

Reflection Essay:
A Musician's guide to the Laidlaw Scholars'
process



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My time as a Laidlaw scholar has been pivotal in my university career. As a student who was in the William and Mary Joint Honours programme and is now decidedly not, I must give credit to Laidlaw for the lovely friends I've made and the confidence it gave me. Although I am an international relations student, my Laidlaw experience was enveloped in music; my first summer was research on youth music education in Fife Scotland while my second summer extended that research on my own to Dar es Salaam Tanzania. The project was sponsored by my chamber orchestra conductor, Bede Williams, and a music centre executive, Ellen Thomson.

Having found this opportunity through my orchestra conductor, I often reflect that my life trajectory would be different had I not decided to advance playing the flute when I was ten. As music has had the strongest influence on my Laidlaw experience, the most appropriate way of describing the Laidlaw process is parallel with the trials and tribulations of my 10–22-year-old self learning to play the flute.

To start an instrument, one will sound terrible at first. No one can pick up a musical instrument and just begin perfectly playing. This is a part of the process, universally experienced with mixtures of excitement and frustration while religiously following a \$3 book for every answer. One starts unconfident, terrified for anyone to hear. One may be highly self-critical, and in awe of musicians who seem to have mastered their instrument.

I began Laidlaw with no idea what it would bring. I remember walking into Parliament Hall and beginning to talk to people. I felt was trying to play an instrument without knowing any of the notes. The uncompleted preliminary stages of my research project still dauntingly loomed in my mind; I had no idea how I'd complete anything knowing I even struggled completing my essays properly for my actual classes. I was amazed by those in my interview process and in Parliament Hall who walked with the confidence of someone who has a bustling CV. I felt unqualified, like my artistic project idea was dwarfed by solar cells and python. I was nervous to tell people about my project.

The reason one may continue to progress in an instrument, could be the feeling of playing in a group—every instrument is designed to be played in accompaniment with another instrument or occasion. In a symphony, there's an emotionally profound moment ones realizes that they are in sync with 70+ others who they may not know, but equally care about their instrument—hundreds of combined hours of practice. One will slowly lose focus how much better others are as any excellent addition to the group will improve everyone. One adjusts their playing to help those around them, for the greater good of the sound. One may experience great drive when they realize the power of this connection. This is what the Laidlaw leadership training did for me.

In our initial leadership retreat and the meetings during my first summer, I found the push for myself to improve in my work. Speaking to the other scholars was the motivating.

People wanted to hear my ideas and were interested in my project. The passion that we jointly created to improve each other's project was unmatched. I began to understand why this academic community was so powerful because of how we would all push each other. The discussions around our individually diverse projects improved mine. So many students with different academic and personal backgrounds, who I would otherwise never have met let alone conversed about a research project, completely influenced how I went about my project.

Just like how playing in orchestra has pushed me to continue improving, meeting some of my closest friends in Laidlaw has pushed me to continue working. I improved not out of competition or even for Laidlaw specifically, but for the passion of what I am doing and a belief that some part of what I've done may be beneficial one day – our action learning groups and informal chats helped me achieve this.

The hours of practice you pour into your instrument, eventually make everyone in the symphony better off no matter how marginal your improvement may be. Essentially, beginning to play an instrument in a group shifts how you think. One becomes more critical and able to “zoom out” by trying to relate to others and make your work useful to all –the Laidlaw community and meetings allowed me to do this.

One will not earn a spot in the orchestra without being a strong musician and putting the hours behind what you love. When one gets to a certain level, joins groups, they meet many people with whom they start collaborating. This is how the world gets new music ideas and genres. My father always joked that when a new talented musician comes to town, everyone knows, and the music world gets a little bit smaller.

The Laidlaw organization promotes "networking" as a main benefit of being a scholar. However, to me, it is not necessarily the event and corporate grind that many people make it out to be. My network has grown as I've met those genuinely interested in my work. As a result of finding people through personal connection, I've found self-improvement and opportunities come naturally—not through meticulously planned networking. In my Leadership in Action Project, I've had the pleasure of collaborating with those in UNSECO projects, meeting members of the Tanzanian government, many musicians, locals of Tanzania and Fife, because of the work I've put in over time and I care about what I'm doing. Laidlaw gave me a platform cultivate my passions and bring all my practice out to the world to connect with people, much like how musicians start to collaborate with each other due to unique talents.

When one learns an instrument, like any other endeavour, they will have a high learning curve, often overcome simply by hours put into it. Suddenly, one sees as soon as they get better at playing a scale, they misunderstand how to articulate, they're no longer in tune, their sound is off... as soon as one fixes those problems, one may realize that they've forgotten the scale all together. The learning curve flattens. One even questions if playing in the orchestra is worth the trouble.

As being a musician pulled out all my weaknesses and forced me to continue addressing problems, the Laidlaw experience pushed my mind to find my personal and global shortcomings—which was frustrating. Firstly, through tough conversations in the leadership sessions, I learned how I need to work on my confidence and assertiveness as well as personal accountability/time management. I learned how to manage this struggle through the networks Laidlaw provided: conversations with my advisors, other scholars, and direct career advice within CEED. Although problems keep popping up, and I must go back and address them just as I do with my instrument, it does mean growth is occurring, and Laidlaw has, with some frustration, pushed me to grow.

Further, My Laidlaw experience has been marked by misunderstanding, confusion and disillusionment. I often struggled with multitudes of issues in my research project and LiA. I consistently battled issues in my first summer with ethics paperwork, timelines of primary schools. I had so little data and I had to turn to other methods that were much more difficult to analyse than numbers. In my LiA project, I was overwhelmed by an unfamiliar environment. I found it difficult to balance learning the language, managing my own project, and trying to make the most experience—improving at one thing meant putting another on the backburner. As soon as I felt more confident in Tanzania, my entire idea of the project fell through. I asked myself if it would matter if I did not accomplish my task? Just as in music practice, I'd level up and feel accomplished just to find more issues. Laidlaw pushed me to these issues which helped me realize that the improvements observable overnight, and issues will always be endemic, no matter how long I've been on a project. This does not take away from how far I've already come.

A specific issue the musicians face when playing pieces from baroque and classical periods, is how to interpret music in the context of which they were written: different instruments, different styles, different intentions for the music itself. How do you adapt music to ears of today? how does one play music so that it becomes accessible to all listeners? One has many things to consider both in the context of past creation and the best way to adapt to each listener. Understanding this context requires hard work, research, and practice. Compromises must be made. There is no one right interpretation, but one must justify what they do.

My research project and LiA required me to take context and adjustments into consideration when understanding what would be best for local communities and why certain things worked and why others would not. Researching specifically Fife community and impacts in Fife alone, I had to learn how to adjust my thinking as an outsider.

Working in Tanzania, I adjusted to the contexts around me and had to scrap everything I thought I knew to make something work. The open discussions and opportunities from the Laidlaw program, specifically the readings we were given and discussions from the Dublin conference, made me reconsider methods. For example, In Tanzania I decided to not roll out

surveys and opt to build trust and gather qualitative data from personal conversations. This also made me reconsider the context of St Andrew's role in Tanzania and rethink the way we have been working all together. After speaking with the Laidlaw team, I learned to identify personal preference and habit as a bias that affects everything we do. As in music practice, one must do immersive research and think meticulously about the way one does things when bringing them to places with different context.

When you get marginally better at your instrument, you begin to teach others. You starting pushing yourself into bigger projects, more prestigious groups. The most I've learned musically were times where I was thrown completely out of my depth and forced to work, teaching or not. The best way I bonded with people and found solutions, both in the St Andrews and Tanzania, was asking constant questions. This way, I became closer with the community and was even introduced to government officials, and I also met some of my best friends.

My experience with Laidlaw has drawn out my personal passions in what I want to take going forward: what is so special about the arts, that it bonds people so quickly. No matter the language or level, whenever there are enthusiastic about their craft, you will be able to communicate in some way. Music and Laidlaw happen to be places that brings this out in people. What was special that I found in my research with P6 children, working in Tanzania, the most impactful and enthusiastic people, are simultaneously teachers and students, they will teach each other. The most successful brass courses reported students helping each other in groups, this was the most significant part of StAMP brass. In Tanzania, the best musicians and students were teachers. In Laidlaw, we are all better leaders because we are constantly becoming better followers through our simultaneous teaching and learning.

In giving back to Laidlaw, I'd like to continue working in promoting projects that are more specific to local communities. Staying where you are or projects that identify grounds-based issues. These projects are the ones that need to be done and are easier to conduct within the timeframe given by the programme, but they are overshadowed by flashier ideas. Further, I believe that we need more discussions on the role of women in communities in the LiAs. I found this to be a ubiquitous issue and potentially something more people should examine constantly.

In the future, I would like to continue my work in music. After living with my Tanzanian friends, I learned about ways that I could continue working in music and meeting people. Specifically, I've become more passionate about the intersection between arts heritage and sustainability. This passion combined with my Laidlaw connections has allowed me to meet scholars in St Andrews with whom I would like to collaborate. There are so many new fields of research that I've been exposed to that are inspiring my current career search. I am comforted by the network that Laidlaw has given me in my upcoming year.

Now, every time I attend a Laidlaw event, I walk in confidently knowing that I am capable and qualified to be in the room. I feel that because of all the issues I've faced and

everything I've learned, future steps will be easier. Most importantly, Laidlaw has brought me to people who have shaped my life and will continue to do so.

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