment I could surrender and there appeared a degree of separation from the pain. In

fact the discovery of, 'What is pain?' became rather interesting during reflection.

Being willing to give up all my own thoughts, assumptions, and give in to just the experience of pain opened things up. Any time a comment would arise I would direct my attention back to only the actual experience in the body. I spent the next number of weeks this way each afternoon.

There was still plenty of pushing against the experience in the rest of my day, but as the days passed, and this willingness to experience surrender was explored, the pain shifted. It did not seem to occupy the same amount of space in my mind. Pain was being interpreted differently by my mind. I would begin with the affirmation my brother had given me as it brought the body and mind to a stillness and grace that seemed to allow for a greater focus, a sense of space, and for the further deepening experience of surrender.

The observation of pain became the observation of energy, and that became the observation of love, peace and aliveness. The physical pain lessened over a number of months, and with the help of many in the health-care field, the condition improved.

This discovery has helped me in all areas of my life, as mental and emotional pain, I think, are more crippling. It has helped me turn to this source whenever I am feeling overwhelmed by life's circumstances, and simply surrender all ideas, even if for just a moment. It isn't always an experience of bliss; sometimes it is just a break from the constant churning of the mind and emotions but the crack is enough to let the infinite field of peace reveal a little of itself. It gives me the perspective and strength to go a little further.

My Life Now

Having to retire from a busy design career a number of years ago was not an easy challenge for me, but I have found an increasing sense of peace and freedom with this and other reflection practices. I am very fortunate to live in beautiful and natural surroundings next to Lake Ontario. Warm and thoughtful neighbours, a variety of birds and small wildlife are my day-to-day companions. It is a quiet and simple life for the most part, not the lifestyle I had dreamed of early in my career.

Having glimpsed something larger has enabled me to lay down the fight for these dreams, and find not only contentment, but a joyful anticipation for whatever might be next. Surrender is not "giving up" as an act of desperation and hopelessness. Surrender is a "giving in" to a greater vision, force, substance of love, that holds everything you think you are giving up, and more than you could ever imagine. It connects you with the substance of All, and all possibility.



Philosophy in Action - one student describes his work

Howard Schott, student in New York, is a high school science teacher at Eleanor Roosevelt High School (approx 500 students) in New York City. In the photo he is demonstrating a chemistry experiment.

Philosophy in a New York City High School

I've been a teacher for forty-four years and a philosophy student for most of them. The desire to give what I have received to my students has always been there. When, in 2005, the school principal asked if I would be willing to offer a one-semester introduction to philosophy, I immediately agreed. My view is that there is no more important study – especially for students entering adulthood.

The syllabus is based on broad questions which have emerged, through discussion, from the students themselves, e.g. 'Why should anyone bother trying to be good?' And 'Who am I and what is my relationship to the universe?' This year, the course has expanded to a full year with an enrolment of fifty students. Watching their love of wisdom grow, simply makes the case that there is no better study for a young mind. I'd be delighted to pass my materials along to any teacher with a sincere desire to bring philosophy to their students.

Contact [HowardSchott](#)

Reader Feedback



"Oh my" are the only words that come to mind. There are fantastic people and stories out there. I loved the concise 'scientific' approach that Craig Hassed took on Meditation. I similarly speak a lot with my patients about daily mindfulness and stress management in this way. I would like to read this to a group I am assisting in who are to take meditation initiation soon. And the story of Margaret Lobo brought tears to my eyes. What an unbelievable life and contribution to humanity. I am humbled and inspired! **Durban**

It is a great privilege to receive these insightful letters. Thank you so much. I shall send this one to even more people. **London**

I enjoyed reading the different perspectives presented in your newsletter. It reminded me once again, why I have been attending the school all these years. It also reminded me of the profound impact of the teachings in every aspect of my life. I feel empowered and truly feel sky is the limit when it comes to knowing the potentiality that exists in the moment. Events of life are going to continue to surprise me but I know I am equipped with all the tools needed to deal with them, in the light of wisdom. **Thank you. San Francisco**

Thanks for reading

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Please keep that feedback coming. I need all your suggestions of personal stories, insights, links, articles, cartoons, video clips – anything that will be of interest to our philosophy community. Do you know someone in the School who has an interesting story to tell? E-mail me at: editor@seslondon.org. Thanks again for reading, CL

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School of Economic Science, 11 Mandeville Place, London W1U 3AJ
Charity No. 313115 and SC039950

schooleconomicsscience.org