



A 'Mini Maestros' taster class in Berkshire

TURNING UP THE BASS

Long considered an 'endangered species', the bassoon is actually thriving in schools and ensembles in Leicestershire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and beyond – so much so, finds Marian Blaikley, that teachers are having to create outlets to avoid a bottleneck of young bassoonists

Martha Burton, a Year 7 pupil at Robert Smyth Academy in Market Harborough, is definitely on-message when it comes to talking about learning the bassoon.

'It's good to play because it's an endangered species. It's classical but it's versatile and it gives you more playing opportunities.' (Martha already plays the flute.) 'It's interesting because it's big, and I like the sound.'

Her school is one of five secondary schools to have taken part in a successful pilot scheme run by Leicestershire Music Education Hub, which has seen the number of bassoonists receiving tuition rise from

a handful to more than 50 in the space of a year.

The scheme was set up by Graeme Rudland, a bassoonist and the hub's deputy service manager until his retirement in April this year. Two factors drove the initiative: a stock of unused bassoons, and the fact that they could offer schools tuition – associate teacher Rebecca Wong, frustrated at the lack of bassoonists and having to teach flute and clarinet instead, was raring to go.

The offer comprised sharing with the schools the cost of ten free lessons for pupils in Years 7 and 8. A specially commissioned video featuring bassoon advocate Laurence Perkins and Emilia

Palmer, principal bassoon in the Leicestershire Schools Symphony Orchestra, helped schools promote the idea. Once the free lessons come to an end, tuition is subsidised for the rest of the academic year.

CONTINUED SUCCESS

So far, the new bassoonists have had staying power. Of the 32 instruments sent out, only six had been returned by the end of March. Helle Petersen, head of music at Robert Smyth Academy, confirms that seven of the nine pupils who originally signed up there have continued after the free scheme ended. 'They have really taken to it and have made solo and group appearances in school concerts. Three of them play in the Year 7 jazz orchestra and received a special mention at the Music for Youth regional festival: the MFY music mentors had never seen three bassoons in an ensemble like that before!'

Players benefiting from the scheme attend weekend events laid on for them by the hub. A workshop run by Graeme Rudland and Laurence Perkins was attended by 19 young players altogether, ranging from primary school players with just two weeks on mini bassoons (and only four notes to their name) to a 14-year-old of Grade 5 standard.

Several of the youngest attenders were there because the scheme has been extended to two primary schools through half-day presentations and workshops, following enquiries from the schools themselves. Associate teacher Rebecca Wong now teaches in one primary school, and her colleague, Ceri Beaumont, at another. Beaumont

A bassoon workshop at Robert Smyth Academy, Market Harborough



“ THE INVESTMENT IN MINI BASSOONS HAS BEEN CRUCIAL ”

now has six pupils at St John the Baptist Primary School, Leicester, selected from a total of 30 who showed interest, with a waiting list of 20. She also teaches four pupils under the auspices of the hub on Saturday mornings, as a result of parental enquiries generated by the video on the website.

So successful has the Leicestershire scheme been overall, that something similar is now in place for french horns and oboes.

Leicestershire is not alone in its success. Catherine Millar, head of wind at Berkshire Maestros, the lead organisation in the Berkshire Music Hub, has been running a bassoon programme since 2008. She teaches about 60 pupils from age six upwards. Berkshire Maestros currently has about 20 pupils with Grade 8 or diplomas, and many at Grade 7 level. There are ten players in the selective county bassoon ensemble and competition for the five youth orchestra places is fierce.

Millar ascribes Berkshire's success to 'a supply of instruments and teachers with a passion to develop their instrument' – an analysis applicable to all three schemes explored here. She and another bassoon specialist cover the whole county, supplemented at beginner level by two clarinet teachers and two oboists. The county's supply of instruments is also extremely good: 18 mini bassoons, 2 tenoroons, about 10 short reach bassoons and 20 full-size instruments. The investment in mini bassoons has been crucial, she says.

'In 2008 we used some of the government money set aside for purchase of instruments for first access projects to purchase 16 mini bassoons. This was a leap of faith: one bassoon could buy many guitars! But the advantage is that pupils can start at the same time as any other wind instrument. If you love the sound of the bassoon at the age of 7, you don't have to wait till you are 13 to be able to play it!



MARIAN BLANKLEY

A bassoon workshop run by Leicestershire Music Education Hub

As long as you blow the thing, it is going to make a nice sound from day one, so the rewards are very good.'

NATURAL SELECTION

Millar also advises selecting the students carefully to maximise retention rates, even if the ideal is to give everyone a chance. Factors to consider are whether the family is supportive and can afford the ongoing cost of the reeds, and whether the child has resilience and a sense of humour. 'Let's face it, the

bassoon looks funny, and often sounds funny, too.'

Carolyn Sewell, area leader of the Wycombe South area of Buckinghamshire Learning Trust Music, agrees that personality has a part to play. 'Certain sorts of kids like bassoons. All of my pupils are sort of bonkers!'

Sewell has been developing a programme with the aid of her staff over the last three years, starting when she joined the Music Service in 2014 and found 30 bassoons in a cupboard, including 9 minis still in their wrappers. »



MARIAN BLAKLEY



Working with young bassoon players in Leicestershire

At that point they had only a handful of student players. Now they have 25, and every single ensemble has one or two bassoons in it.

Sewell began by setting up a mini bassoon club in one of her schools, attracting nine members, of whom five carried on with lessons. This success led to a free-to-schools tour, taking 25 bassoons into 15 schools. At every school 25 pupils got to play, and from that approach at least ten players emerged. She is insistent about the benefits of hands-on experience: 'If you just go in and demonstrate then the kids are just not interested, but if they can have a go, it can really grab them.'

Ensuring that the fee for hiring a bassoon is the same as for smaller

instruments like flutes (£15) also had its part to play. Other initiatives included getting the bassoon quartet Reed Rage in for a day of recitals and workshops; participation in a shopping centre flashmob set up by hub partner Chiltern Music Academy; and a workshop day on solo repertoire from the ubiquitous Laurence Perkins. All these generated further momentum.

VOLUME CONTROL

The Buckinghamshire scheme, like the other two, is now suffering from problems of success: they are almost running out of instruments. In Leicestershire they may have to tackle the prospect of an overly bassoon-heavy

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wind orchestra by creating a bassoon choir, and in Berkshire they have not had enough instruments for new projects. However, this September, for the first time in a few years, Berkshire Maestros hopes to have the funds and instruments to target another school.

Catherine Millar also points out that the knock-on effect of having lots of mini bassoons is the need for lots of short-reach bassoons for the pupils to progress to, and so on: 'Sometimes it's like a house-moving chain, waiting for pupils to have growth spurts so I can move people up a bassoon size!'

Having lived with the 'endangered species' label for so long, it is gratifying for all three schemes to be grappling with these issues rather than bemoaning the lack of bassoonists coming through. And the signs of such successes are to be seen elsewhere: the recent *Vibrant Sixties* play-day run in London by the British Double Reed Society was attended by more bassoons than oboes. Maybe bassoons really are on the rise. **MT**

SUPPORTING THE SOUND

Where to go for more information

Berkshire Maestros Catherine Millar's team are very open to visitors wanting to observe or ask advice www.berkshiremaestros.org.uk

Leicestershire Music Education Hub leicestershiremusicshub.org/video

Buckinghamshire Learning Trust Music Contact area leader Carolyn Sewell for more on csewell@learningtrust.net www.bucksmusic.org

Berkshire bassoon flashmob youtu.be/3LR30pg6As8

Laurence Perkins Involved in several bassoon initiatives, including a weekend of bassoon ensembles in November 2017, and contributing to a five-day BDRS course on 10-14 April 2018 laurenceperkins.com

British Double Reed Society www.bdrs.org.uk

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