

EVERY CLASS ITS OWN ORCHESTRA

GREENMILL'S 'QUIET REVOLUTION'

There's a quiet revolution in music education going on in south-west Scotland. At Greenmill Primary School in Cumnock, eastern Ayrshire, every pupil from Primary 4 to Primary 7 (between the ages of 7 and 11) learns a stringed instrument, and each class is its own string orchestra. 'I come in on a Wednesday,' explains music teacher (and cellist) Ellen Martin, 'and we have six class orchestra lessons throughout the day. And at the end of the day, when the bell goes and the children go home, we have an orchestra for teachers, parents and even grandparents as well.'

It's a hugely ambitious – and remarkably successful – project, and one that attracted the attention of composer James MacMillan when he was planning his own music festival, the Cumnock Tryst, which kicks off in October and brings together local community groups and imported professional performers for events in and around the town. 'The Greenmill project seemed to feed everyone, with the emphasis on group music-making right from the start,' he says. 'When we discovered what was happening, it was important for us to make Greenmill an important facet of what the Cumnock Tryst is all about – whether that's during the festival itself, or in work in between festivals.'

Ironically, the Greenmill project itself came about almost by chance, as the school's head Christine Wilson explains. 'It was initially a research project on a system called Figurenotes, which is traditionally used to enable less able or handicapped adults to read music – the project was to discover whether its system of colours and shapes could be a benefit in mainstream education. It only lasted about eight weeks, and it became evident that there wasn't a huge benefit, but by that time we had a whole string orchestra

set up, with a tutor in place, so it was too big an opportunity to miss.' In fact, she feels that the next step was a canny move by East Ayrshire instrumental music service manager Paul Wood, who knew that Wilson was herself a keen musician and would give the project instant support.

'Every pupil gets an orchestra lesson of about 40 minutes once a week,' continues Wilson. 'The instruments don't go home with the pupils, though, they stay in school, and Wednesdays are really the only time that they see them.' That might sound needlessly restrictive, even counter-intuitive, but according to tutor Martin, it works. 'People think it's a bad thing that the children don't take their instruments home to practise, but it has a positive effect. As a cello teacher myself, I spend so much time fixing bad habits that pupils have been practising themselves, but at Greenmill we make good progress every lesson. To learn something, you have to do

James MacMillan's Cumnock Tryst festival has uncovered a remarkable project that gets students, staff and even visitors playing string instruments.

David Kettle reports

it right more times than you do it wrong, of course.'

And as well as the after-school teacher/parent orchestra, the teachers are themselves intimately involved when their class is playing. 'The class teachers themselves become learners,' explains Wilson, 'and they love it. As the first class to take part in the project moved up the school, though, the Year 7 teachers got increasingly concerned about taking part – after all, by the time they reached Year 7 the pupils had had three years of tuition, but for the teachers it was their first year!'

Any such worries were soon set aside, though, with the help of the youngsters, who showed their maturer musical colleagues »

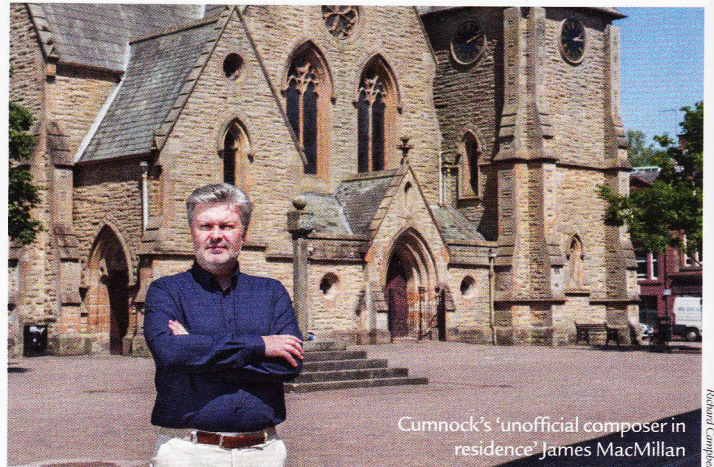


Greenmill Primary pupils perform at the launch of Cumnock Tryst, under strings teacher Ellen Martin

Greenmill pupils rehearse with Nicola Benedetti



Richard Campbell



Cumnock's 'unofficial composer in residence' James MacMillan

Richard Campbell

how things should be done. The same thing happens when any directors of education come to visit (as they have done): 'They're not allowed to come in unless they're playing an instrument, and they sit down next to a child and learn from them,' explains Martin. And that's part of the more general ethos that Wilson is keen to instil in the school: 'We're big on building community – each class is its own community, sometimes each department is its own community, and of course the whole school is a bigger community too.'

And by involving teachers and relations, Wilson and Martin are drawing in the wider Cumnock community. But what are the learning outcomes, musical or otherwise? Martin points to one clear effect that she puts down to orchestral playing. 'I've never worked in a school where the discipline has been so good – it's one of the main things people comment on when we take the children out of school.' Wilson agrees. 'There's the inherited discipline of the orchestra and how you behave when you're sitting in an orchestra, which they soon pick up, and that begins to infiltrate all areas. You're striving for individual excellence within an orchestra, of course, but there's also the whole large-group collaboration of getting things right and making a good sound, and everybody has to play their role in that. That transfers out into the classroom and into the school as a whole.'

Wilson also points to increased self-esteem and confidence as positive outcomes from the orchestra project – 'It's a level playing field for the children, and there's nothing else they do at that age where they're all at the same level' – but she's also keen to stress the more pragmatic opportunities that she feels the project may offer. 'With the Primary 7

pupils, who are about to move into secondary school, we've talked about how, in the next four or five years, they might be writing job or university applications, and how they've got to remember what they've done, what they've been part of and what it's offered them.'

THE WIDER FESTIVAL

For MacMillan, the Greenmill project was a perfect fit for the community and education focus he intended for his festival, which brings in international performers to the small Ayrshire town (where MacMillan himself attended three schools) but also showcases the music already going on there. 'Education and community work were there right from the start. I think it's vital for us to get the wider community involved in the festival,' he explains. And in fact, Greenmill is only one of the local groups that MacMillan has invited to take part, alongside the National Youth Brass Band of Scotland and brass players from secondary school Cumnock Academy (reflecting the strong brass traditions in the former mining area). There's also a 'come and sing' day involving East Ayrshire singers (again, reflecting an already strong choral tradition in the area).

And since starting his work in Cumnock, MacMillan has found his activities expanding beyond the confines of his four-day festival in October. 'I'm down there a lot,' he explains. 'I'm almost becoming a kind of unofficial composer in residence for Cumnock – which I'm enjoying tremendously.' Drawing on the imagination of the young Greenmill players, he has put together a piece called *Playing the Skyline* inspired by the post-industrial

landscapes of the area. 'I took photographs into the Primary 6 and 7 classes, and asked: how do we make music to reflect this? The feedback I got was tremendous – they were very vocal, with lots of suggestions for musical ideas inspired by the images that they saw, and I worked many of them into the piece so that they felt it was their piece right from the start.' Originally commissioned for a Radio 4 series, the piece was given its live premiere – by the young Cumnock players, percussionist Colin Currie and MacMillan himself – at the House of Lords to publicise the new event, and will be performed again during the festival itself.

But despite the school's successes, it's not all about Greenmill. MacMillan has also been working with St Patrick's Primary School in nearby Auchinleck on a new hymn to their eponymous saint – 'That was a very different project, obviously, but it will also eventually feed into the festival,' he says – and he has plans to expand the festival's outreach activities still further in future. 'We're planning a summer composition course for more advanced teenagers who are studying music, and we'll showcase the music they produce in the 2015 festival. We'll also hopefully have a songwriting course for kids who want to go a different way stylistically, and my hope is that we could develop a new festival chorus from local choral groups, to feature in future festivals. It's a grand, huge, complicated collaboration that's going on across a whole range of different aspects of the community.'

Cumnock Tryst takes place from 2 to 5 October. Greenmill's Primary 7 string orchestra will premiere a new work by James MacMillan on 4 October at Cumnock Old Church, beginning at 7.30pm. www.thecumnocktryst.com