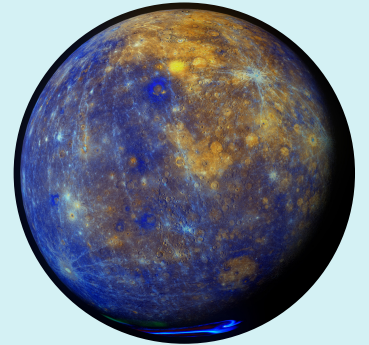




DO WHAT YOU LOVE

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I am currently a PhD student in planetary geoscience with the Open University. The project involves using NASA's MESSENGER mission data to produce the first geological map of the entirety of Mercury's south pole, which needs to be completed before the arrival of ESA's BepiColombo Mercury Planetary Orbiter. It's such an exciting project and, although I am only 6 months in and am exclusively working remotely from home, I have learnt so much. My background is in geology and Earth sciences and applying what I know about mapping our planet to other planets across the solar system has been so motivating. The field of geoscience, particularly geology, has historically been male-dominated with women largely under-represented, which makes me all the more proud to be where I am today. However, as I reflect on the experiences that brought me here, I would be lying if I said that this was always my dream.



Growing up, although I was academically inclined, I had a passion for traditional Scottish music and I was always performing and competing across Scotland and internationally. It led me to Sgoil Chiùil na Gàidhealtachd (a.k.a. Plockton music school) where I spent the best year of my life with like-minded, equally passionate people. From there I travelled to Glasgow and the Royal Scottish Conservatoire where I was delighted to have been offered a place on their Traditional Music course. This process was plain sailing in comparison to the way in which I found geoscience. Cut to me just a few weeks earlier, in floods of tears, haplessly searching through university prospectuses before mum struck gold and came across Earth Science. At school I had loved chemistry and always found geography to be intuitive. Earth sciences and geology seemed to marry the two harmoniously and appeared to provide some great opportunities to travel and learn more about the formation and evolution of the Earth. I was certainly interested, but to choose this blindly over music, which up to that point had been my lifelong passion, seemed impetuous.



We've all been told at some point in our professional development that if we do what we love we'll never work a day in our lives. And maybe that would be true if a career in music just involved music, but the reality is that you can't just be a musician; you become a constant self-promoter, an accountant, a brand. And after all that, you will still be heavily criticized. I find that the more passionate I am about something, the less able I am to take criticism. I have always been able to appreciate criticism I have received in geoscience and viewed it as constructive. Music is, in some ways, a universal hobby and as such even those with no significant understanding believe themselves to be entitled to an opinion; this doesn't happen when it comes to rocks. I've also found that having music has helped me massively when it's come to the balance between university and life. At times I needed that immersive distraction when university got tough because it does get tough. Even in the toughest times your hobbies don't leave you, and studying geoscience has not made me any less of a musician.

My early university career started in 2015 at the University of Glasgow, which is a fantastic place to be a student, and I graduated with a first-class degree in Earth Sciences (Hons) and the Bill Aitken Award. A component of my honours year that particularly resonated with me was the individual lab project. This was my first taste of research and academia, and I really felt incentivised by that to pursue research as a career. It was also probably the first time I felt confident in my decision to pick geoscience over music.

Particularly drawn to the idea of focussing on my own research as opposed to a taught course, I considered a masters by research to be the best option for me to get the experience I was looking for and either train me for professional work or prepare me for a PhD. This time, instead of pouring over prospectuses, I took a more direct approach with regards to finding a project. I composed an email detailing who I was, what I was interested in and the experience I had so far and sent this out to a small number of professors at various universities with whose research I was familiar and aligned with my own interests. Essentially this was me presenting myself as a hopeful postgraduate researcher and asking if anyone would be interested in supervising me, the least romantic of all the lonely hearts ads. I feel incredibly fortunate to have not only received a response but to have found someone willing to take me on as a student.

That brought me to the University of Edinburgh where I spent a little over a year completing a lab-based research project (with very limited access to said lab). Halfway through the project COVID struck and many aspects of the project had to be adapted or dropped. Throughout my tertiary education it has been to my advantage that I've had exceptional supervisors, to whom I owe a lot of my success. Just last week I graduated from Edinburgh with distinction for the degree Master of Science by Research.



The direct method by which I found my masters project has served me well. None of the positions I've ever held outwith university had been advertised jobs with a formal application process. I have always emailed directly, putting my name out into the world to see what comes back. Although it's not the conventional route, it is one I highly recommend; it's resulted in me working as a quality control technician for a chemical engineering firm, as a tutor in singing and harp, as a deliverer of creative development classes for children, and, of course, at TechFest in different capacities for four consecutive summers. Throughout my life my involvement with TechFest has been thoroughly enjoyable, be it as a summer intern, festival assistant or as a competitor in the K-Nex challenge all the way back in primary school. I've found them to be a tight-knit team, a supportive employer and particularly invested in the development of the young people they employ.

One of the most inspiring things I found about TechFest as a company is that, during the time I was working for them, the core team were all female. The world of geology and geosciences has shifted in recent years to become very vocal about equality and the inclusivity of women in a historically male-dominated field. To be given the opportunity by TechFest to share my experiences as a women in geoscience, and to try and inspire the younger generation, for whom I am confident the field will continue to level out, while being supported by a team of strong women is proof to me of progress with regards to equality.

