

Reid School of Music
University of
Edinburgh

23/5
Marchmont Crescent
Edinburgh
+44 748 769 6362
D.Isaacs@ed.ac.uk

Dee Isaacs

Composer, Senior Lecturer, Community Arts Projects, Performance

Dee is a Senior Lecturer in Community Music at the University of Edinburgh. She studied composition with Nigel Osborne. She is passionate about the creation of music and its power to engender 'community'. She has been commissioned by a wide range of arts organisations including: Opera North, London Symphony Orchestra, Northern Sinfonia, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Magnetic North, Scottish Ballet, LiveMusicNow, The Scottish Executive, Dumbworld, Creative Scotland and The Wellcome Trust.

She has been nominated by the British Academy of Composers (now the Ivors) for awards for *Festus*, *Supposer Life*, *Watching and The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In 2012, she was awarded the Principal's Medal for her work in music education and outreach. Between 2000 – 2005 she was the UK co-ordinator for War Child in the Caucasus, implementing a creative arts training programme for social workers and psychologists working with children suffering from trauma. Dee continues to work across cultures and within marginalised communities both near and far. She set up a long term research project for primary aged children using immersive arts projects to improve literacy and language development in The Gambia, West Africa. Since 2016 Dee's focus has been on working with children living in challenging circumstances as refugees. *Windows on the World* is the creative arts programme she now runs in collaboration with SolidarityNow/Unicef in Greece for children living in protracted displacement.

AWARDS

University of Edinburgh
Clutterbuck Travel Award

Principal's Award, 2012

EUSA teaching award for
outstanding course,
Music in the Community,
2020

EXPERIENCE

- Senior Lecturer in Music,
Reid School of Music, University of Edinburgh, 2001 – present
- Senior Tutor, Edinburgh College of Art, 2019 – 2022
- ECA Director of Undergraduate Studies, 2014 – 2018
- Head of ECA BMus Programme, 2014 – 2018
- ECA Staff Student Liaison Officer, 2013 – 2018
- International Officer, 2018 – 2019

RESEARCH

My work places participatory arts at the heart of the performance. The productions challenge preconceptions about the intrinsic value of community engagement and whether it can be viewed as art in itself.

My research explores how immersive musical experiences can impact on individuals and the communities in which they are placed. The compositions and projects look at the educational and developmental power of identity on both the individual and collectively and how music can focus and enhance this.

I have been working to refine this process bringing my compositional expertise and producers experience to the fore whereby there is a strong framework and vision which is enhanced by all the performers involved in shaping the new work. The research activity relies on nurturing meaningful connections between people. It is the making of work through a process of committed engagement, shared curiosity, respect and mutual learning. It is concerned with illuminating and giving voice to individuals and communities, celebrating unique personal experiences and building new creative languages.

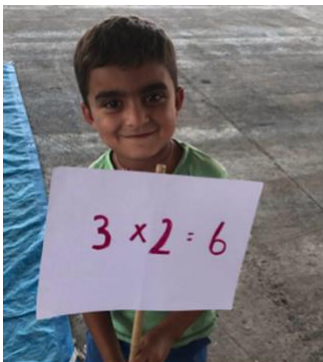
- Consultant on redraft of Music Benchmark statement, 2016
- Board member of Puppet Animation Scotland, specific role Equality and Diversity, 2014 – 2018
- The Gambia Project, 2004 – 2020
- Windows on the World – displaced children in Greece, 2016 – ongoing
- War Child in the Caucasus, UK co-ordinator, 2000 – 2005

RESEARCH

- Creative output includes orchestral, chamber, choral composition, as well as music theatre with commissions from major arts organisations. See list of works
- Compositional research into the musical and social practices within traditional song in the cultures of West Africa, the Republic of Georgia and other Eastern European traditions.
- Recent collaborations have involved the implementation of multi-disciplinary arts projects within communities, aimed at encouraging cohesion in a diverse society primarily involving children.
- The study of indigenous vocal styles and voice production techniques of women from Mali and the Gambia, in particular, female singers from the Bambara, Malinke and Wassoulou tribes
- A creative arts manual for children living in protracted displacement

PROJECTS

- **The Sky has no borders** –for Unboxed Festival 2022/23
- **The Alphabet of Jasmine, 2021** – a triptych for GSA commissioned by the Composer Project/ Creative Scotland, three songs exploring migration, words by Gerda Stevenson.
- **Where the City Flows... 2020** – 160 children perform with Music in the Community, words by Gerda Stevenson, with Angolan instrument maker Victor Gama.
- **Festus in the Gambia, 2019** – a chamber opera in collaboration with Alla Leake Percussion, Gambia.
- **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, 2018** – nominated for a British Composer Award with writer Gerda Stevenson.
- **Your Life is a Work of Art, 2019** – first performed Gambia by Amazing Grace Primary School . Full score and children's chorus with writer Elspeth Murray.
- **Les Colocotaires, 2018** – film score for Iulian Furtuna's first feature length documentary, Canal+.
- **7 Seas April, 2017** – Deeper Life School, Gambia Project, a film and music project with 100 children.
- **Watching in The Gambia, December 2016** – Deeper Life School and Alla Leake Kunda.
- **Windows on the World , 2016 ongoing** – a creative arts programme within refugee communities in Greece, SolidarityNow, Leros Solidarity Network and Pikpa-Leros.
- **Postcards from our World, March 2016** – with music in the community and Leith Walk Primary School.



PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS AND TESTIMONIALS

EUSA

Outstanding Course at the University of Edinburgh Music in the Community, 2019

"The Music in the Community programme has become the single most challenging and transformational activity for the majority of students taking a Music degree. It engenders a sense of worth and commitment, and a focus on skill and communication which is only possible in a situation where the social benefit of the work is so apparent to everyone involved. Dee Isaacs has brought her own unique skill and experience to this programme, and she is a worthy colleague and successor to Prof. Osborne. Her work in Africa, and particularly in the Gambia, has opened up intercultural education to her students in a way that is engaging without in any way fudging the social, political and practical issues involved. Her students develop a real sense of maturity, and the trips to the Gambia, in some of which I have participated, have been life-changing experiences." Professor Peter Nelson

"This course provides so many opportunities for growth as a person. Connecting with the local Edinburgh community, I have been able to work with dozens of new people, and make a real, visible difference within a special needs school. The way it is taught is so exciting and informative, often very hands on and interactive which makes it such a welcome change from stuffy lecture halls! This course has encouraged me to believe in myself and my creative ideas more, and support those around me to the best of my capabilities.

Working towards our end goal of a community / staff / student show in march has allowed the whole course and all of its contributors to work together in a vibrant setting. This course also allows for a thorough exploration of what music means to individuals and has given me many new employable skills to take into my music career! We have also had opportunities to work in multicultural environments, something that I think is so important! Through this course I have been able to travel to Gambia. Meeting these people and seeing the good that music can do is something that has honed my skills as a music leader. I think this has been the most valuable course I have ever done and I have no question about how well it has set me up for future life!"

"Community Music is a key element to being a well-rounded musician. The skills that Music in the Community have taught me, have aided me in all areas of my musicianship and will greatly benefit me in later in my career. The course itself provides a diverse education that helps the participant become more engaging, creative and effective at problem solving. The teaching helps is done through a variety of speakers helping to provide insight into the different career paths that are made possible with a background in Community Music. Finally, it gives students the invaluable opportunity to go to Gambia.

A 'once in a life time' cultural exchange that stays with the student and greatly enlightens their practice.

Isaacs D., 2018

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Coleridge's epic poem was the starting point for a collaboration between writer Gerda Stevenson and composer Dee Isaacs who together made an opera – a retelling for our times reflecting on the current refugee crisis. The promenade performance involved 60 primary school children from an area of deprivation within the City of Edinburgh, 25 music students, 2 musicians from West Africa and professional creative and production teams.

'I know this for sure, that your words Gerda, and your music, Dee, moved people immeasurably, providing depth and light and colour in 3 dark evenings, and giving them a boatload of thinks to think about' **John Bett**

"I saw the Rime of the Ancient Mariner in the sumptuous hall of the Playfair Library and in the Old College quad at Edinburgh University outside last night, words by Gerda Stevenson, music by Dee Isaacs, directed by John Bett. You should go. It's a beautiful and moving community opera that takes Coleridge's poem and places it firmly in the here and now, in the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean Sea and right on our doorsteps. 60 children from Leith Walk primary, a host of musicians and professional actors. This is an event worth catching." **Matthew Zajac**



Dee Isaacs



Isaacs, D.
Postcards from our World, 2016

A promenade concert of music and images exploring 'where is home?' Leith Walk Primary School and Music in the Community.

Isaacs, D.
Orpheus in the Gambia, 2016
Deeper Life School

Isaacs, D.
Watching, 2015

An opera about sleeplessness for large mixed ensemble and children's chorus in the garden and glasshouses of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. 90 mins, with writer Katharine Craik.

Watching – an opera about Sleep – brought together musicians, actors, a director, choreographer and designers to produce an immersive and rich artistic experience for children in primary 7 and provide an opportunity for them to take part in a large scale professional theatrical production. Watching was supported by a Small Arts Award from the Wellcome Trust, and received further funding from the Development Trust of the University of Edinburgh and a generous charitable donor.

"The Watching project was one of a kind. A thrilling exploration of sleep science through music, theatre and history, Watching demonstrated the real impact that art can have on public health. The creative team were uniquely equipped to generate fresh interest in the vital yet forgotten question of sleep's crucial role in our lives. It was a pleasure to watch the project coming to fruition in schools, and at Edinburgh's Royal Botanic Gardens, in 2015."

Russell Foster
Professor of Circadian Neuroscience and Head of Department of Ophthalmology,
University of Oxford

"I have been reminded why I came into teaching – to help children by meeting their needs and supporting them and make a difference in their lives. The success of the project has inspired us all"

Class Teacher

"Great Spectacle! Great Achievement! Lots of good things to talk about, but more than anything I was struck by the commitment and sense of involvement on the faces of in all the participants, both the children and the musicians."

Funder for MITC

"Standing on a balcony, high above the crowd inside a glasshouse, two soloists are singing. Down below, a two-year-old boy sits transfixed, unable to take his eyes off them. Their pure voices, backed by a harpist and choir on the ground, are like a siren song compelling us to listen, but for all the right reasons."

It is moments like this, that prove the importance and impact of work of this nature. Projects rooted in the community, supported by talented artists who introduce young audiences to hitherto unknown pleasures."

A collaboration between the University of Edinburgh's Music in the Community course, the Royal Botanic Garden and pupils from Leith Walk Primary School, Watching gets so many things right. The location is sublime. Walking around the Garden after dark, happening upon one visual and aural feast after another is truly magical. Whether it's a group of primary sevens dressed as nocturnal animals, students singing and playing over ten different instruments, or the beautifully lit glasshouses, the design elements have all been cleverly thought through. So too the music, which is both accessible and engaging."

Family Opera Watching,
Botanic Garden, Edinburgh
Scotsman Review 21 March, 2015



Isaacs, D.

Songs for Mary Stuart , 2015, for Soprano and Piano, 20 mins.

Oxford Lieder Festival, Merchant City Festival

"I really enjoyed the concert. Louise has a wonderful voice and presence and performed the songs flawlessly. She poured her heart into the performance. My particular favourite was Triptych – 3 songs for Mary by Dee Isaacs. They were profoundly moving in simplicity "In the end is my beginning" a fitting end for this poignant event."

Audience

Isaacs, D.

The Gambia Project

The Tin Forest, 2015. For 150 primary school children and small ensemble. 45 mins.

Deeper Life School, The Gambia.

Education is fundamental to poverty reduction, and with over 85% of Gambia's population living below the poverty line in a region with low levels of literacy, this project makes use of the educational and social potential of music as a tool for the transferring of knowledge.

As well as continuing with the wide ranging placement programme across the social and educational sectors in Edinburgh, Music in the Community is committed to a research project in The Gambia, West Africa and has now taken 3 groups of staff and music students to work in Deeper Life School, Kotu. Here the focus is on the links between music and development of language/literacy skills as well as introducing the concept of active learning and the benefits of using the arts across the curriculum. The project works with large numbers of children bi-annually.

"Anywhere you find the children around campus you find them singing your songs. Sooner or later the whole of Serrekunda will learn these songs because each and every child who participated in the programme has a sister, brother, cousin or friend in other Schools. As they sing the songs to them, so they will sing it to others. As they sing the songs to them, so they will sing to others and on and on it will go until it reaches the whole region and if not the whole country. This is possible because The Gambia is a small country"

Mohammed Dansoko

Teacher, Deeper Life Primary School

Serrekunda, Gambia

Isaacs, D. 2014, Boatman – for 150 primary school children and small ensemble, Deeper Life School The Gambia. 45 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2014, Big Boat – working in The Gambia, West Africa, students from the University, teachers and pupils from Deeper Life School are involved in an ongoing 3-year research project using music as a tool for enhancing literacy skills.

Isaacs, D. 2014, Memories are Made of This – for chorus and ensemble to a film by Matthew Kay Memories are Made of This... was an exploration in sound and image of the work of Alasdair Hopwood an artist and curator exhibiting at the Talbot Rice Gallery, performed by graphic design students, music students, sound designers and 150 school children. The promenade event took 'memory' as its theme and interpreted this through newly commissioned films, and musical responses to the exhibition by Alasdair Hopwood.

"Many congratulations to you, the students and children for a truly memorable performance of Memories are made of this... 2014"

Robin Leith Trust

"There was a magical atmosphere from the first fabulous song Refugee Blues composed by Dee Isaacs which was so brilliantly complimented by that amazing film... I was hugely impressed by the interaction between the students and. Children and everyone sang with such energy and commitment."

Primary 5 Teacher

Dee Isaacs

“Active learning is always very, very important and for the children to be actively involved in areas of the curriculum where teachers don’t always have expertise is just a phenomenal opportunity. For the children to have role models with the confidence and expertise and obvious talent to work with the children has just changed the children’s ideas about music, about singing, about live performance... it has made their studies much more engaging.”

Headteacher Gilmerton Primary School

Isaacs, D. 2014, Big Boat and the Snore Gatherers – for 150 primary school children and small ensemble, Deeper Life School The Gambia. 45 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2013, 7 Seas – a film and music project in Deeper Life School, The Gambia – with film maker Ian Dodds.

Isaacs, D. 2013, Conference of the Birds – for mixed ensemble and chorus in the Glasshouses of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. 80 mins. Based on the epic 12th century Sufi poem young performers took the audience on a magical journey through seven garden spaces in their quest to find Bird King. Music, narration, tableau, songs and soundscapes.

“You can make inroads with children through music in whatever area of the curriculum you are doing as long as you do it with passion and encouragement. This project has done just that – encouraged me in my teaching.”

Teacher

“Congratulations to you and all the birds – particularly Owl! – for an outstanding musical and artistic journey. It was so atmospheric and I would have loved to have seen it more than once – the singing from everyone was fantastic and the Finale was ringing in my ears most of the night. Please tell the Head of the school how impressed I was by the children They sang so well and concentrated throughout. They really acted their parts and everyone involved seemed to be caught up in the magic of the performance. It was truly memorable. The lighting, of course added to the beauty and atmosphere of the gardens.

It was truly memorable.

Audience

“It was sensational musically, many congratulations. We loved it and thought all the elements; dance, movement, lighting etc were of a very high standard.”

Funder

“There were some pupils in [the project] who were fairly disadvantaged, from very poor backgrounds, who aren’t academic, and who struggle in school socially and emotionally. Despite that they were absolutely on form... dancing and singing on the stage, surrounded by students. They were very much into it. We saw how [the project] was targeted for specific pupils who have self-esteem issues or academic difficulties, giving them opportunities to excel in different areas. For me this is what the project is all about, and it very much achieved that because children who find school hard, fitted into the activities really easily, and then excelled. Their parents could see that too.”

Headteacher

Isaacs, D. 2012, The City Sings – for choir, soloists and ensemble. National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh. 60 mins.

“The benefits for all the children were tremendous, but the benefits for the children who didn’t think they could do it are incalculable – confidence is like growing skins on an onion, and after the performance in the museum these children have got several onion skins they did not have before... children gained an immense amount from it”

Headteacher – Hermitage Park Primary School

“My mum, dad and sister said it was the most stunning and amazing performance they had ever seen! Practising the songs was good and I was really proud of what I achieved and what the class achieved as well”

P4 Pupil



Dee Isaacs

"I really enjoyed taking part in The City Sings. It was amazing taking part. I loved being in it and I would like to do it again"

P5 Pupil

Isaacs, D. 2011, The Quicken Tree – commissioned by SAC, State Street Bank, music theatre in the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Music in the Community and 3 primary schools. 70 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2010, After Mary Rose – commissioned by Magnetic North Theatre Company Touring. 60 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2009, Musical Hats – for actor, string ensemble and percussion. Commissioned by the Scottish Ensemble; Queen's Hall, Edinburgh; Old FruitMarket, Glasgow; Grand Hall, Kilmarnock; The Platform, Glasgow. 45 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2009, The Ancient Mariner – for SATB and ensemble. ECA and Music in the Community. Queens Hall Edinburgh. 60 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2008, The Lost Happy Endings – for ensemble and children's chorus Inspired by Carol Ann Duffy's book, in collaboration with Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Music in the Community and 100 children. 60 mins Isaacs.D, 2008. You know how this is ... for small chamber choir, performed Dorchester Abbey, Schola Cantorum Oxford and at the Winter Graduation Ceremonies.

Isaacs, D. 2006, Gallery Aloud – portraits in sound. Inspired by the exhibition, Divided Selves: Talbot Rice Gallery. 45 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2006, Suppose Life – Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh- composer and producer for Promenade Music theatre through the glasshouses in collaboration with University of Edinburgh Music in the Community. 60 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2006, The Iron Man – a film in image and sound created for the opening of Perth Concert Hall working with primary school children from rural schools. 50 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2005, Orpheus in the Gardens – Scottish Arts Council, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. composer and producer for Promenade Music theatre for 100 primary school children in collaboration with University of Edinburgh . 50 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2004, Papillon Productions – composer for devised dance/physical theatre performance exploring themes of confinement inspired by the poems of Ghazi Hussein, a writer in exile. North Edinburgh Arts, Dance Base. 20 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2004, Word for Word by Linda Maclean – composer for new play produced by Magnetic North Theatre Company inspired by numbers. 60 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2003, A Boat Sailed on 7 Seas – Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, composer for promenade music theatre for 100 primary school children in collaboration with University of Edinburgh, devised in Georgia with displaced communities and developed in Scotland to explore cultural identity.

Isaacs, D. 2003, Without a Trace by Carol Mack – directed by Gerda Stevenson, composer for a play about the blind pianist Maria Paradis , and the essence of creativity. The Tron, Glasgow. 40 mins.

Isaacs, D. 2003, Festus –community opera commission by Grindlay Court Centre in collaboration with Project Ability, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, The Tramway (Glasgow) Traverse Theatre (Edinburgh) marking the culmination of 8 years work with a core group adults with learning difficulties. Supported by the Scottish Arts Council, National Lottery. 50 mins.