

The Robes for Degrees in Music of the University of London

By Nicholas Groves

As it is well known, and greatly to the annoyance of Charles Franklyn, the robes used for holders of the BMus degree at London fly in the face of the otherwise totally logical (and, as Franklyn often said, symmetrical) scheme. In place of a black hood, they wear a light blue one, and until its abolition in 1997, they wore a light blue gown also.¹ The hood is trimmed with white watered silk. But what is the origin of this, and how did it come to influence other universities?

The original 1840 scheme of dress did not make provision for the BMus²—it covered just six degrees: BA, MA, LLB, LLD, MB, and MD. It was not until the revisions of 1861–62 that provision was made for music degrees—and even that was somewhat premature, as they were not, at that date, awarded.

We shall start with the minutes of the Committee on University Costume of Convocation, which first met on 14 December 1860.³ This committee dealt with the revision of the robes, which resulted in the abandonment of the original 1840 scheme (and notably the velvet borders on the hoods) and the introduction, in 1862, of the basis of the scheme still in use.

The initial suggestion for musicians was that they should wear a blue gown of the same pattern as the BA, and a blue silk hood lined with gold silk, and bordered with 3” gold velvet.⁴ At the same meeting, it was proposed that the DMus should wear ‘a scarlet gown’ (with no lining colour specified, but presumably gold, on the model of the other doctorates). A counter-proposal was that the DMus should wear ‘a gown of white brocaded silk lined with gold-coloured silk’. This was lost 2 to 3, and ‘a scarlet gown’ was approved, with a scarlet hood lined gold silk and bordered gold velvet.⁵ A few weeks later, on 19 March 1861, it was proposed that

I am grateful to The Revd Philip Goff and to Professor Bruce Christianson for comments on the original draft of this paper.

1 ‘There is one freak hood in this University ... This blue hood for BMus is quite absurd, illogical, and bears no relation to anything.’ (*Academical Dress*, p. 199.) Franklyn wanted to give the BMus a hood of cherry-coloured silk, bordered with three inches of white watered silk or damask. The DMus was to wear cream damask and cherry. All this with (as ever) a fine sense of not seeing the lack of logic in his own suggestions.

2 Except in direct quotation, I shall use the forms BMus and DMus throughout for all universities, whatever their current use, as they fluctuated between BMus/DMus, MusB/MusD, and MusBac/MusDoc throughout the period.

3 These minutes are reproduced in Christianson. I shall refer to individual minutes by the internal numbering system.

4 First mentioned in meeting of 5 March 1861: Minutes 51 and 52. In practice, dark blue was used. It is not clear what shade of gold was intended: possibly the ‘pale gold’ which ended up as the Science faculty colour.

5 Minute 54. As with several other motions with this committee, it is possible that the

Minute no 54 be rescinded; and that the Doctor of Music possessing a degree considered as Honorary by both Oxford and Cambridge,⁶ and not being recognized as of equal standing with the Doctors in the other Faculties, it is not expedient that he should have a scarlet gown.⁷

An amendment was put, that DMus should have a scarlet gown if a member of Convocation, followed by a second amendment that ‘it is not, at present, expedient to make any provision for the Costume of Graduates in Music’. This latter was carried 4 to 3, and it was therefore resolved that no provision be made for music graduates.⁸

Musicians were next mentioned at the meeting of 12 April 1861, at which it was proposed that DMus should wear ‘A blue silk gown [of the same shape as for the Doctor of Medicine],’⁹ and if members of Convocation, a scarlet gown ‘faced with white watered silk,’¹⁰ The hood to be blue lined with white watered silk, or, if a member of Convocation, scarlet lined with white watered silk. After another attempt to put a hold on robes for music graduates, which was lost, a set of robes was approved:

The following regulations were then agreed to for the Faculty of Music:

MusDoc [*sic*] — A blue silk gown [of the same shape as for the Doctor of Medicine].¹¹

Doctors of Music, if Members of Convocation, shall also be entitled to wear a gown of scarlet cloth faced with white watered silk.

The hood shall be of blue silk, with a lining of white watered silk.

Doctors of Music, if Members of Convocation, shall also be entitled to wear a hood of scarlet cloth faced with a lining of white watered silk.

MusBac [*sic*] A blue silk gown [of the same shape as for the Doctor of Music].

The hood shall be of blue silk, with a lining of white watered silk.¹²

The scarlet hood is shown in Figure 1. Two points are of interest here: first, that there is no distinction for a BMus who was a member of Convocation, and second, that unless a DMus were a member, he¹³ was confined to the same robes as the BMus. It had already been laid down that other doctors might wear a scarlet *gown* only if members of Convocation, but if not, they were still permitted a scarlet *hood* with their black gowns: the non-Convocation DMus had to use the blue BMus hood.

This is the first mention of the white watered silk as the faculty colour of Music, and as with a number of other decisions, it just appears in the record without any

cream damask option was suggested purely to provoke a vote.

6 It is far from clear exactly what is meant by this. The DMus of both Oxford and Cambridge (and, for that matter, Dublin) was, and is, a substantive degree, awarded after examined work, although it is also awarded *honoris causa*. However, at both Oxford and Cambridge in the 1860s, both the BMus and DMus were gained by external study. Neither degree granted membership of the university.

7 Minute 69.

8 Minute 71.

9 The square brackets are in the original. For some reason, the words enclosed were not to be included in the published version of the regulations (paragraph 28 of the report). It is odd that the DMus regulation refers back to the MD gown, while the BMus regulation refers to the DMus regulation, when the same gown is meant.

10 Minute 98. This must of course mean a Cambridge pattern doctoral gown [d2] as for MD, LLD, and DSc, with facings and *sleeve-linings* of white watered silk

11 See note 9.

12 Minute 99.

13 Women were not admitted to degrees of the University of London until 1878.



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Fig. 1. The DMus hood: scarlet, fully lined with white watered silk. Originally worn only by members of Convocation.

trimmed with fur, but any suggestion that the London BMus hood is based on the Dublin one can, I think, be discounted, as the London hood (and gown) was of *dark* blue silk. This is not clear from the regulations, which merely say ‘blue’ without specifying

discussion of how it was decided on.¹⁴ Perhaps the watered silk was a less flamboyant substitute for the white damask used elsewhere?¹⁵ But if so, why was the body of the DMus hood and gown made into the lining? It is unique in the London system, all other faculty silks being a flat weave. It is also worth noting that watered silk is not used in any other hood at all until 1900, when Birmingham adopted a set of watered silks for its faculty colours.¹⁶

What is also totally unclear is why it was thought appropriate to give the BMus a blue, as opposed to a black, hood and gown: there is no discussion of the rationale behind this choice.¹⁷ This seems to have stuck all the way through from the very first proposal, with merely a change of shape for the gown from the BA one to the flap-collar [d4], thus aligning the degree with those in Medicine and Laws; the new (1860) BSc was given the BA gown.

There is no precedent for any of this anywhere else. At that date, Oxford gave its BMus the same robes as it has now: a [d4] gown in black with lace decoration, and a lilac hood trimmed with fur,¹⁸ while at Cambridge, they wore the BA robes,¹⁹ so there was no precedent at either university for a blue gown for Bachelors of Music.²⁰ Dublin put its BMus into a black BA gown, with a light blue hood

14 The original suggestion of gold had been given to the scientists, in place of their original colour of scarlet. It is far from clear exactly what the first BSc graduates wore in 1860, as there was no provision for them in the 1840 scheme, and the 1862 one was still under discussion. The discussion behind the choice of russet brown for Arts is also lacking.

15 There is an interesting specification in the Oxford statutes of 1636 that inceptors in Music (i.e., those about to become DMus) are to wear ‘white wavy damask capes’. Was the watered silk seen as ‘wavy’—and the damask part overlooked? I am grateful to Philip Lowe for reminding me of this.

16 This was, presumably, for the same reason that Wales adopted shot silks: it was something distinctive.

17 One really would like to know exactly what discussions took place between the formal meetings.

18 The BMus hood may have been in the throes of changing from dark blue (as used by BCL and BM, themselves lightening to a mid-blue) to lilac at this period. But Oxford never had as much effect (if, indeed, any) on the London robes as did Cambridge.

19 The maroon (‘dark cherry’) and fur MusB hood was not introduced until 1889.

20 Durham also gave its BMus the black laced gown, initially with a white hood lined mauve and bound fur, later changed to mauve bound 1” white damask.

what shade. Indeed, the choice of colours is remarkable: blue was already assigned to Laws²¹—albeit a lighter shade—and white had become the marker for bachelors in Convocation.

London's faculty colour system was thus taking shape:

Table 1. London faculty colours 1862

Arts	russet brown silk
Laws	mid-blue silk
Medicine	violet silk
Science	pale gold silk
Music	white watered silk

The other interesting suggestion, already noted in passing, made in March 1861, and which was killed as soon as it raised its head, was that the DMus should have 'a gown [and, presumably, hood] of white brocaded silk lined with gold-coloured silk'. This would have aligned it with the white/cream damask robes of the DMus at Oxford (with pink silk), Cambridge (maroon), Dublin (rose), and Durham (mauve).²² Maybe, as London eschewed fur on its bachelors' hoods,²³ it did not want to align itself with the other, church-based, universities in this way either. Certainly it was the first university to grant its DMus a scarlet gown on a par with its other doctors.²⁴

This may be the point at which to ask exactly who was taking the first music degrees. Neither University College nor King's College had a music department in the 1860s, so there was no formal teaching for them.²⁵ King's, of course, had a chapel where there was some music, but it did not gain its music department until 1964. There was some teaching of music, mostly practical, at both Bedford College and King's College for Women (later renamed Queen Elizabeth College), and at Birkbeck College. But this teaching was by no means at degree-level.

Music degrees were first mooted in 1849, to be similar to those of Oxford and Cambridge, which is to say that they would be effectively totally external, requiring no residence or matriculation, and completely theory-based. Nothing was done, however, beyond ensuring that the 1858 Charter empowered the University to grant degrees in music.²⁶ Convocation raised the matter in 1862, but again, nothing was done. This may well explain why, having considered robes for the music degrees, the 1861 committee

21 So Franklyn's remark that the BMus hood was 'really a Laws hood' did have some basis, at least within the London scheme. But then he was adamant that blue was 'the Laws colour' across the board.

22 Something not seen again until Hull, in 1952, where the cream damask is combined with turquoise.

23 The BAs of those four universities wear a black hood trimmed with fur. London has never used fur on any of its hoods. The reason behind the DMus cream damask is another story.

24 The cream damask and gold combination did not resurface until 1993, when Bath adopted it for its DMus.

25 A very good concise history of the teaching of music within the University is to be found in Brian Trowell's chapter 'Music' in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The University of London and the World of Learning 1836–1986* (London: Hambledon Press, 1990). Much of what follows is taken from it.

26 Trowell, p. 189. The history of the University of London and its charters is somewhat involved.

decided (albeit briefly) that it was ‘not, at present, expedient to make any provision for the Costume of Graduates in Music’: although the degrees had a paper existence, no-one was actually taking them.²⁷

The first serious request came in 1876, from the Council of Trinity College, London, the college of music founded in 1872. It had a wide-ranging curriculum, requiring a general arts training as well as the musical one—indeed, the coveted diploma of LTCL could not be gained without passing the arts subjects as well as the demanding musical ones, and for a time it held prestige for teachers over the Oxford and Cambridge BMus, as it guaranteed a broad general education as well as a specialist musical one.²⁸

The details of the BMus examination were eventually published in 1877. It had the same stiff matriculation requirements as for other degrees, and was examined by a ‘First BMus’ and a ‘Second BMus’ examination, which were totally theoretical. It was not a great success: ‘Few candidates attempted it, and fewer passed.’²⁹ Of the eight candidates who took the First BMus exam in 1877, five passed. It took them a further three years, and not the intended one, to pass the Second examination and thus become Bachelors of Music: the degree was first awarded in 1880.³⁰ The first DMus degrees were awarded in 1885.³¹

This use of dark blue rather than black for the BMus hood was to have a knock-on effect, however. The Victoria University (1880),³² and the University of Wales (1893),³³ which both follow to some extent the London scheme,³⁴ gave their BMus graduates dark blue hoods, while all others wore black ones;³⁵ they also put their DMus in scarlet. Queen’s Belfast (1909), and Liverpool (1903) also gave their BMus dark blue hoods.

27 There is an intriguing entry in the table compiled by J. W. G. Gutch and published in *Notes and Queries* in 1858, where he states that the BMus and DMus wore robes of the same style as the thers, but in ‘puce’ silk and velvet. This is not noted in the list in Northam’s workbook or anywhere else, so Gutch must have been reading too much into his sources. The more so, as ‘puce’ is simply another name used for the violet silk of the Faculty of Medicine: the ‘puce’ of the Lampeter BD is always tied to London violet.

28 Trowell, p. 192. The LTCL had its own hood: simple shape, black, lined violet, and bound fur.

29 Trowell, p. 193. It was so well-regarded that some schoolteachers would put ‘First MusBac’ after their names, to indicate that they had got that far: whether this covered a failure at the Second is not always clear!

30 Ibid.

31 The further development of music as an academic subject within the University and its colleges is beyond the remit of this paper, and can be followed in Trowell’s chapter. But it is clear that until the 1960s, all the music graduates were coming either from the colleges of music, or via the External System.

32 Victoria instituted the BMus degree in 1893: Lowe, *Manchester Academic Dress*, p. 14.

33 At Wales, the first degree awarded, in 1893, was a DMus *honoris causa* to the then Princess Alexandra. The first examined BMus was awarded much later, by the college at Aberystwyth, in 1905.

34 But not, interestingly, Birmingham, which of them all most closely follows the London system. There, the BMus wears a black hood, bordered with 3” tangerine watered, the Music faculty colour (all faculty silks are watered at Birmingham).

35 But with black gowns: the blue one remained a peculiarity of London.

Table 2. Dark blue music hoods

University	BMus hood	
Victoria	dark blue, bound 2" pale blue	pale blue is the Arts faculty colour
Wales	dark blue, bordered 3" pearl shot silk	pearl shot is the Music faculty colour
Queen's, Belfast	dark blue, lined white, bound pale blue watered	white is the BD colour
Liverpool	dark blue lined mid-blue, bound fur	mid-blue is the Music faculty colour, as opposed to the slate blue of Science

Beside this, the white watered silk appears to have had a life beyond London, also. Leeds (1904) gives its BMus the BA hood (dark green lined dark green), but with a 1" band of white watered silk laid on the lining, with the DMus using the DLitt hood and gown with 1" borders of white watered silk. Sheffield's original BMus hood was also the BA one (dark green, the cowl bordered fur, and the cape bound 2" crushed strawberry) with the addition of 0.5" white watered silk as a further binding on the cape edge; likewise the DMus wore the DLitt hood with a white watered silk binding.³⁶ Might this also be a legacy of the London white watered: is it seen—as is cream damask—as a music marker?

We may also point to Edinburgh, where the system of black lined faculty colour bound fur for bachelors is also disregarded: here the BMus gets not a blue, but a scarlet hood, lined with white, and bound fur.³⁷

Two further developments remain. One is that, in 1910, the dark blue hood and gown of the BMus were changed to the light blue still in use. (See Fig. 2.) Again, it is totally unclear why this was decided upon: the Senate minute simply reads:³⁸

That the colour of the blue silk prescribed for the Robes of Graduates in Music be a light blue, instead of the very dark blue at present in use, and that the Regulations be amended to read as follows:

DMus —

A black silk gown of the same shape as for the Doctor of Medicine.

Doctors of Music who are Members of Convocation shall also be entitled to wear a gown of scarlet cloth faced with white watered silk.

The hood shall be of scarlet cloth with a lining of white watered silk.

BMus —

A light blue silk or black stuff gown of the same shape as for the Doctor of Music.

³⁶ These were replaced by the current ones, which have the BMus cape bound 2" cream damask, and the DMus fully lined with cream damask, around 1965: *Pears Cyclopedia* for 1963 gives the old hoods, while Shaw in 1966 gives the new ones.

³⁷ Hoods were reintroduced here from 1843, beginning with medicine. Edinburgh doctors famously wear black hoods—save for the DMus, which wears scarlet lined white. Again, white is the lining for the MA hood. It is unclear quite when the music hoods came in: they are not listed in Wood 1885, but are in Haycraft 1923.

³⁸ 16 March 1910.



Fig. 2. The light blue BMus robes introduced in 1910. The hood is fully lined with white watered silk.

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The hood shall be of light blue silk, edged on the inside with white watered silk.

Bachelors of Music who are Members of Convocation shall be entitled to wear a light blue silk hood with a lining of white watered silk.

This resolution also grants the scarlet hood to all DMus graduates, regardless of membership of Convocation (as with all other doctors). Black gowns are introduced for both degrees, with the BMus having the option of a light blue one—note that this is not, as it later was, confined to members of Convocation. It also introduces a non-Convocation version of the BMus hood, on the pattern of the other bachelors, with 3” faculty colour (white watered silk).

By 1963 a new version of the Convocation BMus had found its way into the regulations: lined with plain white silk, and bordered with 3” white watered silk—on the pattern of the other bachelors’ hoods. It is at present unclear if this originated with the robemakers applying the rule across the board, and overlooking the historic full watered lining, or if this was a conscious decision: if so, it was possibly to make the point that this is a bachelor’s degree. Alas, the white watered silk laid against the plain white silk does not make a sufficient contrast to be effective save at very close range.

The final development was the addition of the MMus degree, in 1966.³⁹ Holders were granted the black gown common to BMus and DMus, and, if members of Convocation, the light blue BMus gown. The hood is of ‘medium blue’ silk, lined and bound with white watered silk, thus almost reviving the original BMus hood—save that the outer is probably a lighter shade of blue than the ‘very dark’ one of the original

³⁹ Minute 2411, FGPC Report to Senate February 1966. Trowell is less than specific on when the MMus itself was introduced. The degree is not listed in Shaw’s 1966 book, but it is in Smith’s of 1970.

hood.⁴⁰ Members of Convocation had a 1½” edging of plain silk, like the other Masters. (See Fig. 3.) The rationale given for the darker blue was that BMus and the MMus would be ‘indistinguishable without the suggested modification in shade’.⁴¹

The white watered silk binding was in due course added to the PhD hood in 1930 (and later to the MPhil hood), replaced in both cases by the dark blue used for all faculties in 1997.⁴²

So the origins and rationale for the distinctive London BMus robes remain shrouded in uncertainty—doubtless they lie in informal conversations held between formal meetings of the committee. But we can say that they go back to the very first discussions of the 1862 revision.



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Fig. 3. The MMus hood for a member of Convocation. The hood is mid-blue, lined and bound with white watered silk, and with an edging of plain white silk.

40 One might wonder why it was not given a medium-blue gown as well.

41 The same may probably be said of the Leeds MMus, which uses the MA hood—dark green silk lined (plain) white silk—with a 2” band of white watered silk laid on the white.

42 Itself removed in 2022, and the PhD hood and robe reverted to the original 1920 ones of claret cloth lined claret silk, with black silk lined claret silk for the MPhil.

Appendix: The London BMus hood as given in various published sources

Wood 1875: ‘Blue silk, lined with white watered silk’. All others noted as black, bordered 3” faculty, plus white if Convocation.

Girls’ Own Paper, 1880: ‘blue silk lined white silk’. (It does not mention watered.)

Wood, 1882: ‘Blue silk, lined with white watered silk.’ (Identical with the non-Convocation DMus.) He notes that the BA, LLB, MB, and BSc have the 3” faculty border, and if Convocation may also have the white lining, but does not note any variation for the BMus.

Whitaker’s Almanac, 1885: ‘blue silk, white watered silk lining’. For other bachelors, it gives only the non-Convocation version. This is the same for **1890, 1893, 1896, 1898, and 1900**—though it does get round to noting the Convocation hoods for others eventually.

Boy’s Own Paper, 1903 (coloured chart): shows a lightish (azure) blue hood, clearly fully lined white. It has both Convocation and non-Convocation BA and BSc.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1911: ‘blue, lined white, watered silk’.⁴³

Haycraft, 1923: ‘Light blue silk edged inside the cowl with 3 inches of white watered silk. If member of Convocation, lined with white watered silk.’

Haycraft, 1924: *ditto*. (And specifically notes that BA, BSc, MB, BCh [*sic*], BD, LLB, and BComm can have the (plain) white lining.)

Haycraft, 1927: *ditto*.

Haycraft, 1947: ‘Light blue silk edged with 3 in of white watered silk.’ *Note:* Bachelors who are members of Convocation have their hoods lined with white in addition.’

Pears Cyclopaedia, 1950: (chart form) ‘Blue and White’.

Pears Cyclopaedia, 1963: ‘The BMus hood is an exception and is of mid-blue corded silk with 3” white lining of white watered silk, but fully lined with white *watered silk* if a Member of Convocation’. (This is after noting that other bachelors in Convocation have a lining of ‘fine ribbed white silk’. The MMus is not mentioned.)

Shaw I, 1966: ‘All hoods full shape ... made of stuff or silk, and bordered three inches inside and edged half an inch outside with the faculty colour. BMus: the hood is of light blue silk.’ (He does not actually say anywhere that the others are black!) ‘Any bachelor who is a member of Convocation may wear a white silk lining in addition to the faculty colour stripe.’

Pears Cyclopaedia, 1967–68: ‘With the exception of BMus, for whom the hood is of light blue corded silk, bachelors’ hoods are of black silk or stuff faced and edged with silk of the faculty colour 3” only. Bachelors who are members of Convocation are entitled to wear hoods lined with white silk and edged with silk of the faculty colour.’ (The MMus is mentioned. This entry is reproduced identically in the 1976–77 edition.)

Smith, 1970: ‘Bachelors of Music who are Members of Convocation wear a hood made from light blue corded silk, lined and bound over the cowl with white watered

43 Franklyn did not get his hands on the *Britannica* article until 1941.

silk.' But the non-Convocation hood has just 3" white watered. He has the MMus—and specifically notes there is no white Convocation stripe.

Haycraft, 1972 (C. A. H. F. et al.): Light blue ribbed silk lined with 3" of white watered silk. They note that members of Convocation 'have the rest of their hoods (after the 3" Faculty colour) lined with fine ribbed white silk'.

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