

# Key change at EPTA

The European Piano Teaching Association (EPTA) has a new UK operations director, Liz Giannopoulos. During a lull in her busy schedule, she speaks to **Harriet Clifford** about her career, her aspirations for the role, and her 'glass-half-full' approach to the challenges of the hour

► EPTA UK's  
new operations  
director: Liz  
Giannopoulos



'I've always felt that the life of a private instrumental teacher – and perhaps even more so piano teachers – can be really isolated, and that we can strengthen our profession through collaboration and mutual support,' says Liz Giannopoulos, the new operations director at EPTA UK. We are speaking via Zoom, of course, mirroring the way in which many private piano lessons have been conducted during the coronavirus pandemic. Half a piano shielded by a Perspex screen can be seen in her background, which, she tells me, is there because she has started to teach 50 per cent of her lessons in person, with the other half remaining online for now.

Removing her 'teacher hat', Giannopoulos offers a whistle-stop-tour of her musical and career history, which has seen her studying for an undergraduate music degree, an ABRSM Certificate of Teaching and Teaching Diploma, an LTCL (Licentiate of Trinity College London) in piano performance, and, most recently, a Master of Education research degree at the Royal College of Music, London.

Alongside this, she set up Encore Music Tuition in 2009 to support both piano students and tutors in south west London, and until accepting the new role, was a trustee on EPTA's management committee.

## Leading a diverse team

In September, Giannopoulos became the new operations director of EPTA UK, which, she jokes, 'is nearly as old as me, but not quite.' Founded by pianist and educator Carola Grindea, EPTA UK is now under the chairmanship of another distinguished pianist and educator, Murray McLachlan, and its trustees are drawn from diverse backgrounds, with specialisms including composing, writing, editing, reviewing, teaching, performing, examining and adjudicating. 'Supporting and nurturing the future of music in the UK is a passion we all share,' says Giannopoulos. 'And for me, the organisational skills I developed in my alternative graduate career, combined with my passion for teacher education, is quite an unusual blend, I think, which is well suited to this new role.'



Although only a few months in, Giannopoulos and the management committee already have plans for EPTA UK, including improving communications, increasing and developing services to members, streamlining the administrative process, and developing their network of partnerships with musical organisations. 'I also want to make sure that EPTA can be responsive to current issues, quickly jumping on those hot topics, whether it's the restructuring of an exam syllabus, teaching online during a pandemic, or exploring new teaching resources, principles and repertoire.'

### Supporting teachers in Lockdown

Inevitably, we discuss EPTA UK's COVID-19 response, which included a webinar series, a regular news bulletin, regular guidance on teaching in a changing environment, a risk assessment, and support for teachers through a helpline, which was 'very much in use' earlier in lockdown. 'It's tricky, because as a charitable membership organisation, we can't impose legislation or enforce any rules, but we are committed to providing interpretive guidance.' In terms of the practical advice for piano teachers, says Giannopoulos, 'I would be cautious to say that we would encourage anybody in any particular course of action, but we would support them in their chosen route. Everybody has unique circumstances and every student is unique – people have the boundaries that they are prepared to work with.'

Although reluctant to get into a political debate, Giannopoulos comments briefly on Chancellor Rishi Sunak's Winter Economy Plan, announced in September: 'I think the main challenge for teachers is the fact that many of them have portfolio careers, which means that they have been hard-hit by the reduction in performance or recording opportunities. I think the disparity between the support for employed and self-employed is disappointing, and the recent reduction of support to 20% raises concerns for the well-being of musicians across the country.' While EPTA has minimal experience in economic policy, it has bursary funds available for students, which have been extended to teachers during the pandemic. 'It's not huge amounts of money, but we hope that it does make a small difference.'

As well as for teachers, Giannopoulos fears for the future of instrumental playing among young people. 'I do worry that learning to play a musical instrument is becoming, if it has not already become, the province of the financially privileged. I think that during the pandemic, the divisions of privilege have become even wider. As a society, we need to do more to nurture the musical development of young people, particularly those in less advantageous circumstances. We have to look to the schools to prioritise music, but for them to do that, we have to look to the Department of Education to provide financial support, increased funding and, of course, sustained investment.'

### Looking forward with optimism

Despite the challenges faced by piano teachers and students, Giannopoulos remains hopeful: 'I'm a glass-half-full kind of girl. I've been hugely encouraged by the support that teachers have shown one another over the last six

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months. I've seen so much empathy, practical advice and peer mentoring, not just within my own team, but also in the wider piano teaching community. That gives me tremendous hope for the future, and I hope that when we emerge from this crisis, the seeds of friendship and professional support that have been sown will continue to thrive. If there's a silver lining, hopefully it's that we recognise that we are stronger when we all work together.'

Again, donning her teacher hat and offering advice as an educator and mentor rather than as operations director of EPTA, Giannopoulos says, 'I think at the moment, more than ever, we need to be adaptable and flexible, we need to respond to the diverse needs of our students and be sensitive to what those needs are, and the ever-changing landscape in which we are all living.'

'I find that parents at the moment are looking to teachers for direction, which means that we need to be decisive and professional. We need to give the confidence that we know what we are doing, and we have to have the courage of our convictions. But along with that, we have to have empathy and compassion, because everyone has different opinions about what is the right thing to do. Above all, the needs of our students and nurturing a love of music have to be the central focuses of everything we do, however we choose to do it.'

We discuss the wide range of different exams on offer to students and teachers, including the ABRSM's new Performance Grade, which is assessed via submitted videos. She has two students who will be taking these remotely assessed exams this term, as she felt that they would suffer unnecessarily under the disappointment of another cancelled exam if we enter a tight lockdown again. 'I've got another student who is very uncomfortable with online lessons, so we are taking the gamble and booking a face-to-face exam and just hoping that it goes ahead. I think it should be about making the right choice of exam for each student, rather than committing exclusively to one format or exam board.'

Finally, Giannopoulos shares some of her views on piano teaching methods and style: 'I'm in favour of a broad curriculum of teaching, which is not necessarily defined by exams, syllabus or assessment process. I like to think of my teaching style as being student-centric, or learner-led. I'm a big fan of letting them work things out for themselves with a bit of coaching along the way, and really finding what makes the children tick.'

'I have been known to teach the Alberti bass using a piece of Adele music, rather than a piece of music from the Baroque era. Because actually, if we're not teaching children music they like, then we're not teaching them anything.' **MT**

Further information about EPTA UK can be found at [epta-uk.org](http://epta-uk.org).  
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