

# Avril Dankworth (1922-2013)

## ‘Making music fun’

Every summer, in a tree-fringed meadow beside The Stables Theatre in Wavendon, hundreds of young people from all over the country – and some from abroad – come together in a musical experience like no other. Originally known as the Avril Dankworth Children’s Music Camps, the camps are designed to inspire, to challenge and – in the words of their founder – to ‘make music fun’. This was Avril Dankworth’s motto. It was the precept that guided her life and her gift to the generations she enthused in a career lasting over half a century.

Avril Margaret Dankworth was born in Southend-on-Sea in 1922 into a distinguished musical family. Her mother Alice sang with and trained choirs. Her aunt was a brass player and her uncle a pianist. Her younger brother John, a saxophonist, would go on to become one of the great figures in British jazz. Her husband Leslie Carew was a trombonist of the big band era.



*Choral singing was a family affair: Avril singing with her mother Alice, mid-1960s.*

Trained at the Royal College and Trinity College of Music, she graduated in 1951. Music was not simply her passion: it was her life. Avril had a deep desire to share music and to make it accessible to everyone. *“Music is life for me. When you enjoy something so much, you want to transmit the feeling to others.”* (*Make Music Fun at Avril Dankworth’s National Music Camps*; publicity brochure, early 1980s). As a Girl Guide, she loved the tradition of the camp fire sing songs. This early experience of ‘friendship through music’ was a powerful influence on her approach to music making and teaching. She had a strong belief in the value of music as a social activity.



*The Girl Guides were an early inspiration: Avril takes centre stage here, 1936.*

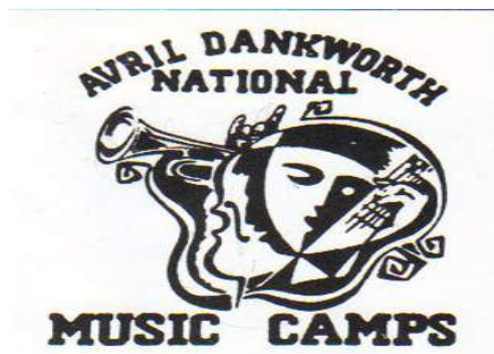
Beginning in the 1950s Avril taught music in schools and colleges, and was a singer and accompanist with Mathyas Seiber's Dorian Singers and the George Mitchell Choir. As a music teacher and adjudicator for the Service Children's Education Authority she travelled the world. In the mid-1960s she co-founded the Sing for Pleasure movement, inspired by the French choral organisation *A Coeur Joie*. It was at a *Coeur Joie* festival in Vaison-la-Romaine in 1967 that she first had the idea that was to shape the rest of her life. *"Young people from all over the world came 'to camp', making music 'fun'. It set me in search of a venue to do something similar in England – a week of learning to live together, with music as the common interest, the camping and the music-making of equal importance."* (*National Children's Music Camps (NMC) 2000*; document from Sarah Watts' archive).



*Whether performing or teaching, Avril made music fun; late 1960s.*

Avril was eventually to find that venue in Milton Keynes. She moved to the area in the late 1960s and taught at the Teacher Training College in Bletchley Park. In the autumn of 1969 her brother John Dankworth and his wife Cleo Laine bought The Old Rectory in Wavendon, with the idea of converting its stable block into a music venue. When Avril saw the meadow at the back of the stables, she knew it was what she had dreamt of. *"It only remained for me to find the courage – or cheek – to approach John with my brainchild. He was immediately enthusiastic, and proposed that*

*we start the National Music Camps in 1970 - the very next summer.”* (Speech at launch of 1983 National Children’s Music Camps, Stationers Hall, London; Sarah Watts’ archive).



*Logo of the early music camps, which began in 1970.*

From the start, the music camps were exceptional in that there were no entry qualifications. Avril felt strongly that though it was easy enough to find music provision for gifted children, and for special needs children, there was little for ordinary, middle-of-the road children. She wanted ‘her’ camps to be all-inclusive. This meant keeping fees as low as possible and in some cases awarding bursaries. It also meant encouraging young people to take part because of their commitment to music, regardless of their standard of playing. As Avril explained, *“it is a Dankworth hobby horse that you don’t have to be an academically knowledgeable and experienced musician to be musical. Music is fun.”* (ibid).



*At the 1990 camp with husband Les Carew, who often joked that he had married a music camp.*

And the camps *were* fun. Avril’s plan was to bring young people together to discover different aspects of life through a combination of outdoor living and making music; and through both of these to find undiscovered qualities and talents in themselves and their newly made friends. Sarah Watts attended one of the earliest music camps in 1971. She remembers *“It was a week that changed my life. ... Avril’s music camps were for anyone who loved music. It didn’t matter what style of music they played or how good they were, it was an exciting environment in which to learn. ... There was no snobbery or barriers in musical style. It was all very inspiring and liberating and shaped my musical thinking.”* (Interview with author, January 2017.) Sarah went on to become a professional bassoon player, a musical collaborator of Avril and the Dankworth-Laine family and, following Avril’s retirement, Artistic Director of the National Youth Music Camps from 2001 to 2014.





*The camps showed that music making could be both serious ... and fun.*



*'Dankworth's band of hopefuls', Evening News, 7 August 1970; picture by David Thorpe, reprinted with permission.*

*The camps reflected the Dankworth-Laine family philosophy of breaking down barriers through music. Speaking during the first camp in 1970, Sir John Dankworth said: "It's a really wonderful idea. Some of the children can't play, but that doesn't matter. We hope they will learn to love their music. I am sure this idea will grow and grow." ('Dankworth's band of hopefuls', Evening News (London), 7 August 1970).*

*Asked to describe the greatest day in her life, Avril said in 1999 "The first day of the first National Children's Music Camps in 1970. Just before the opening ceremony I looked in the mirror and said to myself, what have you done?!" ('Avril blows her own trumpet!', MK Citizen, 1 August 1999).*



*Avril in 1993.*

What she had done was to launch a unique musical venture that continues to this day. Thousands of young people have been inspired by the camps, and many have gone on to successful careers in music. Avril Dankworth wrote several books, including the influential *Jazz* (1968) and her 1973 best-seller *Make Music Fun*. She was an enthusiast, an enabler, and a doer – someone who didn't just have ideas, but made them happen. The National Youth Music Camps are her enduring achievement, and a superb reflection of the innovative spirit that has made Milton Keynes what it is.



*National Youth Music Camps.*

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