

“ 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 BLANLEY

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. »