

Episode 5: Laura Armstrong

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SPEAKERS

Laura Armstrong, Hattie Butterworth



Hattie Butterworth 00:03

Welcome to Things Musicians Don't Talk About with me your host, Hattie Butterworth. I'm a cellist and writer in my final year at the Royal College of Music in London. And I think we need a new way of talking. I've spent many, many years feeling in the dark about issues in the classical music profession. So often it can feel like you're the only person struggling with anxiety, depression, career doubts, money, injuries, and so much more. Who do we go to when we feel we've had enough for whatever reason? Join me and guests as we end the stigma with honest conversations about the things musicians don't talk about. Hello everybody, welcome back. I hope you're all really well and managing okay with what feels like an awful lot of change all the time. Is it just me or are things constantly changing? But it's lovely to see that people are back performing again in different ways. And I really hope you're all enjoying having a nice summer, whatever that might be. So today, I'm talking to Laura Armstrong, who is a cellist, and she previously studied at the Royal Academy of Music in London. And I've known Laura for a few years, because we were at Chethams School of Music together. So last October, Laura was actually involved in an accident that changed the course of her life as a cellist sort of overnight. And today, I'm talking to her about the accident and what it's meant. We speak about the rehabilitation process and the support she's received from friends and doctors and teachers. We also talk about grief and how asking for support is easier in a physical health crisis rather than in a time of mental stress. So I really hope this episode resonates with you, and thank you for all your support with the podcast so far. Please do keep sending your messages, your advice, your stories. I love hearing from you all, and yeah, I'm trying to grow the community as much as I can. I've been enjoying writing blogs as well, if you like to follow my blog, it's online on my website at hattiebutterworth.co.uk. and you can find it there. I'm also on Twitter and Instagram, and the podcast Instagram is @tmdtapodcast. So without further ado, let's introduce Laura and get on with the podcast. Hello, Laura, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast. I just thought I'd ask first of all, how's the last few months been for you?



Laura Armstrong 02:51

Hi, um, it's been, it's been okay. Um, well it's quite an unusual time, isn't it? So just been trying to work out a way to kind of find your routine. I guess getting used to being in my own company a lot, which is new. How's it been for you?

company a lot, which is new. How's it been for you?

H

Hattie Butterworth 03:09

Yeah, it's been a lot of ups and downs and getting used to things that I wouldn't... wasn't expecting to get used to. You know, some things were easier, some things are more difficult. So it's just so strange. But I thought I'd start by just telling everyone how we met. I met Laura when she showed me around Chethams School of Music, and I'll never forget. And you just had the most lovely way of showing me around and making me feel like this was the place I wanted to be. And it was, you were just so like, kind and lovely and honest. And yeah, I don't think I ever said that to you, but I just want to say now., thank you for being so lovely! So then you went on to be head girl at Chethams, and you were in the year above me. And yeah, it's just, you were always there, always so supportive, and I think a lot of people will agree if they know you that, you just... yeah, you're such a lovely supportive person.

L

Laura Armstrong 04:00

That's very kind of you.

H

Hattie Butterworth 04:01

So anyway, today, Laura is going to talk to us a bit about her experience with an injury. And I was just wondering Laura, if you could tell us a bit about yourself, what you're doing at the moment and how your injury began?

L

Laura Armstrong 04:17

Sure, um well, at the moment, I'm just starting to practise again and getting used to playing. It's been a long time. It's been eight months since I had an accident where I was run over by lorry when I was cycling, so wasn't the best morning of my life. But it was ... I had like quite a lot of surgeries. I had an emergency surgery straightway to reattach my arm, and then another 17 hour surgery the day after, with 12 amazing surgeons, which seemed like quite a lot to me. But, so that was all not what I was expecting from this year. And that happened in October when I just ... it was like my third week as a Master's student at the Royal College of Music. It's been an unusual time, but before that I went to Academy from ... to do my undergrad, learnt with Ben Hughes, and Felix Schmidt. And before that, like Hattie said, I was at Chets.

H

Hattie Butterworth 05:20

I mean, during your undergrad, I was always seeing you doing some exciting project, whether it was with a singer or with a sort of folk band, and, you know, and with your piano trio, so you're such a sort of entrepreneurial person. And so I'm just wondering, you're always seem to be creating such incredible projects. How did it feel then to have such a horrifying experience like that? I mean, I can't imagine anything worse to realise has just happened to you, you know, so how did that feel to have your whole musical world just stopped?

L

Laura Armstrong 05:54

It was, first, it felt like the worst thing that I ... the possibility of never being able to play again was pretty bad. But I think with hindsight, it's given me more room to really understand that I ... what I want to do is music, and there's nothing else that I want to do. I'm, I've done some, I worked in a nursery for a few months, and it's been good to like, do some other things and explore how other people live their lives. Because our job is quite unusual, in the sense that we do spend so much time in a practice room and spend so much time working alone, and mentally training ourselves. So to experience a bit more normal life has been quite useful, I think for like, getting back into it.

H

Hattie Butterworth 06:40

And I'm just wondering, when the accident happened, and the sort of days and weeks after the initial event, what were the doctors telling you? I mean, were they saying "there's a possibility you might never play again"? Or was it still very unknown?

L

Laura Armstrong 06:54

Um there was ... it was very possible that I wouldn't play again, because I couldn't ... I severed my, one of my nerves, and there's three nerves which control our hands. And I'd completely severed one of those, so I couldn't move my thumb, first or second finger at all. And I had no feeling in those fingers, as well. And on top of that, I'd had a fracture in the top of my arm, which took two plates, so they needed to know whether that would heal. But, and I think I kind of knew that as soon as it happened, because I had to ... when I woke up after the accident, and I couldn't move my fingers like at all and that kind of that was a shock. But they were amazing, like managing to put me back together again. Which is ... I've never been more thankful for the NHS, but I think having really positive physiotherapists has really helped actually having that support. And also just friends who told me that it didn't matter if I couldn't play, because you don't, I didn't think I really realised like, how much playing and playing the cello is ... I've associated like my entire life with it. And it was me completely. So then having that taken away, was kind of a shock. So having people say that it was okay, and I could ... they still wanted to, you know, dunno, like spend time with me and for the person I was. I hadn't realised how much I'd put my personality into my instrument.

H

Hattie Butterworth 08:26

Yeah. No, that makes total sense. Because I think, I mean, even the injury I suffered at Chethams, which was really short term, I think for me and for a lot of people listening will agree that just the thought of not being able to play again, or play ... not being able to play at full capacity, you then realise through those emotions, how much you are attached to it, and how much your worth is determined by your playing and your performing and the message you send to people through your instrument. And I, I was just wondering if you could talk a bit, a bit more about sort of what was the emotional impact of the injury on you? How long did it take for you to kind of get over the initial shock, and realise ... and kind of come, come to peace with the fact that you might not play again ... how long did that process take?

L Laura Armstrong 09:17

Well, I spent my first two weeks in intensive care. And during that time, it sounds strange, but the focus of playing disappeared. When it first happened, I was definitely like "I have to play again." But during my two weeks there, the realistic side of it was that I very nearly had my arm amputated. So that ... being in that environment with really supportive nurses, I kind of went through a stage of being like, incredi... feeling incredibly lucky that I had an arm at all. And then the second stage was then like, "Okay, I need to come to terms with what I look like now, which is a bit different and how that changes my everyday life." And then after that I kind of worked out about the feeling that I couldn't play was more when I got home, which was after three weeks in hospital. So

H Hattie Butterworth 10:09

Mhmm, goodness, yeah.

L Laura Armstrong 10:09

I think like probably like a month, month and a half. But doing other ... another job in January, really helped me like come to terms with the fact that I can do other things. Despite being trained to do one thing my entire life pretty much.

H Hattie Butterworth 10:24

Because I have a vague memory...I really hope I haven't got you confused with somebody else, but I seem to remember that you told me I think it was even on my tour of Chethams you said that you had originally planned to be a doctor and taken that...

L Laura Armstrong 10:38

Yeah.

H Hattie Butterworth 10:39

Is that, is that true?

L Laura Armstrong 10:40

Yeah that's right.

H Hattie Butterworth 10:42

H Hattie Butterworth 10:42

Yeah, and then you kind of made the decision a bit later on, and then redid your A levels or something, or did a few years extra at Chethams or did another ... Yeah. So it's sort of like you entered into the musical world for what, five years really intensely, and then it must have felt like, "God, I made such a huge choice to become a musician. Now this is gone again." You know, I mean, how was that finding the thing you wanted to do, and then it being cut off? You know, even after you've probably been through a lot of questioning with the whole medicine thing as well.

L Laura Armstrong 11:16

Mhmm, I think it was like, when I decided to do music, it was really just it felt so much like the thing that I was supposed to be doing when I was younger, and I made that decision when I was like 16. So I took an extra year at Chets, basically to practice, which was a really good decision for me then. And I think the fact that I'd never really wanted to do anything from that point onwards, when I'd made the decision, it was a shock to then be like, "I wonder what I should do now." But it was nice to have had like, an early bit when I was at secondary school, like having the space to learn other things like I don't know, you know, you do the ... I dunno, sports or you do art, you do all these other subjects, and not being completely focused on it when I was younger, has helped this period of my life because I've now, I now know that I can be interested in other things and I think it probably will make me more balanced, going forward... hopefully, because it's not the end of the world, if you play things wrong. You know, I think I definitely had that thing of like, overcompensating for ...and like really taking things incredibly hard when actually, the perspective is that you can be interested in more things, and you don't have to have a sole focus to become a musician and have that as your livelihood.

H Hattie Butterworth 12:39

Yeah, I think what I keep thinking is what you were saying about your experience in intensive care, and how your focus was just "Oh, my goodness, I might not have an arm at all, I might not be able to live my life as I did before." And I suppose yeah, if you see it like that, music is, is not something that actually we need, in the sense of getting on with your life, day to day, you know, and it's interesting how musicians, therefore, act as if their instrument, sometimes they act as if their instrument is as important and is as much a part of them as a limb or something. I just wondered if you had a kind of idea, after all, this experience of why you think musicians are so attached, and why we put so much of our worth on the ability to play an instrument and don't tend to look to other things as easily as maybe some other professions do.

L Laura Armstrong 13:36

I think, with playing because we put so much of our lives into it, the time to practise and the emotional ... emotion that we put into our playing, it really is an all encompassing ... performing in front of an audience, it encompasses everything about you, doesn't it? Like your physical ability, and your dedication, and then a really massive emotional output similarly, how, how if, if you do an exam and something and you don't do so well, it's really difficult but to hear critique of your musical voice can be really hard hitting sometimes, because it's this combination of you as an entire person?

H Hattie Butterworth 14:22
Yeah.

L Laura Armstrong 14:22
If you know what I mean, I'm not sure.

H Hattie Butterworth 14:24
No it does! I do and, and sort of even the ability to detach yourself from your instrument in that way then means that you can feel freer with your performing, I think because if you are so wrapped up in a mark, or in an achievement or in sort of the entrance to an institution or, or passing an exam in some way, if you're so attached to that, then it can be so hard to let go in a performance. And I suppose if you're more whimsical about it, you know if it doesn't matter to you on the level of life or death, then ...

L Laura Armstrong 15:01
Yeah.

H Hattie Butterworth 15:02
You have a newborn freedom, I suppose. Is that how you see it?

L Laura Armstrong 15:07
Yes, and I think it's like knowing that you have a choice, like your life is on track at the moment, but things happen, which you can't control. But then also having the choice of like, you're choosing to do music so that you can give to other people and give them ... music's such an... gives such an emotional support to people. It's the only way that we can like talk without words really, and then having that there, if you become very ... I think it's hard if you do ... we are encouraged to become very focused on perfection, but it's not possible. And if you're managing to communicate something beautiful, then you've kind of succeeded, which I feel like sometimes, we don't always have the most positive experience during our musical, classical musical education in particular, but other forms as well. But, and that can be like really hard to, like, get your head around, especially, like, when you're younger in the process. And ...

H Hattie Butterworth 16:04
I think a lot of people, if you ask the musician, this is what I'm thinking a lot now is, if you ask a musician, "what would be your worst case scenario?" you know, your experience might be something that someone would mention, you know, having my arm hurt, or having the

possibility I might never play again. And I just think that that's, that's so interesting that that's such a big fear for people, because you're clearly showing that it doesn't, that you never know, you never know, with something like that, an accident might happen, anything might happen, and it might be, all in all, the best thing that could have happened to your playing or to your, your yourself in general. And I just was wondering as well, whether you, how you could explain like the rehabilitation process with playing again? Uh, when did you start playing again? And how much have you been able to play, and what does it bloomin' feel like, like, it must be really weird?

L

Laura Armstrong 16:59

It's quite strange. Yeah, I have, I'm quite lucky because they put a nerve graft into my arm. Um which then your nerve grows down to, and at the moment, I've got to the point where I can actually move my hand again, which is great. And all my fingers move, which is very exciting.

H

Hattie Butterworth 17:16

Yeah.

L

Laura Armstrong 17:18

And for that to happen, there's already a massive headstart. But basically, the way that I've gone about it so far, and I'm definitely in the middle of it still, the recovery kind of thing, has been that I would try and make sure that I at least tried to play every two weeks or so, just the act of trying. And because I knew that it would be hard to try and not succeed every time, so I just limited it to trying like once every few weeks. And eventually, since about two weeks ago, I can now like hold a bow and I can't feel my fingers still, but I can move them enough to be able to play and enough to be able to have like, I had like a consultation lesson, which was great. And hopefully start again at college in January.

H

Hattie Butterworth 18:06

So, what did you do in your consultation lesson? How did you explain ... did you explain your situation? And did you play at all? Or was it mainly a conversation?

L

Laura Armstrong 18:17

I explained beforehand in email, because I felt it would be, it's maybe a little bit unfair to turn up to a lesson to the professor and be like, "Hi, I can't actually play properly." So that was that was good headstart. And just to make it clear that I was hoping to kind of move forward with things and that things should improve after this point. And then we talked at first, which was really good and good to get everything explained clearly and all laid out and then played as well, which was really great, and he's a very supportive person, so that was really great. And I think I was really nervous about it because it was the first time I had kind of like, presented the possibility of playing again, to a standard, which I want. And also a standard which I need to be

able to get back to do my Masters. And that was hard. And I hadn't really realised, because I kind of thought like, "from now on whenever I play, I'll be just appreciating that I can play the instrument at all. I won't be nervous. I'm ..." you, know that kind of thing, but it's amazing how quickly you can get used to, used to being lucky again, if you see what I mean.

H

Hattie Butterworth 19:31

Yeah, Goodness me. Was it really shocking to you the first time you play the cello again? Do you remember the moment where you first tried to play again? How did that feel? Was it upsetting or was it just sort of interesting?

L

Laura Armstrong 19:47

It was, really made me very unhappy. Because I didn't have ... at first, and I still, I can only bend my arm to 90 degrees at the moment but it's a work in progress. Um so the first time playing just wasn't playing, really. I couldn't hold the bow and I couldn't move my arm at all, really. And it's really been like, by degrees, managing to get function back into my elbow. And so that was, that was pretty hard going. But everyone's experience of learning to play is different. And I think it's okay, if the road you have isn't conventional. But it was difficult. It's like, that's, it feels like a big part of you isn't there anymore? Which is tricky.

H

Hattie Butterworth 20:36

And how did you ... What was the reaction of teachers and your friends when you told them about what happened? I mean, you mentioned that your friends were incredibly supportive, but what about teachers and what about the Royal College? I mean, that must have been really hard for you to have to say to them, you know, "I was about to start this Master's, but now no, that's not happening." You know, what, how did you communicate it? Was it really difficult, or...?

L

Laura Armstrong 21:06

I been really lucky with that, I think, well as, as far as, like, I haven't come, everyone's just been really keen to hear how it's going. And I've had just like, I've been able to regularly update people on how it's going in college. And I think, and also, like, my teacher from Academy, Ben Hughes, he's been incredibly supportive and kept in touch, and just been ready to teach me whenever I've wanted, as in just to help me get started again. So that was amazing. And college has been great. They've offered alternatives, like doing a three year Master's instead of two years, which has been great. 'Cause I might need that time, depending on how extra surgeries and things turn out. I think just... but the thing is, I think it's just like really trying to keep open lines of communication, because I think it's really hard for them to support us as students, if we can't find the ... if it feels too hard to communicate exactly what's happened, if you see what I mean.

H

Hattie Butterworth 22:13

Yeah.

L

Laura Armstrong 22:14

Because once you write something down, like once you've told people you write things down of like, something really awful that's happened, it can sometimes bring it home a bit. And it's really important to be able to, even when it feels really hard, like try and keep those emails going. And my friends, my friends were just amazing. Um because it was ... my flatmates were great. They just were really supportive about everything. And, you know, came to see me in hospital and my best friend Olivia, she's been great. She's a cellist as well, which I think helped me a lot because she can understand how difficult it would be. And just, I just feel so lucky for the people around me because everyone was there just straightaway. Um Olivia was actually there, like, in when I was in ... came in, in the ambulance, and went into my first surgery, emergency surgery. And so it was kind of probably quite traumatic for her as well. But I think, yeah, I just like, I can't believe how lucky I am with people around. And I didn't really expect that as far as like, it just seems like quite a lot to ask to ... when you sign up for living with someone, you don't necessarily sign up for them, then becoming almost disabled as far as like being able to do things for at least a few months. So ... but my flatmates were incredible, supportive people.

H

Hattie Butterworth 23:39

That's a really good point, because I mean, I suppose you must have such empathy as a musician and especially a cellist to be able to watch you know, your best friend go through something that you could never imagine you having to go through, you know, what I mean? It's .. that is really probably really traumatic as much for them as for you to think you know exactly what it would mean not to play. What would it mean, you know, not to have the the Masters year that I'd planned and had all these sort of ideas of, of how your life was gonna go? But I was wondering kind of, what sustained you through, through the periods of healing and recovering? What things did you look to other than music or?

L

Laura Armstrong 24:27

I had, so my, my dad died in first year, which after two years of having a lot of operations and being very unwell, and I think having that example set for me when I was 20 kind of really showed me how brave you could be if you ... I dunno know like with him, he just kept trying. And he also read a lot and like really delved into a lot of literature when he felt ill because it was something that ... it's something you can do no matter what happens, you can usually hold a book. So for me, like a lot of reading really was, was really kind of an escape from things. Reading, and I started doing some embroidery which is a bit random. But it was just like anything that felt like you could have like small projects and small challenges that you could face and meet, which ... that helped a lot and doing something creative. But mostly reading, that kind of thing.

H

Hattie Butterworth 25:33

That's so lovely, because it's something that you know, I think a lot of people have all these books they say they're going to read ... well I'm talking about myself. And I suppose you never find the time, or you always find a reason why not. What about writing, because you are right-handed, I'm guessing? And your injury is on your right hand, so how's writing been? Have you managed to write with your left hand?

L Laura Armstrong 25:55

And yeah, I learned to do that when I was in hospital, actually, 'cause I felt like it was a good first, first step. So I, I was lucky ... some of my friends bought me left handed pens, and like children's writing books to practice. And that was, that was really good to get under my belt. Because otherwise, it's just another thing that you can't quite manage. So that was good to get started with that. It was quite good challenge. Now I can write with both hands.

H Hattie Butterworth 26:28

That's so cool. With the cello, did you do anything with your left hand when your right hand wasn't available? Or did you just sort of think, "no, I don't really want to do this right now. It's too painful, or it's too difficult"? Did you just sort of leave it altogether, or did you do some sort of left hand finger work or anything like that?

L Laura Armstrong 26:50

Well, when I when it first happened, I was like, "you know, I'm gonna come out of this, and I'm gonna have the best left hand shape ever, it's great, I'm gonna be like, a master of thumb position by the end of however long this takes." But I haven't done any of that at all actually. I just, for me, I just couldn't really face doing more than my once every couple of weeks because everyday life tasks were quite challenging. Because I actually had a skin graft taken from one of my legs, so first was really learning to walk again properly was kind of a big one. So doing ... I kind of focussed more on smaller steps as far as getting everyday jobs back to being able to do those, because learning to use your left hand was more challenging than I expected as far as everything to like, from buttons and zips, to doing the like washing up and it sounds very kind of boring stuff. But that was already enough of a challenge without me trying to also then become the master of like technique on the cello.

H Hattie Butterworth 27:57

Yeah, I don't know why that kind of crossed my mind. It shows that ...

L Laura Armstrong 28:00

But it was the same for me as well.

H Hattie Butterworth 28:01

H Hattie Butterworth 26:01

Yeah, 'cause, I don't know. Why... why should you? Why should you have to keep it going? Like, why should you be expected after such a traumatic thing to happen to, you know, I suppose everyone would have that pressure on themselves, "Oh, well, like, I can still use my left hand, so I can still keep going." But it's actually like, no, the whole body is affected. It's a massive mind-body, traumatic experience, you know. It's not as easy as just plucking away a bit. Like, yeah, yeah, that must have been strange, and I want to ask as well, about the period of time you spent working in the nursery? Did you kind of introduce yourself there as like, a sort of new person with sort of a new vision, and did you leave the cello kind of out of your mind and think of starting new or how did that work, work out for you?

L Laura Armstrong 28:50

It was, yeah, it was interesting. I didn't do it for so long, because of coronavirus kind of interrupted that, but I, um, I actually started off...so I now have, well, when term starts again, I actually teach ballet as ... I do a ballet class, which I teach five year olds. So it's not anything crazy. But that was kind of part of my nursery job. And then at another dance school. And that was interesting because I could be ... I actually had to rely on who I was completely without any kind of working towards being a professional cellist. Doing ballet classes and doing an interview to be a ballet teacher, when I hadn't done any ballet in about 10 years, was really interesting. It was good to like to see how much you can kind of blag things sometimes. And then just like look it all up afterwards. So that was good for me to realise that I can get along...I get along in the world without the cello if I have to. But the ballet teaching was ... it was really good. The nursery school teaching was really tiring. But the thing that was nice was having that as part of it, to ... teaching kids to listen to music and enjoy dancing, because everyone can dance. Like, that was really lovely as like my creative output kind of thing for a while. But teaching in nursery is a lot harder work than I thought it would be. The first week, though, usually.

H Hattie Butterworth 30:25

So when you had started that job, was it always your intention, when ... from the time you started that you would, you know, eventually move on to, you know, playing the cello again? And then hopefully starting your Masters again? Or did you start there thinking, "Oh, maybe this is a new life for me. Maybe I want to be a dance teacher instead."

L Laura Armstrong 30:44

Well I definitely will never be able to be a proper dance teacher, I think I will always just be an assistant part-time type. Because I'm not that good at dancing at all. But um, but it was, it was interesting to do. And I think I went in with the idea that teaching in a nursery, and working with very young children, it wasn't just a "to pass the time thing", it was to kind of explore whether that was something that I would look into doing if I couldn't play again. And that meant that when I, when I was there, and I was working there, I felt like it gave me an opportunity to see what my life could be like, doing something completely different. And just how, like the different types of hard work that there are in the world, if that makes sense. Like how amazing people are to do these, like, really long days, and you know, with amazing amounts of patience. Because my, the class that I worked in, was four years and under. And just like being there to

teach children things like being kind to each other and their beginnings, was really ... it was really nice, and it was really different, compared to always been focused on trying to improve and perfect. It was a very different place to be.

H

Hattie Butterworth 32:17

Yeah, wow, I just kind of now want to talk a bit about the impact of your injury on the way that you've seen the world. And first of all, by asking, if there's anything you'd like another person with an injury, to know about how it's impacted you and what you've learned. Is there anything you would say to somebody?

L

Laura Armstrong 32:42

Um I think staying hopeful, is really important. When things aren't looking so good, just like trying to just focus on one step at a time. And taking the slow days when they come and just like not beating yourself up, because it's not your fault. It just happens, you know, it's just part of the patchwork of everyone's lives. It all works out, not quite how we imagine sometimes. So I think just like keeping your chin up. And if you're having a hard time, just speaking, communicating is really important. Talking to people around you, and equally if you're there, and you're happy to open up about things that you've found difficult if you're ... if you have an injury and you're having a bad day, then it'd be amazing how much people around you might then open up about their difficulties, which might be completely different. They might not be physical challenges, they could be like mental health or ballet or anything like, if you'd let yourself be vulnerable around other people, then sometimes you can help them in return, if that makes sense. I think I'd say that.

H

Hattie Butterworth 33:55

No, because it's it's true, I suppose, in the sense that a lot of the time we feel alone, maybe because we put ourselves in a box of maybe how much we suffer in comparison to others. But I think every life will have, you know, maybe not the same kinds of adversity. But definitely everyone will have suffered or will suffer on a level at which they can understand how it feels to feel broken, how it feels to feel like things are the end of the world.

L

Laura Armstrong 34:29

Everyone's cried sometime.

H

Hattie Butterworth 34:31

And I think sometimes I've found in the music profession that when I've opened up to people, uh older people I don't know... I don't know why but sometimes it's felt like they've found it a bit awkward or embarrassing, I don't know whether that's because most of my problems have been with mental health and there's obviously still a big stigma with that. Yeah, I found with my peer group, that was where the strength came from, most of all. Of course I did have very

supportive teachers, but the strength was from the people at the same stage of life as me, and who respected ... it's seeing, isn't it, that you are respected as a human being for your personality and for the person you are and not the instrument you play, not the mark you get in your exam. And I think you've explained that really, really well, actually.

L Laura Armstrong 35:22

Yeah, I think sometimes like, because we're a different generation to frequently our teachers, with a teacher, there ... it's a very distinctive thing, isn't it? Like, I think often, there's a fear of becoming too close to pupils, like having too much of an insight into their mental health and mental health maybe being too close to their personal life for a teacher to feel comfortable. And it's sometimes that can feel like a judgement rather than maybe a worry from a teacher's point of view.

H Hattie Butterworth 35:51

That's a good point.

L Laura Armstrong 35:52

Yeah, if you see what I mean, like, it may come out as like a coldness maybe even. But it probably isn't really meant like that. But it's just that inability to communicate can sometimes be there, can't it? And that can fit ... they can ... that can find like, can feel really difficult, if you've opened up about something to your mentor kind of thing. I think as well, like people our age, are getting a lot better at talking about these things and understanding each other, a lot better. Maybe?

H Hattie Butterworth 36:23

Yeah!

L Laura Armstrong 36:24

Yeah, like the ... like this happening, like you having a podcast which like, is exploring things that people feel every day, often, and difficulties that we've all, all will have in our lives at some point, most probably, but just being able to talk about is a really big step.

H Hattie Butterworth 36:40

Yeah. And I mean, people like you having the courage to come forward and share, I think is something that is really hard to do. And people don't realise what it takes to be able to put something of yourself out there, put your story out there, you know, our story is such a personal thing to us. I'm just wondering, I ask this question a lot, actually. But if you now went back to say, first or second year of your undergrad, and as the person you are now and being

through everything, is there anything you would have done differently? You know, is there anything that you wish "Oh, my goodness, why on earth did I worry about that now?" Like now knowing how it's all been and how much you've learnt through your injury and everything?

L

Laura Armstrong 36:44

Oh, that's a really difficult question. I think, being more calm about when things don't work, or don't, don't go as I'd hoped, as far as performance, mostly, I think, if I could have felt a bit more calm, and a bit more understanding that it will be okay, and well, actually, I think it's, it's really difficult, from my perspective, to think about it now, because those ... that kind of few years for me wasn't that easy, because of my dad passing away, and I think I wish I could say like, "just be a bit more more calm about the whole thing ,and just doing your best is enough. Even if it doesn't feel like it at the time. Like if you're, if you're even getting into a practice room for 10 minutes, or like, managing to do chamber music and explore chamber music with people instead of your individual practice, like anything you can do, just to like kind of keep the ball rolling while you pick yourself up again... is great."

H

Hattie Butterworth 38:38

Yeah, I'm so with you there because there are days where you can't face being alone, in a practice room. It is... It's a, you know, if you recontextualize it, anyone being alone in a room, sometimes can be quite an emotional space, you know, and we do expect of ourselves to be in that situation so often. And when you're going through a hard time, all those emotions are amplified. And I think that's so lovely to say, "you know, you can let yourself off and do it differently, be with friends, play with friends, play in a different context."

L

Laura Armstrong 39:13

Yeah, like the focus doesn't have to be always about the individual ability at that point, like our own own individual ability. If you're having a really hard time with mental health or physical injuries, then you can find your way through on a different path, which is okay, because no one's like, none of the amazing musicians we see ... they've probably all had those days as well. And it's just finding your way through them. And communicate ... like playing with others is just such a gift. That sounds very cliché, but it really is like, communicating with other people is just amazing. And it can it can really give you a lift. And ...

H

Hattie Butterworth 39:52

Similarly, even if something like what happened to you happens, people aren't only there for you in a musical context, you know, you aren't only Laura in a piano trio. You're also, you know, your friends are, I'm sure, you know, everybody, your close friends, whether you play with them or not, are there for you. And I ... Yeah, I think I've had a hard time realising that as well, actually.

L

Laura Armstrong 40:21

Laura Armstrong 40:11

Yeah.

H

Hattie Butterworth 40:21

Because you want them to know that side. Yeah, exactly. I think everybody is going to be just so inspired and touched by your story, because I mean, the two things together of dealing with first of all grief, and then dealing almost with another type of grief, is to me just really intensely emotional to think about and I don't know, what were they similar in any way? Was it a similar kind of grief? One for your cello and for your for your dad?

L

Laura Armstrong 40:54

Well I think it, it was similar in a way as far as something that I loved wasn't there anymore, and compared to someone ...so it's ... I think I hadn't realised how much playing had really, like, guided me through my grief from my dad dying, I think I hadn't really realised how that focus in my life had really, like, pulled me through. So then having that taken away, I was kind of like, "Oh, you got to be kidding me. This is just beyond a joke." Like kind of thing, like I'd got, got myself back on track after, after working through some of that. But at the same time, it maybe was, it made me realise just like people are so much more important. Obviously ... it sounds obvious, but it's just the person ... missing someone who you love is just so much more ... The fact that you can't see it in someone's in someone's like, physicalness you can't see what they're going through, like if they've lost someone, or if they're having a really, you know, really bad, difficulties with mental health. You can't see it physically. And the help that I've had has been amazing because of it being easier for people to almost deal with. It's very, it's like, you can see I have a non-functioning arm, if you see what I mean. I think institutions find it harder to support people with mental health, than with physical health.

H

Hattie Butterworth 42:26

Yes.

L

Laura Armstrong 42:27

My dad dying is just so much ... it's ... just was like a huge, a huge, huge thing to happen. And this was really big as well. But this kind of wasn't as big at all. And this has got a lot of hope involved in it, being physically injured compared to losing someone you love. And I think that distinction isn't necessarily supported. Like, we're supported in the same way for very different things, often, by institutions, because if you can write it down on a piece of paper, and like, I've got, like, I've had so much support from the hospital, and doctors, and I just feel like I have a whole team of people who are behind me, like kind of wishing me to do well, which is amazing. But I think that type of support is really hard to find when you're feeling bad about losing people or ...

H

Hattie Butterworth 43:22

Yeah.

L Laura Armstrong 43:23

Do you see what I mean?

H Hattie Butterworth 43:25

Yeah, because I think people don't know how to go there with ...

L Laura Armstrong 43:29

Exactly.

H Hattie Butterworth 43:29

...with grief. You know, how, how can you start talking about it, I suppose, is for a lot of people, a very difficult thing to be able to do. Because everyone is faced with it at some point, but I suppose not many people are faced with it at the age of 20. You know, so ...

L Laura Armstrong 43:48

Yes it is. Yeah, it's an unusual one. But when Yeah. But I think it's a similar thing that if I ... when the times that I did manage to open up about how I felt, which was a lot less after my dad died, than now, again, like people really ... you don't know what people are going through in their everyday lives. You really don't. And then being vulnerable, and being able to speak about things can make a huge difference to them, as well as you. It doesn't have to feel like a selfish thing. Do you know what I mean?

H Hattie Butterworth 44:22

Yeah. Yeah. No, it's true. giving someone the space to help you, I suppose or be there for you can mean a lot to them as well. And I think we underestimate the power that allowing someone in, can have

L Laura Armstrong 44:38

Absolutely.

H Hattie Butterworth 44:38

Yeah, that's, yeah, I kind of want to end it there, because I think that's just so, so lovely. And

Yeah, that's, yeah, I kind of want to end it there, because I think that's just so, so lovely. And you've given us just so much amazing inspiration. Thank you so much for everything, and for opening up in the way you have.



Laura Armstrong 44:53

Well, thank you for speaking to me. It's been it's been nice to chat.