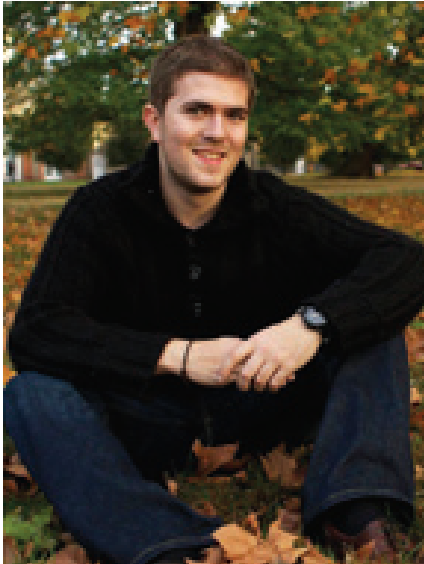


Celebrating the RCM community

In addition to their studies, RCM students contribute to the wider world of music in all sorts of unusual ways. Read on to discover what just some of them are up to...

Ben MacDougall



Ben MacDougall's website describes him as "Flautist, composer, broadcaster". He's active in all three of these different fields...

What have you got coming up as a flautist?

I've got a concert on 28 August as part of the Best of Eden Festival. It's a "Music for a Summer's Evening – Ben MacDougall and Friends" kind of malarkey, so flute and guitar, flute and voice, and so on. You could describe the repertoire as lightweight, but not frivolous – or tedious! It will be fun, but there will be some meat there. It won't all be encore pieces, basically.

...and as a composer?

It's manic! In June and July I'm going to be in America to work with Lorin Maazel. I'm going with an orchestral version of piece I've written, which will be performed – I presume with Maazel conducting – and I think that is also going to be a starting point for new work. I've been asked to take some chamber pieces too. We're still discussing the details of it.

You're also working with Icelandic group the Elektra Ensemble?

Well that's slowed a bit since the volcano! But that's an ongoing relationship where I'm writing pieces for them to play. The ensemble is Emilia Sigfursdottir, who was

a flute player at the RCM, and the rest of them are Icelandic. I've written a piece specially for them, which they're learning at the moment. I went to Iceland a year or two ago and it was amazing – it really gave me a thrill. The landscape is barren but also so alive at the same time. I haven't been over on a professional level yet as it's a fledgling project, but the idea is that I will go over there soon.

And you're also working on a choral project?

Yes I've written a *Kyrie* for the Levens Choir, directed by Ian Jones, which they will be performing later in the year. I'm toying with the idea of writing the rest of the mass.

With all these projects, I'm sort of standing at the edge of the cliff. It's all suddenly going to get incredibly busy! And next year I'm going to do the Composition for Screen course here at College, which is going to be amazing.

How does composing compare to performing?

It's a completely different mindset from performance, as you do all the work beforehand and you're removed from the performance process, unless of course you're playing your own piece – which I find quite hard, by the way, because everything's about you! When you're performing someone else's piece, then you're saying something about yourself through that music. But when you're performing your own piece, it's all about you in a rather daunting kind of way.

Does your performing career influence your composition?

Yes, I think the composition comes out of the performance. My music is very tune-orientated, which I think comes from the flute. I'll sit at a desk, writing, and I'll compose with my flute in the same way that a 'normal' composer might use a piano, which I think does make my music melodically based. Now I'm learning more about orchestration and arrangement from Ken Hesketh here at College, so that I can compose from the ground up, as well as from the clouds down!

Do those relate to your broadcasting? How do your three musical lives combine?

I think they're wonderfully complementary, they're completely seamless. I'll start off by playing my flute. From that I might come up with an idea for a piece. From that, I'll be thinking

things through, and writing them down, and from that might come an article, or a piece for radio. The composition comes out of my opinions and ideas about music in general, and vice versa.

Tell us about your radio show...

Simply Classics is on BBC Radio Cumbria, every Sunday evening – no holidays at all! I've been doing it since October, and it's great fun.

How do you decide what to play?

Sometimes I just stick a whole load of stuff on my iPhone, I listen to it and if I think "oh that sounds good", I'll stick it on a playlist that syncs back to the computer. By the end of the week I'll have six or seven pieces that I've randomly chosen, which could be old crackly classical recordings or the *Transformers* soundtrack.

Alternatively, shows can have themes. For example we might go on a tour around Europe, so start in Spain with Albéniz, work up to France, Italy, Germany and so on.

I have complete licence over what I'm playing. It's got to be fundamentally classical, but, for example, Nigel Kennedy has just brought a CD called *Shhh!* with Boy George, and that is verging on the pop/jazz side of things, but it still counts! People can have this cold, removed idea of classical music, but it's just not an isolated thing in itself, it's a starting point from which lots of things have grown. The idea of the show is to show that classical music isn't a heartless, old thing – it's just as alive and organic as every other kind of music. I aim to show that, not through an in your face "classical music is cool – yeah!" kind of thing, because that would be the wrong way to do it. But just by treating music fairly, I think.

You have an excellent website. Is promoting yourself important?

I think that self-promotion is important. It's by no means the be all and end all, and it's a very dangerous topic to talk about without appearing either vain or big-headed! But it's a good thing to have a website in such a media-consuming world – and in the arts it's especially important. We can practise as much as we want, but if nobody comes to our concerts, and no-one knows what we're doing, then what's the point?

www.benmacdougall.com

Celebrating the RCM community

Alvaro Corral Matute



In July 2009, pianist **Alvaro Corral Matute** headed to India to take part in a groundbreaking teaching project...

How did you get involved in the project?

Back in December 2008 Vanessa Latache sent round an email from the Worldwide Appreciation of Music Foundation about a pilot scheme for students teaching in India. From those that applied they chose seven of us. I went to Gurgaon – an industrial suburb about 15 miles outside Delhi – for two months, from 1 July to 1 September.

Were you given any preparation?

Yes, we did have a training week, which was lots of fun! Nadia Lasserson taught us, and we did a lot of improvisation and multi-hand games. We also had a talk about the musical issues that we were likely to encounter, and health talks and logistical information about actually living in the country.

What did you do?

I took classes on a one-to-one basis, and I also held a series of piano workshops and masterclasses, both at the Delhi Music Society and the Gurgaon School of Music. Not that I deserved to be named as the leader of a masterclass! But essentially, I was teaching somebody while everybody else was listening.

Apart from that we also gave concerts. I played a couple of concerts in the

Delhi Music Society with Hannah Gill, a student from Guildhall who is now a trustee of the foundation, and we also did a concert in the Polish Embassy in Delhi to open the Chopin Bicentenary.

What age people were you working with?

Anything really, from the age of six to mature students. We had a wide range of people, and the point of the collective lessons – which I think were the most important things we did – was not only for the students to be taught a specific piece, but for everyone else to see what they can learn from that.

Some teachers came to the masterclasses as students, which I thought was very nice of them. Whatever problem we saw in the students, we would inform the teacher in order for him to correct it, not only for the student to be corrected, but for the teacher to have a different perspective.

What kind of issues did you come across?

We tackled certain problems that had arisen not because the teachers were not able enough, but because the teachers hadn't actually had good training behind them.

One issue was that students do the same three exam pieces, from standardised syllabi like Trinity Guildhall and ABRSM, and teachers won't dare do anything else. So we tackled the fact that students need to do other things outside their exams.

I also gave theory lessons, as they had very little stylistic awareness. For example, there was a teacher who played some Bach, and since there were no indications written on the score he actually played it like that. Of course you had to tell him that the lack of indications is simply a historic fact, but you have the responsibility to choose the indications yourself.

Generally speaking, I would say in India they have tried to apply to classical western music the same method of teaching that they apply to classical Indian music, which is the teacher plays, the student repeats, and so on. With western classical music, the score is much more important than what your



teacher does, and being able to read confidently is more important than observing how your teacher moves their fingers on the keys. This can be very useful, but you can't learn, say, Chopin's *Fourth Ballade* by listening and imitating! I think that would actually be the most important issue that we tried to improve.

What was the response?

The response we got from students, parents and teachers was very good, very enthusiastic. We felt quite sort of embarrassedly praised! Most teachers seemed very happy with what we had done, so much so that in fact this year the scheme is expanding to more cities.

How was the cultural experience for you?

Culturally it was a very different experience, very enriching. Three of us were living in a flat rather than a hotel, which was very nice, but there were things that were quite hard to see. We had to commute to our schools in a cab or a rickshaw because Gurgaon has no public transport system. You would pass through the slum quarters, and particularly during the first days I was quite shocked, because that was a reality I had never come to terms with so closely before.

Has this experience benefited you?

Absolutely, I did learn a lot from teaching. You have to start thinking in very different terms; you have to take what, to a conservatoire student, has become second nature after so many years, and you have to turn it into words that a 10 year old can understand. The sort of process that you go through to tidy your thoughts in order to teach is also useful to tidy your thoughts in order to practice. You become your own teacher, and that is really useful from the point of view of musicianship.

To find out more visit www.wamfoundation.org.uk

James Maltby and Will Kunhardt



Will Kunhardt conducting the orchestra

Clarinetist **James Maltby** and violinist **Will Kunhardt** co-founded the CLIC Sargent Symphony Orchestra in July last year. The orchestra raises funds for CLIC Sargent, the UK's leading children's cancer charity.

So how did the orchestra come about?

J: One of my friends was diagnosed with leukaemia, and I used to visit her in hospital and got to see the amazing work that CLIC Sargent were doing. I wanted to help in some way and my initial thought was to donate bone marrow, which I will do at some point, but in the end I thought why not use music, given that it's my biggest strength? I was living opposite Will in halls at the time, and we initially planned to organise a single concert, but the plans grew and we've now performed three concerts, played in front of audiences of over 800, and raised thousands of pounds for the charity.

Running the orchestra is a huge undertaking...

W: It's a joint venture, and we share everything depending on our strengths and other commitments. We both have College careers that aren't connected specifically to managing an orchestra, so it's usually just a case of working out who can take on what around those.

J: We basically manage everything between the two of us – from booking the players to spending hours putting leaflets through doors. We're doing some outreach work in schools at the moment to try and get some schoolkids involved in our next concert. It can often mean long days trying to fit everything in.

The orchestra is largely made up on RCM students – how did you persuade them to get involved?

W: We're proud that every English music college has been represented in the orchestra, but the bulk of our players do come from the RCM and everyone has given their time freely for the charity which is really quite amazing. We've even had quite a few RCM alumni, including several with professional orchestral careers, who have still made the time to come and work with us.

J: Initially we began by recruiting our friends and just about managed to pull together a 70-strong orchestra, but after our first concert players were contacting us to say that they'd love to be involved.

W: We've spent a lot of time making it a good and enjoyable place to play, and have even secured sponsorship from a catering company to provide everyone with free food. I also think that players find it gives them a certain amount of freedom – the CLIC Orchestra gives us and them an opportunity to be more experimental.

How do you cover all the costs?

J: Every gig is a real battle. We raise a bit of capital from each concert to help with the costs of the next one, and we've negotiated special rates with some suppliers, but it is tough and it's generally what we worry about the most. We think we have a very strong message – young people working for a young people's charity – and we are always looking for sponsors who are willing to help us with what we are doing.

How much involvement do CLIC Sargent have?

J: It was quite hard when we initially approached them, but we invited them to the first concert and they were blown away. Since then they've helped us secure Sir James Galway and Julian Lloyd Webber as patrons, and they occasionally help us with printing, or by giving pre-concert talks.

W: It's such a large charity that the relationship has been something we had to earn, and that will continue to grow in the future. Music is a strong part of what they do and there are ongoing talks about how we can be a part of some of their other activities, and about how their other musical patrons might get involved with some of our concerts.

J: We're now an official fundraising group for CLIC Sargent and we're the first independent group to achieve that, which I think demonstrates how seriously they now view us.

How much have you raised so far?

W: Between £500 and £2000 from each concert depending on the scale of each one. We're still very new though so some of the income gets swallowed up on investments for the orchestra. We've managed to launch a new website and start a newsletter in the last couple of months, but we'd still like to be able to buy our own stands so that we can take that cost out of future gigs for example. Sponsorship is really important – The Rotary Club last night agreed to pay our venue fees for two concerts – and without it costs often have to come from either the concert income or from us.

J: Will personally funded the rehearsal venues for the second concert himself for example...

W: I was eating beans on toast for most of March!

What has the experience given you personally?

W: Immense satisfaction. It's been quite life-changing for me as I've always wanted to be a conductor, and a lot of people have to wait a long time for their first opportunity, and I'm now getting those opportunities through the orchestra. It's given me valuable experience and has really given me a chance to start building my career.

J: I guess for me it just puts everything in perspective. It's very easy to have tunnel vision on say, a technical exam for example, and it's good to be able to see the bigger picture. It's definitely improved me as a musician, more so than years of private practice and I'm humbled to be supporting such a worthy cause.

www.clicsargentsymphony.com

Celebrating the RCM community

Bryan Kelly



Bryan Kelly, a fourth year undergraduate studying piano with Andrew Ball, was inspired by a festival last summer to create his own rather unusual, and increasingly successful, trio.

So what happened at this festival?

It is a contemporary music festival in Pavia, Italy, called SoundSCAPE. It focuses on the collaboration between performers and composers and gives world premières of new works by participating composers. I have always been interested in new music and I was given the score of a work for violin, guitar and piano by a participating composer that really took my attention. Along with a guitarist from Manchester and violinist from Baltimore, USA, whom I met at the festival, I've been exploring this instrumentation over the past six months to assemble repertoire for concert programmes.

We are preparing for a short UK tour in June and July, for this instrumentation. We're currently fundraising and so far we've raised nearly £2000 and secured three confirmed concert dates, including one at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester.

Isn't this rather an unusual combination of instruments?

Maybe, but it works really well. It offers three different approaches to writing for stringed instruments – bowed, plucked and struck – opening up a range of intriguing timbres and textural possibilities.

Where is your career heading?

When I finish my studies at the RCM this summer, I plan to go back to my native Canada for master's study at McGill University, a music college in Canada well known for contemporary music. Promoting Canadian music is something I am keen to do, and this will be strengthened by my European training and my time in London, both of which have been culturally and artistically enriching. Canadian music is too little known in Europe. There is a great range of styles and I look forward to digging into the repertoire, including concertos, in readiness for both solo and chamber music performances. In my final recital here at the RCM I included a substantial work by Canadian Alexina Louie, *Scenes from a Jade Terrace*, which worked very well.

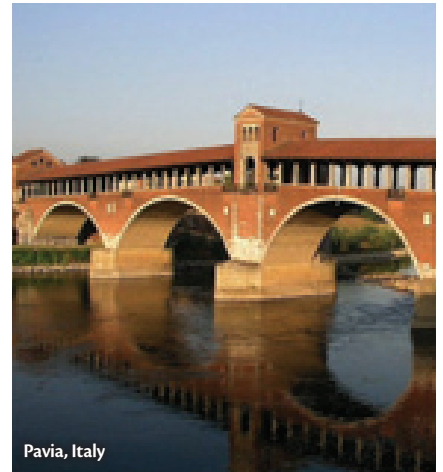
I see this trio project as a stepping stone into a career of which contemporary music plays an important role. It gives the three of us experience organising a concert tour, managing logistics, raising funds, making repertoire choices, rehearsing under tight timelines and in self-promotion – all important skills in transitioning from college life to career. We've even engaged a composer in a commission to write for our trio.

Does new music feature in your plans?

Definitely. My experience at SoundSCAPE had me working alongside composers as part of the creative process. Collaborating with composers - being part of the unfolding evolution of a work - is fascinating, and has deepened my understanding of the process of composing. In turn, I believe it can be enlightening and helpful to composers to have instrumentalists involved alongside them. I see it as an opportunity for me to put my stamp on the development of music in the 21st century.

How will you remember your time in London?

Lots of ways. Great lessons, lots of performance opportunities and, with the trio and our forthcoming tour, the chance to experience all aspects of creating a project. I've had the chance to gain valuable performance experience both within and outside the College that I wouldn't have had access to otherwise.



Pavia, Italy

You are quite an entrepreneur...

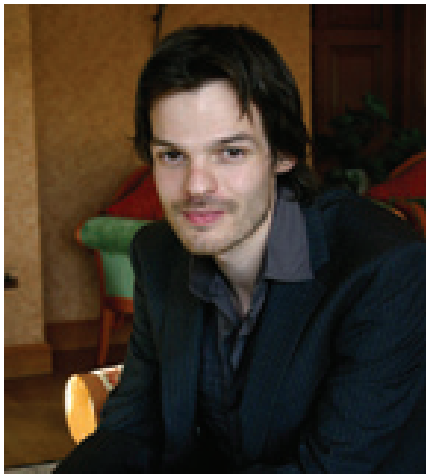
That may have something to do with my business background. I completed a degree in business and mathematics and by the time I started at the RCM had nearly five years of experience working as an accountant. Although I continued to work part-time while at the College, I was lucky to have a manager who appreciated the time I needed to practise and study. Had I started at the RCM when I was 18, I may not have been ready to get the most out of it. Those extra years gave me time to develop and refine my focus and commitment.

Advice for other pianists?

Think ahead to life beyond College and how you can be flexible with your talent. I seized the piano-violin-guitar trio as a way to branch out into something different and am building on to that in a way that is increasing my network of contacts and stimulating me as an artist. Also, standard piano repertoire is so massive that it's easy to overlook new music. That's a pity, since one of its most interesting aspects is that it has no weight of history behind it – it's more open, and full of possibilities.

More information about the SoundSCAPE music festival can be found at www.soundscapefestival.org

Chris Green



Chris Green is in his second year of a Masters in Composition. He set up his own composition and sound design company, Blurred Edge, three years ago.

Tell us about Blurred Edge...

I set the company up three years ago after graduating from my undergrad course. It was initially set up as a sound design company as a way of generating funds for my time at the RCM. I soon realised I definitely wanted to make composition more than a sideline hobby, and began to take on small bits of composition work before eventually joining the RCM to study it properly. At the end of my first year here we were visited by someone from the BBC who seemed impressed with my work, and put me in touch with some of her industry contacts. That's when I really started to get work coming in.

How do you go about getting commissions? Do you pitch for work or do clients approach you directly?

When it comes to adverts it usually all comes through an agency – they put you forward for jobs and you have to pitch to the clients for the work. They set very tight deadlines though, and you normally have about two sleepless days in which to write the music!

As far as film and TV goes, it's a case of getting lucky. You might get an opportunity to work on something which is very rushed, but then you build up a rapport with someone and it leads to other work. I recently just finished a computer game project for a new client which involved composing 12 minutes of music in three days. I got no sleep, but hopefully it will lead to other things with better timescales!

What has been your most challenging commission to date?

I suppose the biggest creative challenge was for a series of National Geographic documentaries, all paid for by a Sultan in Saudi Arabia. They'd already made the documentaries for a Saudi audience and had used very traditional music, but they wanted it rewritten for an American audience. It had to combine both an Arabic flavour and a western feel, and that was very difficult having never written music of that type before. After a bit of research we came up with three or four demos, but they all seemed a bit cheesy, so we began to experiment with using traditional instruments and combining them with more western melodies and harmonies, which was much more successful.

Is there a commission you particularly enjoyed?

Every commission or project has its own interests. I guess because I'm still starting out I haven't been typecast yet, and a lot of the fun actually comes from facing something different each time.

Do you have a dream job or client?

The way the industry seems to work at the moment is that you don't get much time in an actual recording studio – you might record the odd solo instrument to make things sound more live – but I'd love to get a budget that allowed me to take a piece I'd created on a computer and give it to an orchestrator to record live in a studio. Anything with a budget that big would be great!

How do you juggle your studies and your commercial work?

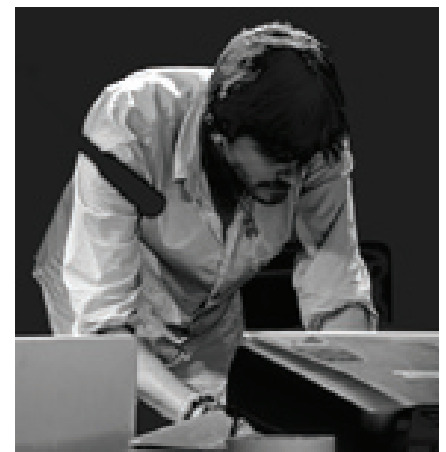
There is definitely a conflict of interest sometimes. At the moment for example I'm working on my dissertation, so I'm hoping that perfect job doesn't come in because I'd probably have to turn it down! My principal studies teacher has been very flexible about the type of work I put into my portfolio though, as I was worried they wouldn't be keen on commercial idents and music for advertising. Lots of RCM composition alumni go on to compose Hollywood scores, but short idents and electronic music is a much less common route to take, so it's great that they are being so supportive.

What has the experience of running your own company given you?

I feel that it has given me a good view of the industry, which is really important. The way academic life works

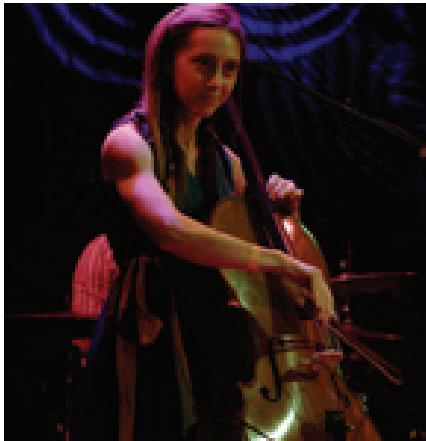
is that you are given the time to excel and look at your music in a very detailed way. You can spend a lot of time on one single musical cue until every smallest nuance is just the way you want. In the professional world you get given very short deadlines and have to create the same quality of work in a much quicker time and to a client's requirements. I find this really makes you stand back from your work, see it as a whole and how it integrates with the full creative project. I think if you want to make a living out of music you need the ability to see music as a job as well as something you love!

Examples of Chris' work can be found at www.blurrededge.co.uk



Celebrating the RCM community

Laura Ritchie



Laura Ritchie is in her second year of a DMus in Psychology of Music at the RCM. She is also a member of indie band The Mummers.

Tell us a little about The Mummers...

The Mummers have been together for a couple of years now. The group formed when Raissa Khan-Panni, who is really at the heart of it, and Paul Sandrone, the guitarist, took the skeleton of a song to Mark Horwood to orchestrate. He asked me to play some cello and a couple of other people played as well. The group grew from there as new songs were written and instruments were added. Thus the name 'The Mummers', meaning a group of medieval door-to-door actors who put on plays, often singing and in mime, became appropriate.

The Mummers line-up has been described by The Guardian as 'a shifting, fluctuating, rattle-taggle bunch of musician friends' – how does this work and what challenges/benefits does it present?

There are always challenges with a large group - we are nine regular musicians who all come together in Brighton to rehearse. The music is very orchestral, and it is difficult to capture this with a slimmed down group. The dream would

be to have a full orchestra to play with, and hopefully that will happen.

Much of the music seems to be inspired by fairy tales – is it true that you used to rehearse in a tree house?

The studio where the album was recorded is called Tree House and was built one storey up in the midst of huge pine trees, so yes!

You performed on the Jools Holland Show last year – what was that like?

It was thrilling and daunting at the same time. It was fantastic to be playing on the same show as such well established artists as Carole King, The Specials, and Franz Ferdinand. We were told to be ready to play at any time as the order of performances might be decided on the spot.

Do your studies and your involvement with The Mummers inform one another, and how do you balance the two?

They certainly do. My research is focused on self-efficacy - a person's self-belief in his ability to do something - and my specific areas are learning and performing music. Much of my research has been with students, but The Mummers have helped me to see what happens at the other end of the spectrum, in professional performances. The approach to learning and performing popular music has become the basis for a research project planned for September involving students at the RCM, the Academy of Contemporary Music in Guildford, and the University of Chichester. As for balance, I am hungry to learn and work hard... It goes back to the topic of my thesis: if you believe you can, then you most likely will.

What has being a member of The Mummers given you?

Confidence and freedom of expression - musically and physically - within my playing, and a great deal of happiness!

Annabel Mountford



Soprano Annabel Mountford is in her second year of a Masters in Vocal Performance. For the past seven months she has been performing the role of Musetta in an Opera UpClose production of Puccini's La Bohème at the Cock Tavern Theatre, Kilburn.

Tell us a little about the production...

Opera UpClose is a new opera company based at the Cock Tavern Theatre, Kilburn. The theatre's Artistic Director, Adam Spreadbury-Maher, trained as an opera singer in Australia before becoming an opera director. He wanted to break down the barriers between opera and the general public, to put opera on in people's normal surroundings in English, so they can relax and enjoy it.

Acts 1, 3 and 4 of *La Bohème* take place in the 80 seat theatre above the pub. However, in the cafe scene in Act 2 the action moves downstairs into the pub itself. I made my entrance with Alindoro from the street. The chorus was spread amongst the pub's patrons and at the appropriate moment sprang into song.

Our director, Robin Norton-Hale, wrote the English translation, which has massively helped the production on its road to success. The libretto is often updated to reflect current events including references to Jedward and, when I performed Musetta last week, a reference to the election: "I'm rushing off to the palace...I am the new Prime Minister"



The Mummers

The production is a fairly unconventional one – what tempted you to get involved?

Through the RCM, I had worked with Robin Norton-Hale at English Touring Opera in their production of *Ariodante*, as part of ETO's Handelfest 2009. She phoned me up and asked me to audition for the role of Musetta. The opportunity to perform *La Bohème* was very exciting. For a young cast to have the chance to perform these roles is very rare, and to be able to explore a role by performing it more than 20 times is unheard of in conventional opera houses.

For me, the idea of setting *La Bohème* in a pub was a wonderful idea, merely for Act 2 purposes.

How did performing in a pub theatre compare to more conventional settings?

Opera UpClose really does live up to its name. Obviously being in such a small space means there is a limited set, however, nowhere else will you find an atmosphere like that at the Cock Tavern. Anything can happen in this type of theatre, from locals getting into a fight, joining the cast on the stage, some 'interesting' heckling, and singing that strives hard to compete in volume with the cast. I am happy to say that the locals lost! The incredible thing is that the singers and the pub patrons blend into the sound of a noisy tavern. The wonderful honky-tonk piano in the corner and chorus members hidden in and amongst the audience added to the overall effect.

Do you think the venue and translation helped attract a different type of audience?

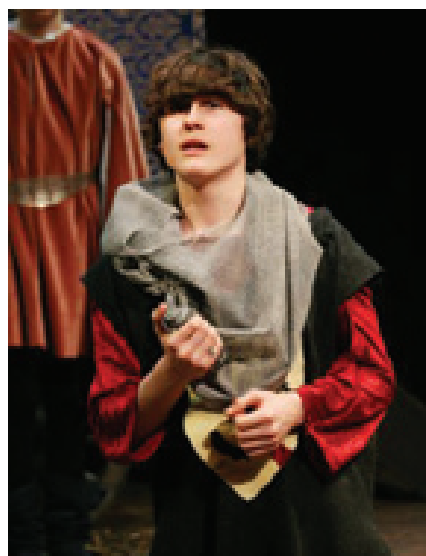
Absolutely, I think that the fact that the opera is presented in a witty, up-to-date English translation increases its impact. People in the audience were in tears by the end. At the Cock Tavern Theatre we are giving the general public a cheap and easily-accessible insight into opera. I think many people are scared of approaching places like the Royal Opera House or even English National Opera, and the price of a ticket is a barrier to most people even trying it out. Many of the locals who happened to be in the pub during Act 2 enjoyed it so much that they bought tickets for the whole show.

What have you learnt from your involvement in the production?

When we started rehearsing *La Bohème* roughly seven months ago, none of us would ever have imagined the success that the production has had. We didn't do it for the money – it was a chance to perform roles that we normally wouldn't have the chance to perform for many years to come. I honestly believe part of its success comes from our dedication and love for what we do, and the opportunity to share it with new audiences. I have learnt so much, from having the courage to perform in front of an unpredictable audience to gaining the stamina to perform over 20 performances as Musetta.

La Bohème is transferring to the Soho Theatre in the West End from 27 July to 4 September 2010.

Andrew Terrafranca



Andrew Terrafranca, 13, is a pupil at Willington School, Wimbledon, and a student of trumpet and voice in the RCM Junior Department. He recently starred in a school production of new children's opera Azincourt and will be taking the performance to the Edinburgh Fringe this summer.

Tell us a little about the production...

The play is based on a true story of the boys who went to battle at Agincourt with Henry V, to look after his luggage, to sing Mass and to help his Knights. It was written by Jeremy James Taylor OBE, from the National Youth Music Theatre. I get to play one of the older Pages, who is a great archer.

How did you get involved? I'd been in his production of *Solomon Pavey* at Willington School two years ago, so when Mr Taylor wrote this new play, I really wanted to be in it, because he is such a fantastic director. I was really happy to get a good part, because otherwise you sit around a lot during rehearsals. I study voice with Ms. Maguire at JD, and she has helped me a lot with my solo performance skills, and I think that's why I got the part I did.

What was first night like?

Well, it was pretty worrying, because my voice was changing, and just before the opening night, the Music Director re-wrote my solos to make them easier for me to sing. I wasn't 100% sure I could remember it all!

You'll be taking the performance to the Edinburgh Fringe this summer – are you excited?

I've never been there before, but it sounds amazing. I hope we have time to see other shows too, because there are loads of new types of performances that we can't see in London.

You'll be competing with lots of other shows and performers – what would you say to try and tempt people to see your show instead of something else?

Well, firstly I don't think there are other shows with only kids performing. And *Azincourt* is based on one of the greatest victories in history. I should warn you, the battle scenes are realistic and it has a rather shocking ending that made some girls cry...

What do you think you've taken from the experience?

Well I used to think I wasn't very good on stage, but this time I really enjoyed performing, and now I think singing and acting is maybe even a career for me some day! For sure my experiences performing at RCMJD have built up my confidence and technique for preparing for a performance like this.

Azincourt will be performed at the Edinburgh Fringe from 15-20 August at the Edinburgh Academy.

Celebrating the RCM community

Frances Slack



Frances Slack, in her second year of Master's study as an oboist, is involved with a groundbreaking music project in a North London school.

Which school and what's the project?

The school is Highbury Grove in Islington; on entry to the school, all pupils in Year 7 select a 'specialist school' to attend – music, sports, catering and science are just some of the choices available. Those who choose music become part of MusicFirst@Highbury Grove, a scheme which runs through years 7, 8 and 9. MusicFirst is inspired by El Sistema, the music education scheme in Venezuela which aims to allow all young people to have instrumental tuition and participate in performances. Like El Sistema, MusicFirst aims to provide new skills and opportunities, increase self-esteem, build confidence and ultimately transform communities. MusicFirst involves hundreds of children in Highbury & Islington, and has three main elements: MusicFirst@Islington- an afternoon project including string group, jazz band and choirs. MusicFirst@Highbury Quadrant- large group instrumental and choir tuition in primary schools and MusicFirst@Highbury Grove- the part of the scheme with which I am involved as an oboe tutor.

How did you get involved?

When MusicFirst@Highbury Grove began couple of years ago, Hayley Clements, the Learning & Participation Manager in the Woodhouse Centre, was involved in putting the school in contact with many of the instrumental tutors. Some of these original RCM students still teach at the school today, and others, myself included, have joined the project since.

What's special about the project?

Those who choose to participate receive, completely free of charge, a weekly instrumental lesson, improvisation and theory classes, sectional and full orchestra rehearsals and choir. The orchestra is at the heart of each academy, encouraging respect, co-operation and team-building. Each pupil gets to hear and experience all of the orchestral instruments in the first few weeks of Year 7, and they then make their choices which are carefully balanced to provide an orchestra in each year group.

Many of the pupils have never seen or heard the majority of the instruments before, and even simple items we take for granted can cause much excitement- 'really cool' is how I once had a music stand described to me! Imagine the reaction double basses, trombones and oboes receive!

Throughout the year, the pupils work towards ABRSM Exams and Music Medals, as well as giving regular performances. In February, a concert in the Union Chapel involved well over 200 students, from all branches of MusicFirst, and was featured on BBC London News. Most recently, MusicFirst@Highbury Grove gave their annual concert in the school, showcasing their work from throughout the year: featuring *Crash Bang Wallop*, *Batman* and *Samba Groove* to the *Grieg Piano Concerto* and Charpentier's *Te Deum*, the students are exposed to an extremely eclectic and varied musical repertoire.

Why do you find this work so rewarding?

It's about making a difference and from this respect the project is hugely rewarding to be involved with. The school is in a diverse borough, an area full of contrasts. It has a very dynamic Head, Truda White and Director of Music, Marianna Hay, who are very supportive of all the pupils. As a result, great progress has been made by the school in recent years and Highbury Grove is

Marianna Hay, Director of Music at MusicFirst says of the project:

"What excites me most is seeing some of the most challenging young people we work with grow in confidence and self-esteem through their instrument and doing things they never thought they could. I love seeing the look of delighted surprise on their face as they play the perfect B flat for the first time or stand up in front of an audience to perform their first solo. The effect it has throughout the whole school is evident - music is now the 'cool' thing to be doing."

now doing well. Some of the pupils come from challenging backgrounds and a number have Special Educational Needs. Also, because the neighbourhood is so varied, many pupils journey to school through multi-million pound properties, while they themselves are growing up in areas of comparative deprivation. MusicFirst's aims are aligned with those of the Sistema Scotland Big Noise and Lambeth In Harmony projects, both of which work with primary age children. MusicFirst@Highbury Grove is unique in that it is a secondary age project which brings with it a whole range of different challenges.

Has your experience at Highbury Grove influenced your future career goals?

Absolutely. It is fantastic to see the progression from a group of disaffected pupils struggling to concentrate, to an orchestra which is alert and focused on the conductor's beat. It brings huge satisfaction. At heart, many of the pupils are petrified of failure, so music helps to build their sense of confidence and self-worth. It's as though the specialist 'schools' at Highbury Grove, including the music project, give pupils a place to belong. Teachers throughout the school have commented that they have seen results they never imagined possible. I shall certainly want to continue this sort of work alongside everything else that I do in music.

For more information visit www.musicfirst.org

The Mercury Quartet

Vlad Maistorovici (violin), **Harry Cameron-Penny** (clarinet), **Corentin Chassard** (cello) and **Antoine Françoise** (piano) formed the Mercury Quartet at the RCM. In 2008 they won a major competition to discover new talent run by the Non-Classical record label, and will release their debut album of improvisations in September.

So you're heading to the Dartington Summer School?

HCP: We've been contracted by Dartington to visit as professors. We'll be teaching a student ensemble to play *Pierrot Lunaire*, and performing the piece ourselves with Linda Hirst. And it's set repertoire for the conducting students, so we'll be rehearsing with them too. We're also working closely with Julian Anderson, whose composition class students will be writing pieces for us. We'll be playing a couple of his pieces, and Messiaen, and we'll probably do a late night improvisation concert as well. So it's going to be a busy week!

You've worked a lot with composers...

HCP: We take every opportunity to work with up and coming composers.

AF: I feel that when we do this, everybody gains something. Sometimes we can be an inspiration to composers, and composers inspire us too. I can't wait for Dartington, working with composers for a whole week.

How do you balance these written pieces with your improvisations?

HCP: It used to be the case that we kept our improvisations very much separate from our performances of notated works. But we tend to incorporate them now into one concert programme, and we find that works very well. For example, we did a concert in Oxford when we played some Thomas Adès, then we did some free improv, and then we played *Pierrot*. I was surprised by the number of people who gave very positive feedback on the improv, including people you might not expect to like that sort of thing.

AF: People can be very moved. I think it's because it's just us. There's no score, there's no composer in between us and the audience – it's direct communication.



How do you go about improvising? Do you have a starting point? Rules?

HCP: When we've tried to have a starting point for an improvisation, it always ends in an argument! So if someone says, "we should start with a big noise", someone else will say "No, that's a bad idea!" As we've played more and more we've honed our improvisational skills to make it more interesting.

AF: Vlad has invented a term for what we do – he calls it "live composition" rather than "improvisation". And I really like the term, because we know and react to each other so well that it's almost like we're writing pieces.

How did you make your CD recording?

HCP: At the beginning it was quite hard to sit down without an audience, in a very dry studio, and try to create these soundworlds and atmospheres. It took us a while to really settle down and play.

AF: Once we had a few tracks we listened back to them and said "Now what's missing?", and tried to do something contrasting, to be sure that at the end we'd have enough material in different characters that we could play around with.

What kind of venues do you perform in?

AF: We've been playing in bars through Non-Classical – they have this residency in pubs around Shoreditch. Playing in these different places is brilliant.

HCP: We've just applied for funding for a big concert series in a variety of venues – churches, art galleries, pubs – there are lots of excellent places in London.

How do pub audiences react to complex notated music?

AF: Very well! We played a piece by Mark Simpson in this bar, and I remember I was introducing the next piece and this guy interrupted me and bawled out "WHAT WAS THE NAME OF THE COMPOSER BEFORE?" And I said "Mark Simpson", and he yelled back: "VERY GOOD!" Instant feedback!

HCP: What I like about the improv scene is that it attracts all different kinds of people who aren't classical musicians or artists, they're just interested in expanding their minds – or just going to a pub and looking alternative!

Would you encourage other classical musicians to improvise?

AF: If people feel like doing improvisation, they should just do it, and the more they do it, the more they'll understand, and the more they'll get the feel for it. But if someone's not ready for it then they should not force themselves.

Some of the kids I teach sometimes, aged 7 or 8, they say "I haven't done my homework", and I say "well, let's do some improvisation". I try to train their ear, and not teach them improvisation, but teach them that there's nothing wrong. A scale is good, but a big cluster can be a good thing as well, if it's well played! I teach them that anything, any sound, can be good, if it's well used.

For more information visit www.mercuryquartet.com