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Living in perfect harmony

The London Music Masters' Bridge Project – which aims for musical and community unity – offers primary students from Lambeth a chance to perform with leading musicians at the Royal Festival Hall. By **Niki Chesworth**

AN INNOVATIVE approach to engaging young children directly with cutting-edge contemporary music will see six to eight-year-olds from two Lambeth primary schools perform at the Royal Festival Hall later this month.

Children involved with charity London Music Masters' (LMM) Bridge Project will take part in the premiere of a new work by award-winning composer Charlotte Bray. They will be playing with the London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO) and young violin virtuoso Jennifer Pike.

The new work entitled *Scenes from Wonderland*, which was commissioned for the children at Jessop and Ashmole primary schools, will be premiered on June 28 as part of the LPO's Bright Sparks Concert.

Bray admits to being "quite daunted" at the prospect of writing for children as young as six to enable them to perform alongside Pike and one of the UK's leading orchestras.

"But when I went into the schools, I was so impressed by the ability of the kids and realised how rewarding it would be to write something especially for them to become actively involved in, to fire their imagination and ultimately to give the work its premiere," she says.

The Bridge Project provides each child with two hours of music tuition per week in group and paired music sessions. Starting with children aged five, the programme offers general musicianship – song, movement, story and play – to develop a sense of pitch and rhythm. They progress in the second year to violin lessons both in pairs and in groups.

In the schools, LMM has provided instruments and organised regular trips for the children to hear professional orchestras, sitting among the players of the LPO and participating in their rehearsals.

Bray's new work aims to highlight Pike's artistry as one of Britain's best young violinists while simultaneously engaging the already impressive skills the Bridge Project



In tune: violin virtuoso Jennifer Pike, along with the Lambeth schoolchildren, will perform a new composition by Charlotte Bray (below)

children have acquired in their lessons and group music-making sessions. *Scenes from Wonderland*, a programmatic piece depicting Alice's exploits in Wonderland, will be sung and played on strings by the children. According to Bray, the work progresses in a programmatic way where the soloist represents Alice.

"The Bridge violinists lead the LPO in an introduction, playing and singing, and three scenes follow: Down the Rabbit-Hole, The Great Hall, and The Pool of Tears," she explains. "A fascination for me in writing the piece was to balance and vary the roles that each part of the ensemble has."

"I was keen to provide the Bridge violinists with a big theme where they are the focus of attention as well as sections where they become part of the LPO in accompanying the soloist."

The children on the Bridge Project will engage in a further major new work following this project. LMM has commissioned composer Martin Suckling to write a concerto for violinist Agata Szymczewska. The new work, entitled *Grains*, will be premiered later this year. Suckling, who is a composition tutor at the University of Oxford, will introduce this new work to the Bridge Project students in a series of workshops, connecting these young performers directly with the inspirational world of contemporary music.

By targeting inner-city boroughs, the Bridge Project identifies and nurtures young children who might not otherwise have the chance to engage in classical music. The project encourages children, their families and their communities to develop a lifelong appreciation for classical music. In particular, it aims to



Positive change: teachers at Jessop and Ashmole Schools in Lambeth say the Bridge Project has improved discipline, confidence and self-control among the students

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help increase the ethnic and socio-economic diversity within professional music ensembles by reaching out to broader communities from a young age and preparing them to participate and succeed in the world of music.

Children from Jessop and Ashmole Schools reflect the ethnic and socio-economic make up of Lambeth, where West African, Somali, East European, Afro-Caribbean and Portuguese are the main ethnic minorities in the area. Many of the children at the schools come from low-income families: 46 per cent of children at Ashmole School receive free school meals while at Jessop it is 42 per cent.

The Bridge Project has far-reaching benefits for the children. The teachers have testified to a marked improvement in discipline and concentration, confidence and self-control, co-opera-

tion and enhanced social skills. As well as boosting self-esteem, a sustained programme over extended periods has wide-reaching effects on the children's academic progress.

The Bridge Project also works closely with the parents and extended family,

"When I went into the schools, I was so impressed by the ability of the kids"

encouraging them actively to participate in the programme and enabling them to attend concerts.

To raise awareness of the programme in the schools to harness parental support, LMM established a parents' choir and has encouraged parents to attend

children's after-school lessons and events their children are participating in. After a slow initial uptake, parental attendance at concerts has risen from eight per cent to 54 per cent.

Following its success in these two schools in Lambeth, LMM aims to establish the programme in two new schools in Westminster and Hammersmith over the next two years.

■ *Scenes from Wonderland* premieres on June 28, with performances from 10:30am to 11:30am and 12:30pm to 1:30pm at the Royal Festival Hall. The joint LMM and LPO commission is part of a series of summer concerts of Charlotte Bray's work, which includes a performance of her violin concerto *Caught in Treetops* with BCMG at Aldeburgh Festival on June 26 and a world premiere of a new piano quartet at Cheltenham Festival on June 30.



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