

Newsletter No. 2

Dear Friend

Tempus fugit!

Time flies and I realize that it is now well over a month since I wrote last.

I would like to say a very special thank you to all who have joined as Patrons and Friends or have sent donations since the last newsletter. This really is appreciated - thank you so much!

Those of you who attended the Jacqui Dankworth and Craig Ogden concert in 2018 may remember Craig referring to his brilliant student James Girling. I mention this as James is part of the Meraki Duo who will be performing for us in 2021. Equally brilliant is his duo partner, the flautist Meera Maharaj. Information about them may be found on their websites: www.meeramaharaj.co.uk-merakiduo and www.jamesgirlingmusic.com-marakiduo but I caught up with them a couple of weeks ago and asked the following:

I am sure that readers will want to know about the choice of name. What is the meaning and why did you choose it?

Meraki is a Greek word meaning 'to do something you love with all your creativity, soul and passion'. The concept of untranslatable words is fascinating and the sentiment that 'meraki' expresses is exactly our aim in music-making.

Tell us a little about your backgrounds, when did you begin to play these instruments and why?

Meera: I grew up in Warrington and began playing the flute aged 9, as the result of a musical evening at my primary school, during which we were able to try different instruments. Producing a sound on the instrument came quite naturally and I remember thinking that the flute was pretty and shiny! My first teacher was brilliant and she encouraged me to apply for the Junior Royal Northern College of Music, a Saturday music school, so I attended Junior RNCM for 6 years, whilst studying at my local state school during the week. I remember there being music around all the time when I was growing up and I know James had a similar experience, so we were both exposed to a wide variety of genres and styles, which we have spoken about in relation to our musical curiosity in adult life. We also have the shared experience of learning by ear as young musicians, consequently memorising music from early on and this has allowed us to perform from memory as a duo.

James: Born in London, I moved with my family to the Cotswolds at an early age. My dad, who had played guitar in a band, gave me my first (half-sized!) guitar for my fourth birthday, on which he showed me basic chords. The next half-a-dozen years, I wrote my own songs and learnt as much of The Beatles' music as I could. Self-taught until my mid-teens, my relationship with music was entirely by ear until, after watching a spell-binding John Williams recital in Liverpool, I began teaching myself to read music aged 13: to be able to learn repertoire that was too fast to transcribe from CDs! I'd always enjoyed improvising, and it was around this time that I also began playing jazz. At 16, a scholarship enabled me to begin classical guitar tuition and join the Warwickshire Youth Jazz Orchestra.

What message would you have for youngsters learning a musical instrument?

Meera: I would encourage a sense of play and fun, as this is how we all learn, especially as young musicians. If young musicians maintain their inherent curiosity, both in terms of listening and their study of the instrument, they will develop and progress steadily, whilst building their love of music.

James: Learning an instrument is a brilliant way to get involved with music we love. It also creates special opportunities to meet other creative people and explore music together as friends, whether that be in bands, orchestras, choirs, duets, etc. Music introduces us to many different cultures, and it can be something we have strongly in common with people from the other side of the world, even if we don't share the same language.

We first met at your audition for Live Music Now some years ago. Would you like to say a little about your work with LMN?

It is no exaggeration to say that we absolutely love our work with LMN!

Live Music Now is an organisation which was set up by Yehudi Menuhin in 1977. After our duo was selected for the scheme, a couple of years ago, we have enjoyed delivering many interactive music sessions in special educational needs schools, care homes and various community settings. Our LMN work has taken us as far North as Cumbria and as far South as Devon.

We have witnessed some really touching moments during our LMN sessions. In care homes, residents living with dementia have joined us in singing old jazz ballads and we have seen young people with special needs get involved in musical activities, when they would otherwise remain disengaged or distressed. These moments are constant reminders of the power of music, particularly within these settings.

Will this be your first visit to Wales/ to a Festival in Wales? Or have you performed here before?

***Meera:** I played in the Gregynog Young Musician competition when I was much younger but I don't think I've performed a concert there since then. However, as a duo this will be our first trip!*

***James:** Although this will be my first classical outing in Wales, in recent years I've played at Green Man Festival, Brecon Jazz Festivals, and Black Mountain Jazz (Abergavenny) with a number of jazz and original ensembles: ArtepHis, Lieko Quintet, Agbeko, & The Easy Rollers.*

It has been a very difficult period for free-lance musicians of late. How have you had to adjust your lives?

***Meera:** We haven't performed live concerts since March so that has been very strange indeed. We had a busy start to the year and had just finished a tour of the South West before Lockdown happened, so it was a stark contrast to suddenly have the diary empty! The last few months have allowed for positives though, such as spending time with family, having space to think and reflect (when normally, life is very hectic!), time to learn new repertoire, study and listen to a lot of music, read and get out for good walks! We have been getting to grips with online concerts too, so that has been a steep learning curve!*

My first livestream was a flute/piano recital and this has since developed into a series. James and I will feature in this series over the next few months so if anyone wishes to receive updates, this is the link for the mailing list:

<https://mailchi.mp/d8bb61e9d7fd/sign-up-for-updates-from-live-with-dominic-degavino>

***James:** Carrying on from Meera's comments, it has also been very rewarding to discover that the remote, video format is an effective and enjoyable way to give guitar lessons for private and school pupils. I'm grateful to have been able to continue teaching in this way, and it has been a privilege to offer a diverting weekly dose of music during these unusual, challenging times for young people.*

One of the advantages of the swathes of available time has been the opportunity to independently study music, not only repertoire but also styles of playing and those of particular musicians with a thoroughness which isn't quite afforded during normal working life, not even whilst a student at music conservatoire.

Other than music matters do you have any hobbies and interests?

***Meera:** Certainly! I really like the outdoors and I enjoy getting out walking. I'm a bit of an adrenaline addict (on and off stage!) so I also like rock climbing. Less adrenaline related interests include reading (recent gripping reads include 'Girl, Woman, Other' by Bernardine Evaristo, 'Queenie' by Candice Carty-Williams and 'Go Tell it on the Mountain' by James Baldwin).*

***James:** I've always been hooked on sports: mainly football (as an avid player and supporter), though I've enjoyed getting back into tennis lately. In the countryside, I'll take my Vespa on road trips; in the city, I'm a cinephile and avail myself of chances to watch European cinema on the big screen. I spend quite a bit of time in Norway nowadays, so I'm attempting (albeit without the greatest success) to learn norsk.*

It is with pleasure that I now invite you to listen to two performances by these lovely musicians on videos that can be found at www.fishguardmusicfestival.com/meraki-video. I am so delighted that they will be coming to FWWIMF in 2021. Enjoy, stay safe and I shall look forward to being in touch again soon.

With thanks and very best wishes,

Gillian

Gillian Green MBE (Artistic Director) Fishguard and West Wales International Music Festival