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# INSIGHTS IN SOUND

## *Visually Impaired Musicians' Lives and Learning*

DAVID BAKER AND LUCY GREEN

An **Ashgate** Book

'Baker and Green have written a landmark study of the perspectives and practices of visually impaired musicians. Through opening up this musical world within such a broad range of musical contexts, they have succeeded in offering powerful insights to both musicians and educators, which can only serve to enrich our understanding, knowledge and practice.'

*Gordon Cox, University of Reading, UK*

'*Insights In Sound* offers a substantial contribution to the field. Using the colorful and insightful stories collected from hundreds of visually impaired musicians and the individuals who work with them, Baker and Green offer a comprehensive picture of the complexity of visually impaired musicians' lives. This is a must read for anyone interested in understanding the lived experiences of musicians, or music education for the visually impaired.'

*Chi Gook Kim, Berklee College of Music, USA*

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# Insights in Sound

Music has long been a way in which visually impaired people could gain financial independence, excel at a highly valued skill, or simply enjoy musical participation. Existing literature on visual impairment and music includes perspectives from the social history of music, ethnomusicology, child development and areas of music psychology, music therapy, special educational needs, and music education, as well as more popular biographical texts on famous musicians. But there has been relatively little sociological research bringing together the views and experiences of visually impaired musicians themselves across the life course. *Insights in Sound: Visually Impaired Musicians' Lives and Learning* aims to increase knowledge and understanding both within and beyond this multifaceted group. Through an international survey combined with life-history interviews, a vivid picture is drawn of how visually impaired musicians approach and conceive their musical activities, with detailed illustrations of the particular opportunities and challenges faced by a variety of individuals. Baker and Green look beyond affiliation with particular musical styles, genres, instruments, or practices. All 'levels' are included: from adult beginners to those who have returned to music-making after a gap; and from 'regular' amateur and professional musicians, to some who are extraordinarily 'elite' or 'successful'. Themes surrounding education, training, and informal learning; notation and ear playing; digital technologies; and issues around disability, identity, opportunity, marginality, discrimination, despair, fulfilment, and joy surfaced, as the authors set out to discover, analyse, and share insights into the worlds of these musicians.

**David Baker** is Lecturer in Music Education at the UCL Institute of Education, UK, where he is Programme Leader for the MA in Music Education. He has held appointments as Honorary Senior Research Associate at UCL, Module Leader for "The teaching musician" at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, London, and Course Tutor for the MA in instrumental teaching at the Institute of Education, Reading University, UK. David completed his PhD at Reading in 2005, which won a Bernarr Rainbow Award. He has been a professional trumpet player, and also taught music in primary and secondary schools for a local education authority in England for over ten years. David is an Associate of the Royal College of Music, London, and member of the Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain. He first worked with Lucy Green as Senior Research Officer on her "Ear playing project", 2011–12, which was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. After its completion, David became Principal Investigator for the Arts and Humanities Research Council project on which this book is based. He has published various chapters, as well as research articles, and book reviews on music education in peer-reviewed journals. His research and writing have also taken him as a presenter to Australia, India, Norway, and the USA.

**Lucy Green** is Professor of Music Education at the UCL Institute of Education, UK. Her research interests are in the sociology of music education, specializing in meaning, ideology, gender, popular music, inclusion, equality, informal learning, ear playing, new pedagogies, and most recently, the lives and learning of visually impaired musicians. Lucy's work bringing the informal learning practices of popular musicians into formal education has reached countries across the world. She has produced two edited books and six authored books on music education, amongst a range of other publications.

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# Insights in Sound

## Visually impaired musicians' lives and learning

**David Baker and Lucy Green**

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# Acknowledgements

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We were also fortunate to have been guided by an advisory panel, all experts in different areas of visual impairment and music, which comprised (as well as James and Sally): Peter Bosher who, through his company, Soundlinks Ltd, provided training in accessible music technology; Jackie Clifton, Fellow in Visual Impairment, Royal College of Music, London, who was appointed an MBE in 2011 for her work in promoting equal opportunities for visually impaired musicians; Dr Anthony Gritten, Head of Undergraduate Programmes, Royal Academy of Music, and Julian West, Head of Open Academy, who were both interested in opening up accessibility for musical learners with special needs; Kevin Kern, a pianist and composer from the USA, who had been involved in the development of access scripts for the popular Sibelius music engraving software; Lord Colin Low CBE, Vice President of the RNIB, a non-party peer of the House of Lords with a special interest in music; and Lydia Machell, Director of Prima Vista Braille Music Services, who was collaborating with commercial music publishers to increase

1 The project was officially entitled "Visually impaired musicians' lives: Trajectories of musical practice, participation and learning". The Principal Investigator was David Baker with Lucy Green as Co-Investigator.

access to digital Braille. Peter, Jackie, James, Kevin, and Lord Low gave us valuable perspectives from their position as visually impaired people, with Peter, Jackie, James, and Kevin being practising musicians. We were pleased that Peter, James, and Kevin also participated in our research as interviewees. We also wish to thank Dr Maria Vraka for her patience and forbearance in making transcriptions of our life-history interviews, a lengthy task creating voluminous text.

Vasuki Sivagnanavel FRCOphth, MD, BSc, MBBS, PG Cert, a Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon, Royal Eye Unit, Kingston Hospital, London, kindly advised us on medical aspects of the project (e.g. terminology, definitions, and ramifications of eye conditions). We are most grateful to her for her continued support throughout the project; and also for reading a complete draft of the book in detail and for checking the accuracy of Appendix 1 containing a glossary of medical terms.

Additionally, many organizations and businesses helped us connect with participants, including: the Baluji Music Foundation (UK); Berklee College of Music, Boston (USA); the Blackburn and District Blind Society (UK); Dancing Dots (USA); the Essex Blind Charity (UK); the European Blind Union; the European String Teachers' Association (ESTA); the National Association of Music Educators (NAME) (UK); Friends of Moorfields Eye Hospital, London; the Hull and East Riding Institute for the Blind (HERIB) (UK); the International Music Education Research Centre (iMerc); the Kent Association for the Blind (UK); Lighthouse International (USA); the Music Education Network of the Visually Impaired (MENVI); Music Mark (the UK Association for Music Education); the National Federation of the Blind (USA); Northumberland County Blind Association (UK); the Royal Academy of Music, London; the Royal Blind School (Edinburgh, Scotland); the Royal London Society for Blind People (UK); the Society for the Blind of Dewsbury, Batley and District (North Kirklees, UK); the Surrey Association for Visual Impairment (UK); the Thomas Pocklington Trust (UK); Vision Australia; the Walton Blind Society (UK); and the World Blind Union.

As well as the formal research discussed in the book, two practical outcomes organized as part of the overall project had an impact on us and coloured our thinking. One started in October 2014, when the authors visited the Royal Academy of Music, London to present issues covered in this book with staff and students from this world-renowned conservatoire. Alongside this, Sally and James of the RNIB provided complementary training for the students, planning and running music workshops. All this was kindly facilitated with the kind support of Julian West and Anthony Gritten. Some of the Academy's students then proceeded to work with children within the visual impairment unit of Edward Wilson Primary School, London with the support of Anette Dahyaraj, the school's specialist in visual impairment. A musical performance in which the children worked with Academy musicians was created in November of that year, led by Neil Valentine, based on the BBC's 10 Pieces. We were delighted that the project could fund this venture, and that the research

findings would feed into the training of future music teachers and into children's education. We are grateful to everyone involved, including the children.

In March 2015, we held a "Visually impaired musicians' lives" conference in London, which brought together many of the people who had been involved in our research. These included visually impaired performers, and both sighted and visually impaired music teachers, researchers, music industry representatives and members of other organizations working in this arena. It was a unique gathering of stakeholders in visual impairment and music from across the world. We are appreciative of our keynote speaker, Chi Kim (Assistant Professor, Berklee College of Music, USA, and Programme Leader of the "Assistive music technology lab for the visually impaired"), in addition to all those who provided musical performances and talks, as well as practical support. We made many further contacts through the conference, several of whom have also fed into this book in a variety of ways.

We would like to thank our partners in life, Charlie Ford and Thuy Hoang for their on-going support in so many areas. Most importantly, our gratitude goes to the research participants who made the task of researching and writing the book an unforgettable experience. They generously gave their time to share thoughts, ideas, experiences, opinions, not to mention music itself, and much more. Without their support and strong enthusiasm for our project, this book could not have been written.

# Note on the text

In accordance with advice from our project advisory panel, we have presented aspects of the text in a way that, in an academic book, may seem unusual to some sighted readers.

At the beginning of each chapter, a list of its contents appears underneath the chapter heading. This is to assist those using screen readers or text-to-speech software (explained inside the text), since it is not possible for them to scan quickly what is to come in the way that a sighted reader can.

It is not possible for visually impaired readers to know whether text is indented or not; and, again, they are often unable to scan down to the bottom of a citation to see where it comes from. Therefore, when citing a written text or a research participant's spoken words, we have placed the citation reference at the top of each citation; and at the end of the citation(s), we have put "End of quote(s)".

In the case of citations from our interview and questionnaire data, all visually impaired respondents were asked whether they classed themselves as "severely sight impaired" or "sight impaired". During data collection, we used those particular terms in accordance with medical usage in the UK. However, as explained in more detail in Chapter 1, for the purposes of the book we have translated "severely sight impaired" into "blind", and "sight impaired" into "partially sighted". This categorization is shown, along with information about the musical roles undertaken (e.g. composer, performer, producer) and instruments played (including voice) by each respondent, as given to us by the respondent him- or herself.

We have included tables rather than diagrams as, in the digital form of this book, the latter would not be easily accessible to someone using screen reader software. Where we have used visual display media such as a photograph, we have placed a textual description underneath for readers who are unable to see it. Permission for the photos to be taken and printed has been granted by those concerned.

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# 1 Background, aims, and context

Chapter contents:



(End of chapter contents)

*(Joe Buck, film and television composer, partially sighted; interview, USA)*
You almost have an edge when you lose your sight because you hear so much better. So it's a love–hate relationship with my blindness.

*(Cara Tivey, Lecturer in Performing Arts, Royal National College for the Blind, sighted; interview, UK)*
I think visually impaired people's ability to work by ear is so much better, so superior to their sighted counterparts …

*(Mark Miller, piano teacher, sighted; interview, USA)*
If one sense is lowered, the other one is heightened, right, so visually impaired musicians have good ears.

> *(Norman Waddington, pianist and guitarist, blind; interview, UK)*
> A lot of people would assume that, because you are a blind person, you would be good in music, which doesn't follow at all. You know, there is this stereotype that says "All blind people are good at music", which they are not necessarily, you know. It's a bit like saying "All sighted people can be good drivers", but they are not.
>
> (End of quotes)

Straus (2011, p. 170) comments: "in popular imagination, blind people are compensated for their disability with preternaturally acute hearing as well as prodigious musical gifts". Durant (1984, p. 86) traces a line of blind musicians in early jazz through to the rock and soul of the 1980s, describing "a mythology of special attentions to sound in the absence of light". Stories of famous, even legendary blind musicians of many kinds, past and present, abound, and the sighted layperson and sighted musician alike are prone to be astonished at how such composers, instrumentalists, singers, and others acquire their musical skills, sometimes with truly amazing success. There have also been legions of less well-known professional as well as amateur visually impaired musicians across vernacular and classical musics, around the world and through the ages.

But what is the nature of visually impaired people's musical experiences across the life-course? How do they acquire their musical skills, rehearse, perform, compose, and produce music? What musical choices do they make, and to what extent are those choices related to their visual impairment? What challenges and opportunities do they encounter? Many sighted musicians – performers, composers, musical directors, teachers, researchers, and others – will admit they know little of the answers to such questions. Even many visually impaired musicians themselves, while knowing how they personally experience their musical world and how they participate in musical life, do not necessarily know a great deal about the experiences of others.

## Studies of visual impairment and musical participation[1]

For centuries in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, says Meeker (2006, p. 3), "music has historically been one way that visually impaired people could earn

1 To give an overview of the extent of visual impairment globally: an estimate in 1975 suggested there were 28 million blind people and, extrapolating according to population growth, argued there would be 38 million blind people with a further 110 million low vision by 1990 (WHO, 2007). The World Health Organization's *Vision 2020, The Right to Sight* (ibid., p. 2) indicated global estimates of around 214 million people living with visual impairment in 2006; and, based on their 2010 data, WHO estimates 285 million people are visually impaired, of whom 39 million are classed as blind (i.e. 39 million classed by the organization as "blind" and 246 million "low vision"). Ninety per cent of these cases are in developing countries; 82% of those who are blind are aged 50 years and above; and 80% of visual

their living". Music-making was able to offer opportunities for financial independence, either alongside or instead of other work, or in the face of difficulties in conducting or obtaining paid employment in a largely sighted world. Several studies within the social history of music and ethnomusicology have focused on what might be called "closed" or specialist socio-musical groups made up mainly or entirely of visually impaired musicians, past and present. Many of the itinerant traditions in the middle ages and beyond have included visually impaired performers, some of whom have risen to fame such as Takahashi Chikuzan (1910–98), a shamisen[2] player and member of the Tsugaru-jamisen tradition from Northern Japan, whose life was portrayed in a 1977 film, *Life of Chikuzan* (Groemer, 2012; see also Isaki, 1987 who provides a history of blind performers in Japanese music). There are blind musical traditions in Sierra Leone, among which Ottenberg (1996) explores the life histories of three musicians who play the kututeng,[3] elucidating "their problems in coping with the world as sightless, wifeless, and childless men who are poor and largely dependent on relatives for survival" (p. 4). He looks at the rituals and musical performances of the Wara Wara Bafodea people (living in a chiefdom of Northern Sierra Leone), and at marriage and work as viewed by the three men. In relation to the Ukraine, Kononenko (1998) calls the period 1850–1930 a "zenith" of blind minstrelsy, noting that minstrelsy was "a solution to disability. It existed to provide for the blind, not to foster art … Because music was a way to support those who could not do normal work, a far greater range of musical ability was tolerated and financially rewarded" (p. 65). As Silvers et al. (1998, p. 53) state "cultures commonly create social roles that are imagined to be especially suited to people with a particular impairment"; and they go on to describe guilds of blind musicians and fortune tellers who survived for many centuries in China. As a contemporary example, during the research for this book we were approached by Sister Christine Ntibarutaye who e-mailed us from Dublin, putting us in touch with Jean-Bosco Ntunzwenimana, President of the Union of Visually Handicapped Persons of Burundi, Central Africa, "Sois notre lumière". Jean-Bosco's organization was ratified by the government on 17 April 2011, and comprises a group of seven blind musicians who come together with the aim of gaining economic self-reliance through music, as well as agricultural activities and making and selling table cloths, mats and handbags.

impairment is avoidable or curable (WHO, 2012; see also WHO, 2013, p. 5). Cataracts and refractive errors, such as myopia or near-sightedness, hyperopia or far-sightedness, and astigmatism or distortions caused by an irregularly curved cornea are the most common causes of sight impairment worldwide. (Appendix 1 provides a glossary of medical terms.)

2 The shamisen is a lute-type instrument used in traditional Japanese music.

3 The kututeng is a lamellaphone, otherwise known as an "mbira" (African thumb piano), i.e. an instrument with lamellae (tongues of metal or wood that are plucked).

Literature has also examined lengthy global traditions stretching back to ancient times, where blind musicianship is linked to mythology about other compensatory abilities such as wisdom or spiritual powers. From medieval times, there was for example, an ancient custom of blind Japanese singers who accompanied themselves on the biwa, a short-necked lute used for storytelling. It is associated with Benten, a Shinto goddess of music, poetry, and education (De Ferranti, 2009). Lubet (2011) observes of the Japanese *biwa hōshi* tradition, "it is widely believed that, like other disabilities, blindness has, or leads to, 'compensations.' One such compensation is wisdom … Blind people's capacity for special insight … has been a Japanese belief as well" (p. 70). In Kononenko's study of the Ukrainian musicians mentioned above, she also notes they "were repositories of tradition and culture … They were disseminators of the word of God and the major source of folk historical and religious information" (Kononenko 1998, p. 3).

There has been particular attention to visual impairment in early gospel, blues, and jazz idioms. Rowden (2009) looks at the lives of musicians like the nineteenth-century prodigy Tom Bethune (1849–1908, a.k.a. Thomas "Blind Tom" Wiggins); the blues performer "Blind" Lemon Jefferson (1893–1929); gospel musicians such as "The Blind Boys of Alabama" (Jimmy Carter, Ben Moore and Eric McKinnie); and there are biographies of other early blues musicians such as "Blind Willie McTell" (Gray, 2008) and the jazz musician Rahsaan Roland Kirk (1935–77). Attention is paid to the dual adversity of racial discrimination and disability, in order to understand the socio-musical history of such musicians. Rowden (2009) argues that their lives mirrored the social positioning of the African-American people in nineteenth- to twentieth-century USA. Southall (1999) uses Bethune's life to address questions about stigmatization due to a combination of racism and prejudice towards physical disability. Fuqua (2011) describes the Blind Boys of Alabama, formed in 1939, as "one of the most enduring acts in gospel music, now entering its seventh decade" (p. 48). They originated from the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind, and in the late 1940s began touring with a group of blind singers called Jackson Harmony, who were renamed by promoters as the Blind Boys of Mississippi for added hype (Fuqua, 2011). Batterson (1998) and Harrah (2004) both explore the life of the ragtime musician and composer, John William "Blind" Boone (1864–1927). Batterson states: "His own troubled beginnings and overcoming hardships are symbolic of the times" (p. 20).

In more recent jazz and popular music, biographies of visually impaired musicians include those on George Shearing (Shearing and Shipton, 2005), Art Tatum (Lester, 1994), Ray Charles (Charles and Ritz, 1978; Evans, 2005) and Stevie Wonder (Williams, 2002; Ribowsky, 2010). There have been intriguing, eccentric characters, too, like the iconic American poet and musician, "Moondog" (Louis Thomas Hardin, 1916–99), who lost his sight due to an accident at age 17 years. "Moondog" (also known as "The Viking of Sixth Avenue") could be found from the 1940s to 1970s in New York, where he composed, performed, and sold his music on a street corner dressed in a horned helmet. He was

linked with people such as the jazz musicians Benny Goodman (1909–86) and Charlie Parker (1920–55), British pop musician Elvis Costello (b. 1954), and US singer Janis Joplin (1943–70) (see <http://www.moondogscorner.de> [accessed 28 August 2014]). Among visually impaired popular music producers too there is, for example, the acclaimed Robin Millar, "one of the world's most successful ever record producers with over 150 gold, silver and platinum discs and 55 million record sales to his credit" (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robin_Millar> [accessed 27 March 2016]).

Numerous biographies and autobiographies have documented the life histories of acclaimed visually impaired classical musicians as well. Texts include, for instance those on the opera singer Andrea Bocelli (Bocelli and Pugliese, 2002); the composer Frances McCollin (DiMedio, 1990); the flautist James Galway (Galway, 1979); and there are many books on the Japanese concert pianist, Nobuyuki Tsujii (b. 1988), all in Japanese to date (see <https://sites.google.com/site/nobufans/nobuyuki-books> [accessed 27 March 2016]). There are countless other highly successful visually impaired classical musicians about whom information is available on the internet and elsewhere, such as the composer Michael Stimpson (<www.michaelstimpson.co.uk> [accessed 30 March 2016]) or the composer and concert organist David Liddle, (see <davidliddle.org> [accessed 27 March 2016]). The latter represents a strong tradition of visually impaired church organists, in London, Paris and elsewhere for centuries (see e.g. Farlow 1956).

As well as such work in music history, biography, autobiography, sociology, ethnomusicology and related fields, there is a body of scholarship on music and visual impairment in the psychology of music, special needs education, music therapy, and music education.[4] Ockelford provides a summary of findings drawn from three studies involving 32 children with septo-optic dysplasia, 37 with retinopathy of prematurity, 66 with Leber's congenital amaurosis (see

4 In music and music therapy, recent examples include: Dingle et al. (2012), Tomlinson et al. (2012), Williams et al. (2012), Burland and Magee (2014), Metell (2015), and Nightingale (2015). On music listening and musical activity generally its effects on the visually impaired, see: Hart and Feeney (1991), and Arter and Lavelle Hill (1999). On music and complex needs, see e.g.: Ellis (1997), Ockelford (2000, 2008), Ockelford et al. (2002), and Welch et al. (2009). On music, autism, and visual impairment, see: Hammel and Hourigan (2013); and Ockelford (2007), which is a detailed life and learning account of the musical "savant" and pianist, Derek Paravicini from his childhood into adulthood. On music and special needs, see: Ockelford (2000, 2007, 2008), Ockelford et al. (2002), Jaquiss and Paterson (2005), Paterson and Zimmermann (2006), and Hammel and Hourigan (2011). For studies of children and young people with septo-optic dysplasia, see e.g.: Pring and Ockelford (2005), and Ockelford et al. (2006). On retinopathy of prematurity, see: Ockelford and Matawa (2009). Please note that we a present a brief glossary, which includes sight conditions in Appendix 1. For related work on absolute pitch, see: Hamilton et al. (2004) cf. Welch (1988); Ockelford et al. (2006); Ockelford (2007); and Ockelford and Matawa (2009); and for work on pitch-naming, Dimatati et al. (2012).

Appendix 1 for a glossary of these terms), and a comparison group of 32 sighted children. On this, he writes:

> First, children with visual impairment were more likely than their fully-sighted peers to show a particular interest in everyday sounds and music, and to evince relatively advanced musical skills. Here, it was children's level of vision rather than their medical condition that appeared to exert the greater effect. Second, there was a substantial difference in the prevalence of absolute pitch (AP) among the children who were visually impaired and those who were fully sighted. The data suggested that both level of vision and medical condition might affect the incidence of AP. However, having AP was neither a necessary nor a sufficient factor in the development of exceptional musical interest or achievement. Third, the studies provided evidence that learning difficulties need not impede a child's evolving musicality. Here, however, the possession of AP appeared to be a necessary element in the development of exceptional skills. Fourth, it appears that blind children's learning styles in music may be very different from those of their partially- and fully-sighted peers. Young blind children frequently teach themselves to play by ear (particularly the keyboard), for example, whereas children without visual impairment typically learn informally at a later stage through emulating what their friends do (largely visually, anecdotal evidence suggests) or, more formally, by taking instruction from a teacher, who will usually use music notation as the main route to learning. Fifth, it may be that some teachers' perceptions of the impact of sight loss – especially in combination with other disabilities – may cause them to think, erroneously, that they lack the capacity to teach visually impaired pupils. Sixth, the young people who were reported to be learning Braille music were in their teens – although there is no pedagogical reason why music notation should not have been tackled earlier. Seventh, it was shown that neither visual impairment nor learning difficulties need be a barrier to musical accomplishment and, ultimately, to achievement at the highest level (Ockelford, 2014, conference abstract, n.p.n.).
>
> (End of quote)

(In an aside to an aside, but nonetheless related to a point of relevance to this book: we would not concur that informal learning takes place largely visually among sighted children [see pp. 133–4 for a distinction between aural and visual stimuli in ear-playing], or indeed that evidence in this field is anecdotal [see e.g. Bennett, 1980; Berliner, 1994; Monson, 1996; Green 2001]. Learning by ear through copying an audio recording, with no visual stimulus, has been the mainstay of informal learning particularly among young popular musicians since the beginnings of the recording industry. Chapters 6 and 7 include discussions of this practice as part of both formal education and informal learning among visually impaired people.)

What, then, of the notion that visually impaired people have a special gift for music? Melcher and Zampini (2011, p. 270) explain the phenomenon thus:

> Brain regions that are normally involved in processing visual information in sighted people can be "recruited" by the blind to aid their auditory performance. By contrast, sighted people cannot rely on additional brain areas but are dependent only on auditory areas. In other words, if one sense is absent, another sense can take over and involve the neurons in those areas associated with the non-functioning sensory modality. This cortical plasticity may help to explain why blind people have increased auditory (but also tactile) abilities when compared to sighted people. It is tempting to speculate on whether the special sensitivity of the blind towards music might partially explain the long tradition, across many cultures, of blind musicians (and in Western Europe, blind piano tuners). It is interesting to note the large number of blind musicians who have played an important role in the development of jazz, country and blues music.
>
> (End of quote)

It is possible, too, that there may be a connection between an exceptional "musical ear" and, somewhat paradoxically, finding notation difficult. Many teachers of sighted children will tell us that those with "good ears" naturally rely on them and, possibly because of that, are often slower to learn to read notation. Remarks about people having a superb "musical ear" might be misconstrued to suggest the possession of some kind of inborn ability; yet, equally, any heightened sense could be the result of learning and necessity. As we know, many sighted musicians who learn primarily or entirely by ear can also develop fine aural capacities (see e.g. Berliner 1994; Monson, 1996; Green, 2001); and while many of the specialist teachers (both visually impaired and sighted) who we interviewed for this study did believe that visually impaired learners often had extraordinary hearing capabilities, they regarded it as mainly due to the need to rely more on their hearing in general ways, which expedited learning music aurally. This issue crops up many times during subsequent discussions within these pages.

The existing literature on visual impairment and music, then, includes research on individuals, guilds and other groups within the history and social history of music and within ethnomusicology; biographies of famous musicians; and investigations in the psychology of music, music therapy, special educational needs and music education. But there has been relatively little sociological research looking into the perspectives and practices of adult visually impaired musicians, broadly defined as a socio-musical group, cutting across a range of national and international contexts, musical styles, and musical practices.

## The aims of the book

*Insights in Sound: Visually Impaired Musicians' Lives and Learning* hopes to increase knowledge and understanding within and beyond this multifaceted group. Our aim is to draw a broad picture of the different ways in which

various visually impaired musicians approach and conceive of their musical activities; to offer illustrations of the challenges and opportunities involved from the perspectives of the musicians themselves; and to link these with the views of both visually impaired and sighted specialist teachers. We look beyond affiliation with particular musical styles, genres, instruments, or practices, to address an international span, from beginners to those who have returned to music-making after a gap; and from "regular" amateur and professional musicians, to some who are extraordinarily "elite" or "successful". The experiences of a professional opera singer, a jazz pianist, a rock guitarist, a sitar player or an electronic music producer are therefore just as much within our purview as those of an adult beginner oboist or an amateur choral singer. We are interested in what visually impaired musicians of many kinds share, if anything, and where they differ, or not, from each other as well as from sighted musicians, in their personal experiences *as musicians*. Themes concerning education, training, and informal learning; notation and ear playing; digital technologies; and issues around disability, identity, confidence, opportunity, marginality, discrimination, despair, fulfilment and joy surfaced as we set out to discover, analyse and share insights into the worlds of these musicians.

Our research methods and the nature of our sample of participants are explained later in the present chapter and also, in more detail, in Appendix 3. But first, we will address some terminological issues, then the story of how we came to do this research.

## What do we mean by "visually impaired", and what kinds of visual impairment among musicians are included in our study?

There are countless degrees and types of visual impairment, from blindness to slight myopia, reduced visual fields, blurred vision, colour blindness, or photosensitivity. Terminology is used variously in this arena, and can differ from person to person, organization to organization, and worldwide. It may include terms such as "blind", "sightless", "partially sighted", or having "low vision" or "vision loss". Usually a visual impairment refers to a sight condition that – for economic, geographical, medical or any other reason – either cannot be or has not been corrected by for example wearing spectacles or contact lenses, or by an operation.

We use four main terms throughout this book to denote a range of conditions: "visually impaired", "blind", "partially sighted" and "sighted". The term "visually impaired" is used as an umbrella under which we place the two main terms "blind" and "partially sighted". These can be conceived along a continuum. At one extreme, in our usage "blind" refers to those who have no light perception at all, as well as those with negligible or residual light perception but little or no functional vision as it relates to daily life. Under "partially sighted" we include people with some light perception which may be functional to some extent, allowing them for example to recognize certain objects by their colour or general shape, or to see objects if they are highly magnified. We use the

term "sighted" to refer to people who do not fall under any of the above categories and/but who may have sight conditions that are corrected (for example by wearing spectacles or having had an operation). Clearly none of these terms implies any simple cut-off points or boundaries, and each individual may fall along the "blind" to "partially sighted" continuum, or be "sighted" as distinct from "visually impaired" to different extents and in different ways. Other terms naturally appear in quotes from our participants, or other sources.

Many of the discussions in this book refer to a range of conditions and technical, medical or other terminology such as some of those above. We have attempted to make each context understandable to a layperson as we go along, without inserting explanations into the main text, which may disrupt the flow and shift the focus. Instead, we have provided a glossary of technical and medical terms relating to visual impairment in Appendix 1 including, briefly for a non-medical readership, some of the congenital, hereditary, and other causes of visual impairment that we mention.[5] Appendix 2 contains other technical and non-technical terms, covering for example different technologies or ways for visually impaired people to read music (e.g. "talking score", "refreshable Braille display"). We have also included some commonly used terms whose meaning may seem obvious, such as "independent mobility", but which in some cases are not as simple as they seem, or for other reasons.

As we explain shortly, our sample includes research participants who self-identified as having any kind or level of visual impairment. However, this book is *not* about the experiences of visually impaired people with, or in relation to additional special needs or any learning and participation issues aside from visual impairment. Some of our participants do have additional conditions, and as we go along, we mention these and their implications for musical lives, where relevant or where they were mentioned by the participants themselves. One of the teachers we interviewed, Louisa Maddison, works at the Royal Blind School in Edinburgh. Many of her students have profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), and none of them are without some additional condition aside from visual impairment; so, when we quote her words they often refer to children with such needs. But apart from that, our focus is first and foremost on issues to do with visual impairment itself in relation to musical experience and participation.

5 We are indebted to Vasuki Sivagnanavel FRCOphth, MD, BSc, MBBS, PG Cert (healthcare management), Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon at the Royal Eye Unit, Kingston Hospital, London, for her expert reading of this account. The information we gathered on eye conditions also comes from: the RNIB at <http://www.rnib.org.uk/eyehealth/eyeconditions/Pages/eye_conditions.aspx>; Dr Michel Michaelides and the British Retinitis Pigmentosa Society at <http://www.rpfightingblindness.org.uk/home.php>; and Dr Andrew Blaikie and the Scottish Sensory Centre (SSC, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh) at <http://www.ssc.education.ed.ac.uk/resources/vi&multi/eyeconds/list.html> [all websites in this note accessed on 19 March 2014].

Individual circumstances have massive implications for how visual impairment is experienced: blindness from birth is, for example, a very different circumstance from say, rapid or immediate sight loss in later life. So many issues, from emotional response, employability, adaptability, to independent living and of course, musical participation, are involved. We have tried to be sensitive to such matters, and are careful, for example, to avoid the term "sight loss", unless we actually mean "loss". One of our participants commented about this term being misused on an e-bulletin (not one of our own ones):

> *(Anon. comment from a "music and visual impairment" e-mail bulletin list, 29 June 2013)*
> I'm on this [music and visual impairment e-mail] list as a blind-from-birth musician about to take part in this year's Three Choirs Festival [a major English annual amateur choral event], as well as dabbling with all sorts of instruments. I've used Braille music most in singing, piano and percussion though. Sorry if this is ultra-picky, but I've always been blind, so this "sight loss" thing really bugs me! Am I the only one? How could I "lose" something I never had? Perhaps I left my sight on the bus, or in the supermarket?
>
> (End of quote)

By contrast, an unexpected turn of events can abruptly shift a person from being sighted to being visually impaired, and thus totally reshape their experience of, among other things, music-making.

For our purposes in this book, we consider a person to be "visually impaired" when:

i their vision cannot be or has not been corrected to a functional extent by spectacles, contact lenses or an operation
ii they meet the requirements for official registration as either "blind" or "partially sighted" in the UK, even if they have not opted to register; or in the case of this particular study, even if they live elsewhere[6]

6 Registration as "blind" is often referred to in official UK documentation as "severely sight impaired" and "partially sighted" as "sight impaired". Registration as blind or partially sighted in the UK is voluntary. It can have financial and social-care benefits, such as practical support from social services departments, parking and other concessions, a reduced television licence fee, a disabled person's railcard, tax allowance, Disability Living Allowance (DLA), or free National Health Service (NHS) sight tests. Registration entails acquiring a Certificate of Vision Impairment (or CVI) from an ophthalmologist, and the process is explained in Appendix 1. Briefly, in order to make their assessment, two components of eyesight are tested by the specialist: first, visual acuity, or a person's ability to resolve detail; and, second, their visual field, or the spatial extent (horizontal and vertical compass) of visual sensations to the eye.

## The terms "impairment", "disability", "handicap", and the deficit model

The terms "impairment", "disability", and "handicap" are often used interchangeably in casual dialogue; and although the last one was largely discarded a few decades back, at least the first two are common across different contemporary academic texts and are in everyday usage. All the terms tend to imply a problem or a lack, and as such may be understood as contributing to a "deficit model" of people's differing needs and capabilities. As one of our respondents put it: "Far too often, visually impaired people are told what they *cannot* do rather than what they *can* do" (anon.). Silvers et al. (1998, p. 54) point to the broad sociological implications:

> In contemporary Western culture, to be disabled is to be disadvantaged regardless of how much success one achieves individually. That is because costs are extracted if one is seen as a member of a poorly regarded group. Being identified as a "weak" class invites oppression.
>
> (End of quote)

We were grateful to receive an e-mail taking issue with the title of our conference, "Visually impaired musicians' lives" which is almost identical to the subtitle of this book:

> *(Dr Lori Andra Kernohan, PhD Music, Toronto University; e-mail, Canada)*
> I will be unable to attend the conference in London in March 2015 although I myself am a sightless musician. I just have a comment regarding the title of the conference. As an individual with classical music training and who has existed without vision for most of my life, I have never considered myself the following: impaired, disabled and/or handicapped. I am a performer, composer, arranger and improviser. As well as classical genres, I use sacred, gospel, folk, swing and original styles of music. My primary instruments include the piano, the clarinet, the voice (mezzo soprano) and the alto saxophone. I also have experience as a private music instructor, university professor, scholastic researcher, journal writer, guest lecturer and conference presenter. Therefore, the title of the conference should be the following: "The lives of sightless and partially sighted musicians".
>
> (End of quote)

Indeed we agree that the term "sightless" has many advantages over "visually impaired". However not all our advisory members felt the same, including those who were visually impaired, and favoured instead using the term which tends to be most widely adopted in the UK, where the research was based. (Also "sightless" still contains some suggestion of a lack – sight-*less* – and does not apply to people with partial sight so it still leaves the need for a term to cover both.)

We do not use the term "handicapped" at all in this book and we tend to avoid the term "disability" in most of our discussions, in favour of "impairment". However, all these terms inevitably arise in the words of participants, citations from literature, and commonly used expressions such as the "disability arts scene" (Chapter 8). In such cases, we tend to use them more-or-less interchangeably, and with as much sensitivity as possible to the context and the issues above. Abramo (2015) uses the term "twice exceptional" for children with disabilities who are musically gifted; this emphasizes two layers of outstanding ability, the first concerned with overcoming adversity related to "disability", the second concerned with achievement beyond the norms of the general population. Another term, "differently-abled" is a strong contender to replace "disabled", but few people use it, and mainly for that reason we have not adopted it. We are keen to avoid presenting visual impairment as a necessarily unsettling divergence from a prevalent "norm", and even the term "differently-abled" does not quite achieve that.

We feel the focus should be on the recognition that each visually impaired person is different, as is every person in the world, sighted, able, "disabled", exceptional, unexceptional, or otherwise. At the same time the fact cannot be escaped that visually impaired people are in a small minority in a largely sighted world, and the onus is so often on them to make adaptations. We endorse the perspective given by one of our research participants:

> *(James Risdon, recorder player, blind; e-mail, UK)*
> Almost every country around the world uses different terminology. Australia, for instance, uses "vision impaired" which I don't like, but it does have a certain logic alongside "hearing impaired". I personally find debate about the language of blindness rather uninteresting, and it certainly leads to confusion and awkwardness among sighted people who wish not to cause inadvertent offense. I prefer to focus on the impact, consequences and opportunities my vision brings. I suppose I draw the line at handicapped, and I do wonder whether in 50 years' time, we will all have moved away from "impaired" and even "disabled". As a little boy, I always wanted to be a train driver (actually, I still do) so the deficiency model is one I was quite unhappy with aged 8, but "blind" or "partially sighted", or the blanket "visually impaired" suit me now.
>
> (End of quote)

## What do we mean by "musician", and what kinds of musician are included in our study?

Bennett (2008) describes musicians' careers as "Protean" after Proteus who could change form at will. A "musician" is involved in learning, teaching, performing, arranging, or creating music and, for many, due to necessary adaptation to circumstances (including family life, finances, employment opportunities, and so on) there are ever-shifting, multiple roles and emphases