

Onwards and upwards

Undeterred by funding cuts, the National Youth Orchestras of Scotland's new chief executive talks to **David Kettle** about her ambitious forward plans

It was only last year that the National Youth Orchestras of Scotland suffered a body blow. In 2011, following a review of the organisations it supported, the recently established Creative Scotland stripped the institution that introduces young Scottish musicians to orchestral playing of its foundation status, as well as cutting its core funding by half.

Understandably, it is not something that new chief executive Joan Gibson wants to dwell on. But that body blow was perhaps one of the reasons behind the ambitious plans for the development of NYOS that she recently revealed. 'This is a phenomenal organisation,' she says. 'My plans are slightly bullish, but if we gave in, we would only ever be mediocre. I say let's develop the organisation, and let's

shout about it. We're here to stay, and we're only ever going to get better and better.'

It is a convincing rallying cry, and Gibson is passionate about both NYOS and its vital role in Scottish music education. She has got plenty to be passionate about, with recent projects including a NYOS tour culminating in a well-received performance at the BBC Proms; and trips to the far-flung Western Isles for workshops and performances; and, of course, the developments in the organisation that she has recently unveiled. From 2013, NYOS increases its upper age limit from 21 to 25, with the youngest players being allowed in at 13. Gibson is also tweaking the organisation's ensembles for younger players: the National Children's Orchestra of Scotland will be replaced by the NYOS Junior Orchestra (for ages eight to 13) and the NYOS Senior Orchestra (11 to 18). The Junior and Senior orchestras will now meet for three courses per year, and NYOS goes up to two courses per year.

All in all, Gibson's plans are to involve more young players in more musical activities, and to provide them with greater flexibility about their involvement and which pathways they can follow within the organisation. The functions of the new Senior Orchestra are to provide a stepping stone between the Junior Orchestra and NYOS, and also to offer high-level music making opportunities to older players who don't make it into the flagship orchestra. Gibson has even introduced a single audition process across all three orchestras to open up options for young players. 'When I first came into the post,' she says, 'they used to run Children's Orchestra auditions in November, and NYOS auditions in January.



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But what happens if you accept someone into the Children's Orchestra, and they're good enough to have gone into NYOS? So I said, let's just audition everybody on the same level, and we'll allocate you to the orchestra that we think is most appropriate for you.'

Indeed, Gibson is keen to foster links between the NYOS orchestras, and for players to feel like they belong to a family of ensembles rather than simply attending an orchestral course. With repertoire themed across all three ensembles (Britten and *Russia* in 2013), players are encouraged to attend each other's concerts, and musicians invited to play in more than one ensemble if needed for particular repertoire.

She is also keen to harness the experience gained by the orchestras' older players in giving them responsibility for coaching some of the younger ones. And it's a formal arrangement. 'We're calling them NYOS associate tutors,' she says, 'and for the players who are at the top of the NYOS pathway, who are looking to go into music as a full-time job, it's more of the nuts and bolts that they'll need in a portfolio career.'

Glasgow-based cellist David Munn, a NYOS player since 2005 at the age of 16, experienced something similar when recently performing with the pre-professional NYOS Camerata chamber orchestra in Uist on the Western Isles. 'We had the opportunity to devise our own workshops for primary-school kids,' he explains. How valuable does he think this education work will prove in his own development? 'It's just adding another skill

set. In today's challenging times, being able to work with young people could be what swings things in my favour.'

But is there not a danger in raising the main NYOS orchestra's age range that players in their early teens might find it harder to get in when auditioning alongside young adults who have already been through conservatoire or university? Gibson sees no reason why the younger members shouldn't rise to the challenge: 'If it's more difficult for the younger ones to get in, there's still the senior orchestra until they're ready. But in the end, we're raising the bar of this orchestra, so you've also got to raise your bar in order to get in.'

Although NYOS used to undertake regular overseas tours, for financial reasons she can't envisage anything similar happening just at the moment. 'But I can see a foreign tour coming up in the next two or three years, to get the message out there,' she says. And getting the message about young Scottish talent to as wide an audience as possible is high on her agenda. In bringing NYOS's upper age limit (almost) in line with groups such as the European Union Youth Orchestra and the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra, Gibson is aiming high in terms of future performances. 'In order for us to be considered for high-

profile events, we've got to be able to stand alongside these other youth orchestras.'

Gibson is also casting her net wide in exploring possible partnerships with other music organisations. 'I'm in the middle of talking to Sistema Scotland – it's a no-brainer that we should be working with them. And there are lots of other organisations we're talking to – the RSNO, BBCSSO, Lammermuir Festival, Hebrides Ensemble – just to see if there's anything we could be doing together.'

And in the end, she hopes, it will become a virtuous circle. With its clear educational pathways and increased playing opportunities for young musicians, as well as rethought age ranges and new coaching responsibilities to raise standards, not to mention ambitious plans for future performances and partnerships, Gibson hopes that the NYOS family will be very attractive to funding from trusts and foundations, sponsors and donors. 'Nobody wants to give their money to something that's withering away. So by doing this, I'm trying to say to people: we're here, and we're strong, and you should come on board with us and get involved.'



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