

# Christina Patterson: Why our children should reach for the stars (and the violins)

The Saturday Column

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*Lambeth children perform in the 'Bridge Project', which widens cultural diversity in classical music*

I didn't know that a bunch of South Americans could make me cry so much.

It wasn't just the applause, or the smiles, or the yells, from all around, of pure and utter joy. It was the way they sat, as they gripped their violins, or cellos, or trombones, the way they brandished their bows, the way they stared out at us, happy and proud. And what emerged, as those bows sliced against strings, and as smiling mouths puffed into brass tubes, was a swell of ecstatic sound that could have been the soundtrack to another welcome, a welcome that the whole world was watching.

It was Tuesday night, and if it wasn't Camp Hope, in the electric atmosphere of the Royal Festival Hall it might as well have been. What was on stage looked less like an orchestra and more like a victory parade. There were whole cohorts of double basses, massed battalions of violins. The girls, chic in grey shift dresses and court shoes, looked like extras from *Mad Men*. The boys, in black trousers and crisp white shirts, looked ready for their first job interview. I was bursting with pride, and I wasn't even their mother.

And that was before they played. Since I went to primary school at a time when it was fashionable for schools to be "progressive" (and before the word was stolen by political anoraks for discussions which are, no doubt, thrilling to them) and where you were lucky if you emerged having banged a triangle, and to a secondary school where, if we had any contact with music other than belting out "Jerusalem" in school assembly, I'm damned if I can remember it, I am, I'm afraid, in no position to judge the interpretation of the Teresa Carreno Youth Orchestra of Venezuela of Beethoven's fifth or Prokofiev's fifth symphonies. All I can tell you is that it was fantastic. The Beethoven was fantastic, the Prokofiev was fantastic, and then the applause, and the standing ovations, and the encores, which went on for half an hour, were fantastic. The lights dimmed at the start of them, and the players bent and rummaged around, and when the lights went on again they were all wearing jackets in the colours of the Venezuelan flag. They played the encores – twirling their instruments and moving in Mexican, or perhaps Venezuelan, waves – with the flirtatious energy and zest of the jazz band in *Some Like it Hot*. Some do like it hot. I like it hot. And this was as hot as it gets.

Less than 24 hours later (24 hours in which 23 miners had been pulled from darkness to light), the stage in the Royal Festival Hall was packed again. This time, the performers were even younger. Some of them were only six. Many of them were black. Some were wearing blue T-shirts, some were wearing white ones, some were wearing green ones, but they were all clutching tiny violins. In a short film, shown on a screen over the stage, a group of them yelled "welcome to our concert!". They went on to play, beautifully, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star", and then "I'm a Little Monkey" and then the "Twinkle Variations". These were not South Americans, shipped over to astonish the world with the fruits of El Sistema, the classical music scheme started 35 years ago in Venezuela by Jose Antonio Abreu, which has led literally millions of children from desperate homes into a new world of classical music. These were children from schools just down the road in Lambeth, schools which have been taking part in the "Bridge Project", a project which aims to tackle the lack of cultural diversity in classical music run by a charity called London Music Masters. And it was one of the most moving things I've ever seen.

The children were so cute I could have kidnapped the lot of them. Gazing at their little arms, and their toothy (and sometimes toothless) grins, I wondered

what it would be like to be catapulted from a world where your opportunities in life were, on any social and economic index, likely to be pretty limited, to one I couldn't even dream of: one where you understand how the black dots on a page turn into something that lifts the human heart, and where the way you move horse hair over strings can make the soul soar. I wondered what it would be like to listen to a piece of classical music, and hear the notes, and be able to follow it, instead of finding it a soothing antidote to the cacophony in your head. And I thought about a school in Yorkshire I used to hear about, a school where one of the teachers was a poet, who taught the children to write poems: proper, good, grown-up poems, poems that got published and won prizes.

It's so obvious that children can do anything if we teach them how to do it that it almost doesn't seem worth saying. But we need to say it, because we don't. We think that if children have parents who spend their lives in front of the telly then we'll be lucky if we can get them to read and write. Perhaps, if they're really, really lucky they can get some kind of vocational training, but not Beethoven, not Prokofiev, not Keats. In fact, the number of children whose reading went up at least two levels after taking up the violin was, in a similar project, 84 per cent. And 75 per cent for maths.

We have lost the art of difficulty. We think that "high art" is for an elite. Our media, run largely by that elite, feeds the people pap and assumes that they want it. They should get their patronising little arses down to Lambeth and think again.

### A tale of solidarity, saints and secrets...

For some of us, family holidays are torture enough, so one can only take one's hard hat off to the 33 Chileans who have been stuck with each other's bad jokes, bad breath and bad smells, without even the distraction of a breakfast buffet. In their transition to sainthood, they were helped by a man who seems to have kept social democracy alive half a mile below the surface of the earth in a way that's proving increasingly elusive in its former bastions in Western Europe. But even under the benign sway of shift foreman, Luis Urzua, tensions, it's now clear, arose. According to at least one of the miners, there were major rifts and fist fights as well as petty squabbles, and the looming spectre of cannibalism.

The men have signed a "blood pact" not to reveal all about their 70-day season in hell, which is a nice, comradely thing to do, since people, when they think they're about to starve, and not see their wife or child (or, in several cases, mistress) again, do not necessarily behave in ways that get you praised by the Pope. They have also agreed to share the fruits of all media deals. It's all very heart-warming, but did all that media training (now clearly part of all emergency rescues) omit to mention that the deals do rather depend on the warts in a warts-and-all saga not being airbrushed out? Still, the publishers can probably relax. The "blood pact" is already looking pretty porous.

### A very loose cannon called Kim

It's not often that you hear cheery snippets from North Korea, a country where they're drip-fed to the people, and the world's mass media, but where they remain a little bit unconvincing. It's not often, in the land of the personality cult, that you come across anything you could call a personality either. But comments made this week by a man called (you've guessed it) Kim suggest that, behind the synchronised-to-the-split-second mass choreography, some real human hearts beat.

Clearly pissed off by his half-dead father's sudden enthusiasm for the new generation new politics, Kim Jong-nam, the eldest son of the Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il, told a Japanese TV station that, in effect, he didn't give a monkey's about his father's elevation of his totally unqualified twentysomething younger brother to leader of 24 million people, with the capacity, at the flick of a nuclear switch, to wipe out millions more. "I have not," he said, "taken any interest in it." Kim Jong-nam, who, at 39, is clearly too old for politics, spends a lot of his time at the Chinese gambling resort of Macao. At 2001, he tried to get to Tokyo Disneyland on a forged passport. Finally, a Kim who sounds like quite a lot of fun.

*c.patterson@independent.co.uk*

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hope this helps you, I had tonsil stones and awful bad breath. My friend told me to check Oral tech Labs as it helped him get rid of bad breath and his post nasal drip. I've been following Oral tech Labs advice for about 4 months now and I feel much better, also at work people are not avoiding me anymore so it seems to have cured my bad breath as well, so good luck.

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"It's so obvious that children can do anything if we teach them how to do it".

No it isn't obvious to the educators of Britain. We overprotect them and under-educate them. Push them, challenge them and they will always surprise us with their ability.

However, this causes a problem for the politicians because educated children become questioning adults as the 1960's showed. Much better to cut, cut, cut as Thatcher did and have a compliant, easily influenced adult population, in their opinion.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)**tiddles** 1 day ago

Well said Christina ,the Berlin Phil. encourage kids from council estates to attend concerts and engage in music making. Cameron must show some direction .and support teaching music, after Blair and Brown's apathy to the arts.

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