



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

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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 MFFY 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

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A bassoon workshop at Robert Smyth Academy, Market Harborough