



Steely reputation



**NEW FACILITIES AND
LAID-BACK CITY LIFE
WELCOMES STUDENTS TO
SHEFFIELD UNIVERSITY'S MUSIC
DEPARTMENT, SAYS ABI BLISS**

Being seen and not heard doesn't sound like a proposition to tempt prospective music students to the University of Sheffield. But that's the aim of the Soundhouse (*pictured above*), a visually striking new facility that's set to become a local landmark thanks to its covering of studded black rubber. Designed by Carey Jones Architects, the cube-shaped three-storey block resembles a loudspeaker, or perhaps some kind of kinky fetish dungeon. Yet passers-by won't hear a peep from the heavily soundproofed practice rooms and high-tech recording studios inside.

The Soundhouse is one of two new homes for the university's music department. In January this year, staff and students also moved into the Jessop Building, a renovated Victorian maternity hospital that houses lecture rooms, staff offices, ensemble rooms and a 20-workstation music technology lab.

'What's great about the new facilities is that we combine the old with the new,' says Simon Keefe, head of music. 'The renovated building has high ceilings and lots of room, which I think is essential for using the spaces creatively. Then we have the state-of-the-art new building as well.' Before the move, the music department was situated more than a mile

away from the bulk of the university's city campus. Now it's much closer to central services such as the Information Commons, the 24-hour library and IT building that opened in 2007, and to the student-friendly shops, bars and cafés of Glossop Road and trendy Division Street.

Sheffield's music department is on the large side, but still small in comparison to the university's total population of around 24,000 students. 'The close-knit community was evident from the offset: everyone knows each other and everyone's really friendly,' says second-year music undergraduate Rebecca Tompkinson, who is enjoying her time at Sheffield so much that she acts as a UCAS ambassador for prospective applicants.

Academically, the department aims to offer new undergraduates as wide a grounding as possible in the subject. 'We're very broadly based and are strong in a number of areas: musicology, world music, music psychology, music technology, composition and performance,' Keefe explains. 'We explore points of connection between those areas whenever we can as well. Gone are the days when teaching Western music history comprised the core of a course.'

Photos: courtesy of the University of Sheffield

SCHOOL DAYS



The Jessop Building



VITAL STATISTICS

- Sheffield University has its roots in the Sheffield School of Medicine, founded in 1828. It was granted a university charter in 1905
- As of December 2008, the music department had 123 undergraduates and 51 postgraduates
- Undergraduates can study for a single honours BA in music, a dual honours BA with another subject, or a BA in traditional musics with folklore studies
- Taught MAs include music management, sonic art and media production. A music performance MA is led by violinist Peter Cropper, former leader of the Lindsay String Quartet and current artistic director of Music in the Round
- Nearly all first-year undergraduates are guaranteed a place in halls, which range from traditional catered rooms to city centre flats

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It's much more about approaching it from a range of perspectives.'

'Ethnomusicology is a module that I've taken this year and I never thought I would be interested in that kind of thing, but it's really good,' says Tompkinson. 'I'm doing a fieldwork project on the brass band tradition in the north.'

Whether a student leans towards performance, composition or theory, the second- and third-year modules offer greater scope for specialisation. There's

also the option of a BA in traditional musics with folklore studies, a pathway through the undergraduate modules with a greater focus upon world music – although you don't need to be a virtuoso on the djembe or kora. 'Students would be expected to have an interest in the various traditions, but we certainly wouldn't expect them to be an expert', Keefe says. Ethnomusicology has a dedicated room in the Jessop Building, housing an array of global instruments in readiness for recitals and classes.

The University of Sheffield is also strong when it comes to postgraduate courses. After completing a music degree, Stephanie Bramley chose Sheffield for a part-time taught MA in psychology of music because of its specialisation and focus on research. 'The beauty of Sheffield is that the academics are really well-known in that field, and also the whole nature of the course is based around research and gaining research skills,' she says.

The department fared well in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise, winning joint fourth place in the rankings alongside Cambridge.

Currently conducting a project on the links between music and gambling behaviour, Bramley hopes to remain at Sheffield for a PhD. She feels that the new facilities are not just of benefit to instrumentalists: 'From a research point of view we now have dedicated space for postgraduates, and on

the music psychology course we now have a couple of rooms we can use for research. It's great to have a space where I can just go and do what I want.'

Although the new music buildings don't include large concert halls, the department is now closer to Firth Hall, which hosts performances by the university choir and orchestra as well as visiting musicians. Free lunchtime concerts, often by students, take place in the 200-seat drama studio, and events also take place in Sheffield Cathedral.

Additionally, Sheffield is home to Music in the Round, which promotes chamber music in accessible settings. This has benefits beyond a stream of high-quality concerts to attend. 'A number of our students have got jobs with Music in the Round, helping out with administration, or working on a more ad hoc basis,' says Keefe, who is on the organisation's board. Other opportunities are available for anyone hoping for a head-start in the post-graduation careers world. 'A lot of the students work for Sheffield Music Service', says Tompkinson, who does volunteer work herself in primary schools with the aim of progressing to a teaching qualification.

If students can tear themselves away from the Soundhouse's sparkling facilities, they will find themselves in a particularly student-friendly city. 'The hills take a while to get used to!' Tompkinson laughs. 'But the public transport is good. Of the places I looked at, Sheffield is one of the cheapest cities to live in. It's also one of the safest.'

Bramley doesn't live in the city, but still finds it attractive. 'I really like the Peace Gardens. No matter when you go through there, there's always people talking, milling about or playing in the fountains. Cities are full of hustle and bustle, but you never get that feeling with Sheffield, which is laid-back. It's very clean as well.'

Despite its relatively small size and laid-back feel, Sheffield's nightlife is lively, boosted by the extra 30,000 students from Sheffield Hallam University. 'The Union has something on every night of the week', says Tompkinson. It's not just big touring acts such as Arctic Monkeys that foster Sheffield's reputation as a creative city though: as she notes, many students get their first gigs in local pubs. 'There are a lot of opportunities to get involved.' ■