

Fine Music 102.5

Interview with Simon Moore and Tara Elvery (Hear For You Mentee)

Speaker 1:

Well, I'm very delighted to welcome into the studio this morning, a violinist, Tara Elvery. Tara is a student at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and I'd like to welcome her to Fine Music Sydney. Tara, thank you for coming in this morning.

Tara:

No worries. I'm excited.

Speaker 1:

Now, I don't know the correct way of expressing this, but there's a particularly interesting reason why you're here and a particularly unusual aspect to you as a musician at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, would you mind telling me what that is?

Tara:

Yeah, sure. So I'm actually a hearing impaired performer, so I have severe hearing loss in both ears. And so I wear hearing aids on both sides.

Speaker 1:

And yet you're able to talk to me quite successfully, appear on radio, and be a musician. Can you tell me about the... I mean obviously that must be very challenging. Can you tell me about those challenges?

Tara:

Yeah, sure. So I'm actually very lucky that I wasn't born with hearing loss. And so that's why my speech is still quite normal. And I'm able to express what I'm saying quite well. So my hearing came about from something called clostridiosis, which came into both my ears and so I've had 19 surgeries across my life to get rid of that and to basically rebuild my air drums.

Tara:

And so I think performing has been such a great thing for me to be able to do. I think it's so lovely that I can still enjoy sound and I'm so privileged to still be able to do that. But I think it has definitely come with its challenges. Being hearing impaired definitely would impact my music. But I think that probably the main challenge is just other people's I guess prejudice against you in that sense.

Tara:

People just not really expecting a musician to be hearing impaired just brings its own set of challenges to the mix.

Speaker 1:

And they just assume that, well therefore you can't possibly be a musician.

Tara:

Yeah, exactly. So it's just a battle of trying to prove that I can still be a musician, but then also maybe I also need some help in different ways just to help me cope as well.

Speaker 1:

Can I ask how old you were when you started being hearing impaired?

Tara:

Yeah. So I had my first surgery before I was one, but I think the main decline was about junior primary. So I got my first set of hearing aids in grade four, which were just the in-ear hearing aids. And then in grade seven, I got a bone-conducting hearing aid because the in-ear ones just weren't doing it anymore.

Tara:

And then last year, I had another surgery to get the second bone-conducting hearing aid as well.

Speaker 1:

So obviously you weren't a musician before you started losing your hearing. So what inspired you to learn music?

Tara:

Yeah. So actually both of my parents are musicians themselves, so my entire family has gone through the Conservatorium. And so yeah-

Speaker 1:

It's in the blood.

Tara:

Yes, pretty much. Which is what they said in my audition as well. But yeah, my mom was a clarinetist and so I think I mainly take after her in that sense. But my mom is actually also hearing impaired in a very different way. It didn't come about until later in her life, but I think being able to see her still being a musician and being hearing impaired just really helped me to be able to do that as well.

Speaker 1:

So I understand that at the moment you, I know you have the hearing aids, but you're also lip reading me, I believe, right? Tell me about learning that because that must've been quite a thing to learn how to do. Or does it just come naturally like learning how to speak?

Tara:

Yeah, I think it's very different for different hearing losses. So yeah, like I said, I wasn't born with it and it was a very gradual process, so I didn't lose it all at once. I lost it over multiple years and so for me, lip reading was something that I just picked up on and learnt to do as I lost my hearing especially because it took a little while to figure out what was going on. And so I just naturally started coming up with coping mechanisms before I was able to get hearing aids and all of that.

Tara:

But yeah, I think lip reading is just something that is just so second nature to me because it's just how I cope, especially in social situations. And for instance, if it's dark and I can't see the other person, I've really noticed that I can't really hear what they're saying and it's a lot harder.

Speaker 1:

And then you suddenly realize how you've been understanding people.

Tara:

Yeah, exactly. So I need to see to be able to hear basically.

Speaker 1:

So what about the music?

Tara:

Yeah. So I think I'm really lucky with my instrument because it's a clarinet. It goes inside my mouth and so I internalize a lot of the sound. So the main challenge is just performing in ensembles. But I'm really lucky with the technology that I have. It's grown so much since I got my first set of hearing aids. So now I have the directional sound having bone conducting on both sides. So that really helps me cope.

Speaker 1:

But it's also the feeling of it almost the vibration as well.

Tara:

Yeah, exactly. So I think I've had to learn to I guess experience music in a different way because internalizing the sound of the clarinet myself, but then just finding different ways to get the same result as other people I guess. But it's just not a conventional way of enjoying music.

Speaker 1:

So what about playing in an ensemble situation, whether it's small or even an orchestra? What are the challenges there?

Tara:

I think in the orchestra is probably the biggest challenge because the clarinets are quite far back and you're also in a line of really loud brass instruments and so they tend to overpower what I'm taking in when I'm in the orchestra. So that's definitely something to get used to.

Tara:

But again, it's using the visual cues. So watching the conductor, watching the other instrumentalists, it's just getting to know your part well so you can focus on other parts and just get that same well-rounded sound. When it's a smaller ensemble, like the ensembles I'm in at uni at the moment it's easier to cope, but it depends on the room that you're in as well with sound quality and stuff. For instance, I play in a clarinet choir, so it's just having to process one particular tone and so that's a lot easier.

Speaker 1:

Okay. So part of why you're talking to me this morning as well as to hear about your program is because it's hearing awareness week for 2020. You're obviously involved therefore with the deaf community or the hearing-impaired community in Australia. So what do you see as your role in hearing awareness week?

Tara:

Yeah, I think for me it's bringing awareness for different types of hearing loss and also bringing awareness to just protecting your hearing as well. I think a big part of hearing awareness week is just showing people that hearing is such a precious thing and it's so easy to lose it. And so I think especially in the musician's scope, it's talking to my friends, talking to my colleagues about just protecting their hearing so that they don't have to go through the challenges of losing their hearing.

Tara:

But I think also just bringing awareness to the challenges that you have as a hearing impaired person. I find as a young hearing-impaired person, people don't really understand what it's like. They relate to me as, "Oh, my grandparents have hearing aids." Which is fine. But it is a very different experience to grow up-

Speaker 1:

Age related hearing loss is somewhat different to this.

Tara:

Exactly. Yes. And it's a very severe hearing loss and so it's just realizing the small things people can be doing to just help you communicate better, especially in social situations can just be the

most isolating place. So just looking at me and not covering your mouth and speaking slowly and just repeating when I ask you to repeat is the main thing. So it's just bringing awareness to the small issues that just help the hearing community, the hearing-impaired community to just connect a lot better with those who are [inaudible 00:07:04].

Speaker 1:

Do you know what proportion of the adult population or even the younger population is hearing impaired?

Tara:

I don't know off the top of my head.

Speaker 1:

But it is higher than we think, isn't it?

Tara:

Yeah. And I think for me, when I was growing up, I had never actually met someone else who was my age who is hearing impaired, but then through the organization Hear For You that I'm doing a lot of stuff with now, I was able to meet other people who were the same age as me and experiencing hearing loss and it just opened me up to a whole new community of people.

Speaker 1:

I'm talking with Tara Elvery. She's a clarinetist. I have to apologize. I think I accidentally said violinist at the beginning. I'm sorry for that. I think I had the wrong note in front of me, so I do apologize, but Tara is hearing impaired, but she's a musician and studying at the moment at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. So Tara, tell me about... You obviously went to a quote unquote traditional school. You didn't have to go to a special needs school. So how did you find that, especially as your hearing deteriorated throughout your childhood?

Tara:

Yeah, so for me, so I've always just gone to a public coed normal stream school. So I never went to a deaf or hard of hearing school. And so I think probably the biggest challenge for me was primary school because that was when I was losing my hearing and when I was starting to get hearing aids and going through that process and also just being out of school so much with my surgeries, I was having multiple surgeries a year and also just having like ENT appointments every single week.

Tara:

So I was missing a lot of school, but also losing my way of communicating and hearing and learning. So I had to have a lot of extra help from my teacher aid to just be able to get through school. I found my grades started to slip a lot, especially in English. Because I was learning to read and write, I was starting to lose my hearing. And so I didn't write with vowels and stuff like that. And so just because it's that processing while you're learning, it just really impacted my

learning in primary school. And I think for me in primary school, I was very scared to I guess identify as a disabled person. I just wanted to pretend that I didn't have-

Speaker 1:

You're just a person.

Tara:

Exactly. Yeah. And so I'd never ask my friends or people what they were saying or ever explained what I was going through. So I found that really isolating in primary school, but I was really lucky to have a good teacher aide who really helped me just get through primary school.

Tara:

But then I think for high school, for me it was advocating myself in saying that I'm still capable. Yes, I'm disabled and so I'm going to need some extra aids and different I guess techniques in learning because I can't hear as well. But just being that doesn't stop me from being able to do well. Because I found once I got to high school, I was doing okay. I wasn't doing badly in school, but a lot of my teachers then saw that as being like, "Okay, she doesn't need help." And so they would refuse to wear my FM system, which was a microphone that I use in the classroom and they would just not give me the aids that I really needed.

Speaker 1:

Sorry. Who was refusing to do that?

Tara:

I had a couple of teachers who refused to do it. Yeah. And also I think for me just I guess the response from my I guess classmates as well, when I was doing that, they just thought that was really weird and they're like, "Why would you do that?" And so it's just... Yeah.

Speaker 1:

Especially because it's not difficult. It's not something that people have to go particularly out of their way. It's just a very, very minor thing to be had to accommodate really. What about moving into the Conservatorium? Has that been a similar experience or have people being a bit more accommodating?

Tara:

Yeah, I think I found being in the uni scope you're not as I guess individually picked out and so I think I've actually found that easier as a hearing-impaired person because you do develop a bit more of a personal relationship with your tutors and your lecturers and especially doing a music degree, your teachers... You see the same people quite a lot.

Tara:

And so I've actually found it quite good. I think when I first got to uni, I was quite scared to actually let people know that I was hearing impaired. So I did not show anyone my hearing aids for a full semester. I was just too scared. But I've gotten over that and I think it's been really good to just be like, "I'm a musician, I'm hearing impaired, but that doesn't mean that I can't do it."

Speaker 1:

Is fear of discrimination like that, like what you've just described, is that actually almost worse than having to then just... The things that like the hearing special microphone. So is it almost actually worse? Is the fear of that holds you back more than the actual disability?

Tara:

I would say probably yes. Just because hearing is how we communicate. It's how you socialize, it's how you learn.

Tara:

And so I think when people are judging you in that space, it can be really hard to then advocate for yourself. And I think especially being in Sydney, it's just myself that's trying to get my I guess disability across and what that means. And so I think socially I'm completely fine to be hearing impaired. I've accepted it now. I didn't accept it when I was younger, but I'm worried about what other people think. And so, and especially, I think also starting a music degree, you just get that fear of how people are going to receive that and how it's going to impact your career I guess as well. So yeah, I think it's catastrophizing the actual response to people rather than the actual disability.

Speaker 1:

And can I ask, and I don't want to bring up bad memories or anything, but I see you at some point when you apply to join the Conservatorium or started always learning music, there would have been at least one person that said, "Don't be stupid. Don't be silly. You can't do that."

Tara:

Yeah. I think that was definitely the general response. And even just like-

Speaker 1:

So that response is much more common than saying, "Great, you go. Good for you."

Tara:

Yeah, exactly. I think the people who know me well who I have grown up with who have been supporting me the whole way up, they don't think twice about it because music is just something that I really enjoy and I've never not been able to do music because of my hearing impairment. But when I meet people, they see my hearing aids. So they'll be like, "What are you doing?" "I'm studying music." "Oh, what's that on your head?" "A hearing aid." "Ah, how do you

do music?" It's just that immediate reaction to that. And so yeah, you just get a lot of people not thinking that you can do it.

Speaker 1:

And what do you say to them?

Tara:

I just say that it just means that I bring something else to the table. I think obviously I'm not going to be performing and experiencing music the same as other people, but it doesn't mean that I can't do it. And I just explain that I can internalize sound and just experience that in a different way. And so there's no way it's going to stop me. And one thing that I do like to bring up is that the principal percussionist in the London Symphony Orchestra is profoundly hearing impaired. So why would I not be able to do it?

Speaker 1:

Indeed. Here, here. Well, Tara, it's been absolutely fascinating having you this morning. Thank you so much for sharing your stories and I hope I haven't... I just realized actually a moment ago it's funny you said because I rested my head on my hand like that and I realized I was starting to cover my mouth a little bit.

Speaker 1:

Just enough probably. It's actually interesting how I suddenly, "Oh no, that's making it difficult to view." So could conceivably do that. So it's amazing how those things that people just don't think about. So it's really important that you've come to talk to me this morning. Thank you so much for the time.

Tara:

Thank you for having me.

Speaker 1:

Tara Elvery, she's a clarinetist at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music studying there and well, she's also hearing impaired. It's hearing awareness week this week and if you'd like to find out more about hearing loss and about people living with hearing loss and perhaps what you can do to make life just that little bit easier because it's just the little things that are needed. Get along to [Hear For You .com.au](http://HearForYou.com.au). Hear For You. And that of course is A-G-A-R Hearforyou.com. Dot AU. Fine Music Breakfast. It is 21 past eight.