

## A Room for Improvement? - John Robert Brown

"How many practice rooms do you have?" That's a question I hear frequently when recruiting overseas students for HE music courses in Britain. Unfortunately, the answer isn't straightforward.

Of course, I could say something like: "Oh, we have thirty-two small rooms, eight seminar rooms and four large rehearsal spaces." That would be factual, and reasonable for the college that I represent. But just as one can never possess too much technique, or be too thin or too rich, music colleges can never have enough practice rooms. During a midweek morning, at midterm after a large lecture, every student seems to be seeking a practice room. That can amount to hundreds of players. The truth is that no music college in the world has sufficient practice rooms at those times of the day when demand is at its highest.

When answering, I explain that practice rooms are sometimes scarce, pointing out that major conservatories are located in the middle of large cities, where property costs are high. Therefore, practice space is expensive. Additionally, I make the observation that every college I've ever seen has empty practice rooms at weekends, many remaining unused - albeit for good reasons. Strangely, that's never a winning argument!

There are many solutions to the problem. One gesture that deeply impressed me was that of a former editor of *Music Teacher*, David Renouf. David would never lock his office at Nottingham University, to allow students to use it as a practice room when he didn't need the room himself. I've never forgotten his good example.

Not all student musicians need a practice room. During a recent visit to the Royal Academy of Music Museum in London I was impressed to hear a violin student practising among the glass cases of the York Gate Collections, steadfastly working away at a cadenza and ignoring my presence. What concentration!

Alas, public practice doesn't always work. I'm sceptical about those players who regard busking in the street as a form of practice. Even in a college environment, being overheard is a temptation to pirouette rather than practice.

Traditionally, pianists worked at the concert repertoire with a dummy (silent) keyboard. Drummers can use practice pads. Electric guitars and keyboards can be practised with headphones, or even unplugged. The Yamaha company markets a range of silent instruments - silent strings and silent brass. But for those music students who require a conventional practice space to be provided, one of the most sophisticated contemporary solutions to the problem is that marketed by the Wenger company of America.

Not to be confused with another famous Wenger company - the one that makes those Swiss army knives with the red handles - this is the Wenger company that is also known for its high quality music accessories, including music stands, chairs, cabinets, choral risers, and the prefabricated soundproof practice rooms known, of course, as Wenger Rooms.

Wenger Rooms are freestanding, relocatable and self contained. About the size of a small bedroom, they have a full length window in the door, with additional windows available for security and supervision. Users, like good Victorian children, are seen but not heard. In my conversations with V-room users, the window was the only feature that was criticised. Unlike that brave violinist at the RAM, most students regard practice as a private matter. They don't want a room with a view. They don't wish to be observed. Regrettably, such privacy can't be justified. Windows in practice rooms are essential in today's world.

A solid oak floor, an open lattice ceiling and built in lighting all add to a pleasant environment. Some models are designated as V-rooms. The 'V' stands for 'variable acoustic', the fascinating feature of these rooms. The sound of the musician is picked up by integral microphones and transmitted back into the room with a reverberation chosen by the user. Touch a switch, and this top-of-the-range model can simulate the acoustics of either a concert hall, a cathedral, or a stadium, in preparation for a future performance in that particular venue. There are ten options in total.

Wenger Rooms, which are manufactured in Owatonna, Minnesota, have been available since 1969, but only in the last decade have they been taken up in Britain. I first encountered V-Rooms at Bath Spa University when Professor Geoff Smith took me to see them in his music department and demonstrated the variable acoustic. Smith hinted that these high specification rooms cost in the region of £30,000 each.

The Bath Spa installation initially dates from 1998. A technician at the University is Derek Pierce: "They're fairly soundproof and are useful for recording student works, especially with the variable acoustic," he told me.

The cost of the rooms amounts to a large slice of the budget for many music departments. Nevertheless, it's a tribute to the usefulness of the Wenger rooms that in all of my researches about this equipment, the various users - from the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester to the Royal Marines Band in Dartmouth - offered no complaints about the price. Some of the responses have been glowing. Typical is Simon Mercer, Music Coordinator at Ridge Danyers College in Stockport: "We have two Wenger Rooms which were installed about twelve years ago, in my predecessor's time," says Simon. "They are in constant use as practice rooms, and are virtually soundproof. We now also teach Music Technology and use one room as a drum recording room, for the simple reason that the kit can be miked up and separately monitored without interfering with other recordings."

Simon uses the second room as a recording studio. "We feed cables in from the drum room and from another studio space, and monitor and balance in complete peace," he says. "I have to say that they are an incredible resource for any practice purpose. They are air conditioned and large enough to accommodate a small chamber ensemble. If I had the money, I would buy two more, they are fantastic," he said. A second room is now used as a recording studio.

The Royal Marines Band at Dartmouth has one Wenger room, in use in a musical community of 35 to 40 people. The room, around three metres by two in size, is fitted with a microphone and speaker. "If you want a dead room, you just turn it off and it becomes a box," says Captain Martin Williams. "The room is not 100 per cent soundproof; if you walk past when someone is practising, you can just hear what they are playing. The room has good lighting, and forced airflow, not air conditioning," says Williams.

The Royal Academy of Music has installed Wenger rooms in a large corridor, an innovative way of making use of otherwise dead space. However, it isn't quite as charming as using the Museum as a practice room.

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