

King's Student Perspectives

Music

Jess, 3rd year

As I write this, I'm four days away from graduating, having completed a BA in Music at King's College, Cambridge. It sounds illustrious and prestigious and all sorts of things that I never expected to have to my name, and somehow it doesn't go any way to summing up the three years I've had here.



How did you decide on a Music degree?

I didn't know I wanted to study music until a couple of weeks before the Cambridge application deadline. Music had always just been a hobby for me, something I did to cheer myself up in my spare time. Around GCSE time, I was convinced that I wanted to be a physics teacher, and I chose my A-levels accordingly: Physics, Maths, Further Maths, French and Music. I ended up dropping Physics after the first term, and got more and more involved in the music department. I liked playing in school bands (I play the piano and saxophone), but I hated the pressure of solo performing, so I found other ways to get involved in shows and productions, like fire-stewarding, front-of-house and designing tickets and publicity.

Around GCSE time, I was convinced that I wanted to be a physics teacher.

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I knew that I wanted to go to university - I always quite liked school and learning. Through sixth form, I got increasingly curious and knowledge-hungry, but I still wasn't sure what I was aiming for. As more people started asking me what I wanted to do once I left school, I decided that I wanted to choose a subject to study at university based on what I enjoyed doing, rather than what job I wanted to land at the end of it. As a bonus, it turns out there are actually some jobs for music graduates out there.

What attracted you to the Cambridge Music course?

Music isn't often given enough credit for its variety and depth as a subject. Once I'd decided that I wanted to study music at university, I found that most courses were divided into three big strands - performance, composition, and musicology. I liked the look of the Cambridge course, because it really shows how big the musicology strand is, and this is what most of the papers

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on offer explore. But Cambridge also still manages to get the most reluctant composers (like me) writing music, and provides some incredible performance opportunities no matter what your experience or technical level.

I really liked the Music Faculty as well. The whole building is quite modern, built right next to the old music faculty building, which looks like a cute detached house and now houses the administration offices for the faculty. The library is a really nice, light space with a huge number and variety of resources, lovely staff, and an 'annex' where you can use keyboards with headphones and iMacs. The faculty doubles as a concert venue. As students you can access the Concert Hall (incidentally, where we do our exams, on the stage) and Recital Room, and the very nice pianos that live there. The foyer has a small coffee shop too, which is an absolute life-saver for morning lectures.



Music faculty foyer

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The course structure itself suited me really well, especially as I came straight from school with no gap year, and no real idea of what specific area(s) of music I wanted to study. The first year is a little different now - when I first started all the papers were compulsory; now one of them allows you to choose an extended essay, composition or performance - but it is still divided into six papers, which cover a range of historical, technical and practical subjects.

You're taught in a mixture of lectures, classes and supervisions. Lectures take place at the Faculty (a ten-minute walk from College, and that's if you walk slowly) with your whole year group, so about seventy people. Classes are smaller - usually fifteen to twenty people in a classroom and you get to be a bit more involved. Supervisions are what a Cambridge education is famous for, one-on-one tuition (some supervisors prefer to work with small groups of 2 or 3 students) with someone who really knows what they're talking about.

How was the transition from school to Cambridge Music?

I found the jump from school to the first year here quite tricky: I could pretty much keep up with the teaching for historical papers, learning about which composers lived when and getting to know their music, but a lot of the composition and practical skills seemed way above my head for a while. At school we were taught to harmonise four-part chorales in the style of J. S. Bach. While this



The path King's back gate – this is the way to the Music faculty

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wasn't a very in-depth education, it certainly helped. In hindsight, I wish I'd taken it further in my own time.

I noticed very early on that for a music student, I really didn't know a lot of music. My piano teacher had introduced me to things like sonata form, what to expect from the movements of a symphony and so on, but things would have been a lot easier if I'd been better

acquainted with 'classical' repertoire. The introductory pack I received suggested miniature scores of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven - my advice is to start early, get to know one or two works really well then you can use them as useful models and points of reference in a large portion of the first year papers!

And supervisions?

I really appreciated supervision time, where once a week or once a fortnight someone takes time to answer all your questions thoroughly and monitors your work throughout the year to make sure things are sinking in! In first year, I wrote three or four 1,500-word essays (on average I read four or five chapters or articles for each), and had two or three practice harmony and counterpoint exercises a fortnight. Each piece of work was marked and discussed with a supervisor. This happened in a group of three with two other King's "musos" in my year for essay subjects, and individually for the harmony and counterpoint papers. This sort of workload was new to me, especially without a teacher telling you what to read, where to find it, when to read it and so on, but I felt that I was eased into it at the beginning of the year and I became good

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What is the later part of the course like?

As you get into second and third year, you're allowed more and more choice over what you study. The papers I'm currently studying are Music Aesthetics, Miles Davis, Mozart's Don Giovanni, and The Music of Chopin. I've submitted a dissertation on film music (specifically, Aliens, Titanic and Avatar), and a composition portfolio, consisting of songs written in the style of Edward Elgar - so the papers are specific, but varied. The lecturer for each paper is an expert in their field, and they're so passionate about it that learning from them is really exciting and interesting.

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This is important, because in third year you also have a lot more control over your own learning. You have less supervision time, as lectures are generally replaced by seminars. In theory these are discussion groups with about 10-15 people, but some of the papers I took were so popular that the 'seminars' were actually lectures or classes. The emphasis shifted from essays to presentations, so where in first and second year you did your research, wrote your essay and maybe chatted a bit with an understanding supervisor, in third year you do your research, give your speech then

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fend off difficult questions from 20+ fellow students, who, like you, have just spent over two years being taught to think outside of the box and to question everything. Once we hit exam term, however, I feel that I was more prepared, given that I'd been forced to practice thinking rather than writing. If you can manage to learn how to write a decent essay in your first two years then come finals you can be more adventurous with your exam answers and get your teeth into some of the bigger and more complex issues in music.

What is College life like?

As great as the Music course is, the main thing I'll remember about my time in Cambridge is King's. When people find out that you're at Cambridge, they don't seem to care what you study - it's all about which college you're at, where your allegiances lie. It's tricky to describe the role a college plays - from doing tours of the college for Open Days I've found that the best summary is 'a mini University', so 'Cambridge University' is an umbrella term for all the thirty-one individual colleges. They're so much more than halls of residence. Yes, you live there, but it's where you make your first friends, and each have their own student

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unions, colours, societies, sports teams, rules, traditions, quirks, and reputation.



Jess on her Yr12 stay in King's

I didn't really choose King's. In Year 12 an opportunity came up to go on the 'Shadowing Scheme' (run by the Cambridge University Student Union) ^{see end}. This was back when I was interested in science so I ended up following a King's BioNatsci (biologist, to the rest of the world) around for two days. I stayed in Keynes, which is where most King's first years live, ate in Hall, went to lectures and seminars with her, and even to a French class at the language centre. We went to the cellar bar in King's (now re-branded and re-launched as 'The Bunker') where my instructions were "Don't drink..." - I was 16 - "...and don't touch the walls". I loved it. Everyone I met was laid back, very easy to talk to, very welcoming and very proud of their college. It was a bit infectious, and even when I came to a University Open Day, I didn't really look at other colleges.*



This year I live in Bodley's court

The lifestyle here is new and exciting but also made very comfortable. Accommodation is provided for the entirety of your time at King's, and the variety of places you can live is wonderful. Whatever your priorities, there will be something that suits you. Music students and choral scholars have a separate room ballot to the rest of the college, with special rooms reserved for us all over the college. Each one contains a piano which is tuned each term. On top of this, you can practise on the Steinway concert grand in Hall, the baby grand in Keynes Hall, or either of the basement practice room pianos.

I was never particularly bothered about an ensuite or state-of-the-art kitchen so I chose some of the older parts of the college. Last year I was in A-Staircase, which overlooked King's Parade, and this year I live on a creaky wooden staircase in Bodley's court overlooking the river, in a room that is actually two rooms, each with its own fireplace.

Throughout your time here, the support you get from King's is amazing. Most of the undergraduates here are living away from home for the first time, so there are bound to be problems - medical, psychological, social - on top of any academic issues. I always liked that there are so many different options for people to talk to. To mention a few: the college nurse (who has a wonderful sense of humour and is not shocked by anything), the KCSU welfare officers (one male, one female), your Director of Studies (at one particularly horrific moment I burst into tears at mine, we had tea and a chat and I left the office feeling much better about myself and the world), any member of the Tutorial team, the Chaplain (whether you're religious or not, he's a lovely man)...

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What is there to do in your spare time?

In my first year, I mostly filled my spare time with music-related things.

I auditioned for King's Voices, just about managing to make a noise through all the nerves, and have been happily singing away in one of the most famous musical venues in Europe ever since, with a very nice and hugely varied group of people. I went on tour with them twice, once to Bologna and once to Malta. The choir I sang in at school did medleys from West End shows and pop covers, but King's Voices



King's Voices in Bologna, Italy

I read a poem for the BBC program 'Carols from King's' this year.

introduced me to a whole different realm of vocal music which really helped with my academic work as well.

Through the choir I read lessons in Chapel, which works wonders for your public speaking, diction and confidence. I read a poem for the BBC programme 'Carols from King's' this year, and was helping in the production

van for the recording of 'Easter at King's'. Also, early on in first year I happened to get an email from someone looking for a page turner, so I became a regular at the Kettle's Yard evening concerts as well as the more prestigious Concerts at King's.

My main extra-curricular musical activity has been King's College Music Society. I started doing odd-jobs in my first year, making posters, tickets and so on. In my second year I became Student President and was in charge of my own committee, organising large- and small-scale concerts in College. The aim was to get more people involved in making music, so on top of the big concerts that were expected of us, we started up a recital series as well as a Friday night slot which showcased some of the amazing bands that King's has floating around. I'd never done anything like it before and found myself making things up as I went along, as there wasn't anyone who'd done it before still around to help. This year I took more of a back seat as Secretary and guided a



After the May Week Concert, we were on our way to Trinity May Ball.



The W1 crew after the May Bumps races (I'm third from left).

new President through the year.

I can now look back and be really proud of what we achieved. Our May Week Concert, where students sang, played and conducted some pretty adventurous works, was one of the most successful the college has seen in a long time.

Having avoided sport rather successfully for 19 years, in second year one of my best friends became women's captain of King's College Boat Club, and talked me into trying it out. I'm not sure how I got sucked in, but I've now rowed in the first VIII for five terms, competed in four sets of "Bumps" (crazy week of

... racing), and met some really amazing people.

I think I liked the instant reward you get with rowing: with academic work you have to wait until exam results come out to see where your hard work got you, whereas the progress you make when you're doing something new and being constantly tested (both by others and yourself) is very obvious and very satisfying.

It was great for getting me out of bed in the morning, especially this year when I didn't really have lectures to get to, and while I was revising it was great for getting some headspace back, out in the open air and (hopefully!) the sun. The social side of the boat club is pretty spectacular too, and now that my leaving Cambridge is getting scarily close, I think this is one of the main things I'll miss.



W1 crew at the May Bumps dinner (I'm second from right).

I'm confident that a music degree was the right thing to do.

What comes after Cambridge?

Going out into the world after being in education for so long is strange. We're all well aware that the graduate job market isn't in great shape, and more than ever the arts are struggling to keep going with funding cuts and the public tightening their belts. All the same, I'm confident that a music degree was the right thing to do.

In a slightly strange series of events, last Easter I met a gentleman on the rowing machines in the gym, who found out that I was a music student and offered me a job. I'm now Front of House Manager for the summer theatre that he runs at a stately home in Cheshire, and am heading back for my second season there after graduation.

In September I plan to begin a gap year of sorts; I have an au pair position in France lined up, where as well as taking a break from academia and improving my French, I hope to keep up the singing and rowing. Long-term I would like to work in the concert and theatre world, putting on productions, shows and music. My time at King's has given me the contacts, experience, confidence and inspiration to really go for it.

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** King's continues to welcome talented students from schools without a tradition of top university entry to stay in College and 'shadow' a student studying their subject. For information about the Shadowing Scheme, please see <http://www.applytocambridge.com/shadowing/>*

A note to current King's Music students

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying Music at King's for our prospective students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details: undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk