



Graeme Rudland: The aim is 'to kindle a motivation for music'

## RIGHT ROUND

*Marian Blaikley looks at the development of a popular new unit from Leicestershire Music Hub, which makes use of the rise in popularity of turntablism*

Twelve-year-old Thomas O'Brien had never shown particular musical talent until he was introduced to the turntablism unit of work run by Leicestershire Music Education Hub for its secondary schools. Now he is composing and notating his own piece for performance in a school concert, and learning the trombone. His teacher, Nick Hughes, is head of performing arts at Robert Smyth

Academy: 'The scheme has highlighted Thomas musically and he has been a revelation to us. As a result, I asked him if he would like to learn an instrument and he chose the trombone.'

Thomas is one of 136 Year 7 students who have so far completed the unit in weekly curriculum music lessons over eight weeks. Graeme Rudland, Leicestershire's deputy service manager, says that a key aim is 'to kindle a

motivation for music among children who might otherwise have been demotivated.'

The scheme is the brainchild of teacher and turntablism specialist Bradley Smith, whose enthusiasm, expertise and track record of producing high-quality materials led the hub to commission him to write and prepare all the resources. These include a six-lesson planned unit for a teacher to deliver, supported by an exclusive techniques video featuring the renowned turntablist Mr Switch, soloist in the BBC Proms 2011 performance from Gabriel Prokofiev's *Concerto for turntables and orchestra*.

The inclusion of this work among the BBC Ten Pieces scheme raised the profile of turntablism significantly, and Smith feels this link to the Ten Pieces legacy is helpful in winning over more traditional musicians, who might be apprehensive about the medium. 'The BBC Proms involvement showed that turntablism can be scored and used as an effective performance tool, as good as any instrument out there.'

The turntablism unit, introduced last September, has been enthusiastically received by Leicestershire schools. It is fully booked for the rest of the year and bookings are already in for 2017/18. Craig Cubitt, head of performing arts at Ivanhoe Specialist Technology Academy – the first school to take the unit – explains its appeal:

'I knew it would be something that the students would love. We have been running a popular hip-hop and DJ club here for some years. When the opportunity to teach students how to scratch on 16 top-of-the-range decks came along I could not pass it up. We managed to teach nearly all of our Year 7 students, half of our Years 8 and 9 students, more students in an extra lunchtime club and even some staff in after-school sessions – a total of about 650 people in all. The project was excellent, as was the equipment, and the scheme of work extremely well planned.'

### Nuts and bolts

The top-of-the-range equipment is exactly the same as that used by Dr Switch in the course tutorial videos,

a detail which thrills the students: 16 pairs of Reelbox RP-8000 turntables, each set connected to a Reelbox RMX-22i mixer. Smith selected the turntables for their high amount of torque, and their straight tone arms, which he says have a good hold on the groove. The equipment also needs to be robust, and during ten weeks' use at Robert Smyth Academy – about 100 hours use on 32 turntables – they only had four needle breakages. The equipment is supplied by Music Junkie, Leicester, at an educational discount, and cost the Hub £20,000 in total (this also included the bespoke flight cases, headphones, cables and records for the pupils to use). It is bulky, and schools are warned that they need to plan the space to accommodate it, but Smith also has plans in the pipeline for lighter, easier to store systems.

The charge to schools is £500, which includes training, consultancy and a contribution to the cost of resources.

### Flipping vinyl

Crucial to the unit's delivery are the records on which students take turns to copy the turntable techniques they see on screen. Smith produced the records himself to meet the bespoke requirements of the course. On Side A are instrumental beats for practising and performing over, with the possibility of

varying the speed of the beat according to the ability of the student. On Side B is a large bank of repeating classic scratch samples for performing the scratches.

Side B also includes a bank of melodic scales on a variety of instruments to allow the pupils to begin creating their own melodic phrases and compositions. Most students master a range of scratches and move on to this more creative stage, learning about different time signatures, and even mastering TTM – the Turntable Transcription Method – which is taught as the course progresses. Staff found that scratch notation became a challenge for some students, but Thomas O'Brien says it is 'easier than using crotchets'. Although he will be able to perform his piece from memory at the school concert, his teacher is determined that he put his TTM up on a stand, to further impress the audience with his achievement.

Smith sees turntablism as an art form which can lead children with poor musical experiences and low self-esteem to a sense of achievement. For children who find music hard to penetrate, it is a good way to show how instantly rewarding music can be. But he also stresses that children who are more advanced musically appreciate how it can be used as a musical instrument: 'With turntablism you can become any

instrument you want. That's what holds the youngsters: you can be any sound or instrument you want to be, take any favourite song and develop and create something new. The technology can go very far.'

In terms of legacy, Bradley has a proposal in the pipeline to bring the cost of equipment down to the price of a standard whole-class ensemble project (around £4,000-£5,000 for a class of 32 learners), resolving issues of storage and logistics at the same time. He also hopes to introduce more advanced units. The two schools which have run the scheme so far are certainly determined to build on their experience. Nick Hughes hopes to invest in a set of decks and would like more students to take the unit next year, and Craig Cubitt has already secured a grant from Leicestershire hub to purchase a few sets – and his school's summer concert will see performances by a new generation of scratch DJs. **MT**

### LEICESTERSHIRE MUSIC HUB: INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

The turntablism unit of work is just one of many innovative projects run by Leicestershire Music Hub. These include a successful approach to increasing players of 'endangered species' such as the bassoon, alongside many initiatives aimed at developing inclusive practice. Other projects which engage groups of children who might not otherwise have opportunities for musical experiences include:

- » Partnership with Bullfrog Arts, delivering Taiko drumming projects to vulnerable children
- » A half-term music enrichment course for children in care
- » The 'Boys Noise' singing project, engaging 200 boys from primary and secondary schools in partnership with Leicester City Football Club
- » A partnership with Darbar Arts, offering an Indian music experience to children in primary schools
- » An album of songs created and performed with children from special schools, in partnership with Sinfonia Viva
- » The 'Moving Beyond Play' project developed in partnership with Transformance Music for special school pupils, enabling them to produce music using iPads.

Notation for turntables

