

OUTREACH TO ORDER



RSNO Takeover concert

The RSNO has compiled an outstanding menu of education projects for schools, including an all-out takeover of its central office. David Kettle reports

TAKEOVER

The Glasgow offices of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra (RSNO) are a sea of iPads, as dozens of teenagers tap away furiously, writing speeches and programme notes, huddling in groups around their glowing screens for intensive discussions on marketing, sponsorship, outreach and programming, and jotting down quick notes in full-team meetings bringing the 40 youngsters together with regular staff.

It was a bold move – and a big ask – for the RSNO to invite a gaggle of 16- to 18-year-olds to take over the running of the orchestra for two days in June, and to expect them to look after everything from balancing the books to crashing the cymbals at the right moment in the score. But judging by the smiling faces of youngsters and RSNO staff alike at the closing concert, where young players swelled the ranks of RSNO regulars and two novice

conductors took up the baton on the podium, it was an education for all concerned.

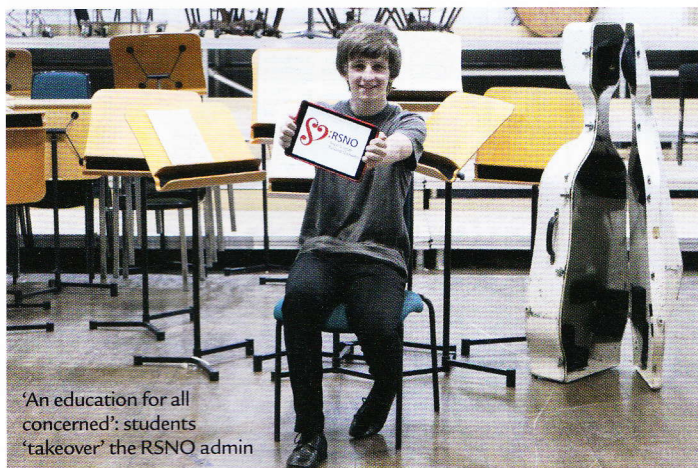
The young participants in the RSNO's two-day Takeover project had come from all over Scotland, many already signed up as RSNO ambassadors – with the role of acting as advocates for classical music in their schools and communities – but others getting their first glimpse of the orchestral world. They'd selected particular areas of the orchestra's work that they'd most like to sample – whether performing as musicians, or working in planning, development, stage management or any other department – and had picked apart the various threads that combine in the successful staging of a concert, which they hosted at the end of their time.

RSNO ENGAGE FOR SCHOOLS

It's tempting to focus solely on the inaugural RSNO Takeover event's success. But in

fact, it's just one element in the orchestra's quietly radical new approach to education and engagement, which revolves around a scheme aimed squarely at schools, RSNO Engage for Schools. Announced in May, the scheme offers a menu of more than 30 individual projects or workshops for primary and secondary schools, from which teachers can select whatever is most appropriate for their age group and learning level. There are relatively straightforward ideas – an 'instrument petting zoo' where RSNO musicians give pupils the chance to examine and try out the tools of their trade, or workshops looking at the different sections of the orchestra. There are themed projects – on war and music, for example, or American works, or even Vikings and Romans – that can tie in with teaching happening elsewhere in the curriculum. And there are more ambitious, longer-term projects – such as adopting an RSNO musician, or establishing a school choir with the help of RSNO Junior Chorus staff – that offer more open-ended possibilities for learning.

Flexibility is key, according to RSNO director of learning and engagement Jenn Minchin. 'Teachers can just get in touch with us, and we'll have a conversation about what they need and what kind of benefits they're



'An education for all concerned': students 'takeover' the RSNO admin



Student Isla Ratcliffe conducts during the RSNO Takeover day

hoping to achieve,' she explains. 'Then we'll speak to our musicians, find dates that will work for everyone, cost the whole thing out, and go out and work with them. It's about creating a dialogue between schools and ourselves.'

SCHOOL-LEAD OUTREACH

That dialogue was kicked off in the initial planning stages of RSNO Engage for Schools. 'We did a national survey,' explains Minchin, 'and we had around 200 teachers from nursery, primary and secondary schools respond to it. As a national company, I feel we should be doing what the schools want from us, rather than dictating a programme to them. It was quite an in-depth questionnaire, asking what things they would expect from a national orchestra, and what added value we could give.' The results, she explains, showed that teachers wanted players to go out into their schools, not only for demonstrations of playing techniques and musical concepts, but also to talk about life as a professional musician – a focus on the realities of a working life in music that was mirrored in the orchestra's Takeover project.

'I hope it'll make people think differently about the orchestra – that's the aim,' Minchin continues. And it's a long-term plan for a wholesale change of philosophy. 'We're not going to see the impact of what we're doing for another ten years or so.'

COSTS

The one area of teachers' requests that the orchestra was unable to meet, Minchin admits, was cost. 'We've tried to keep things as low-cost as possible, but we're not 100 per cent fully funded ourselves, so we do have to charge.' And for Julia Wilson,

head of performing arts at North Berwick High School, East Lothian, it's one of the practicalities that the scheme will encounter on the ground. 'All of these projects will take money and organisation,' she admits. 'We could happily do all of them, but there simply isn't the money, nor the time for all of the organisation they'll require.' But she's enthusiastic about many of the RSNO's projects, especially the 'adopt a musician' idea. 'Within a few days of getting the brochure, I was on the phone to the RSNO about it,' she continues. 'From the conversation I had with them, it's up to me as a teacher how we'd use them – it's as though we can tailor-make the relationship for our school. They could come to a school concert, or work with the orchestra for a day, or even do a masterclass with pupils learning the instrument they play.' Wilson also points to workshops on improvisation and musical concepts as projects she'd find potentially valuable. 'To have visiting musicians talking in the language that we're asking these young people to think in – ostinatos, modulations, perfect cadences – would be a really valuable way for pupils to get to understand the language of music.'

The RSNO's scheme comes at a significant moment for Scottish education, with new exams – the National 4 and 5 and new Higher and Advanced Higher replacing the well-established Standard Grade and previous Highers – and sometimes subtle changes to the content of the music curriculum meaning that teachers are being forced to rethink and reformulate lesson plans and resources. Minchin points out that the RSNO's plans are not designed specifically to address those areas of the curriculum that have been modified – 'but,' she says, 'I hope that teachers will see this as an added resource they can draw on in a time of change'. And interestingly, the scheme comes at a time of change for the orchestra itself, which is two

years through a three-year pilot continuing professional development programme aimed at expanding and diversifying the skills of musicians and admin staff alike. 'It's come at the perfect time,' says Minchin. 'If musicians don't feel like they have the particular skills for a project or could do with some extra support, then we have the funding there to be able to encourage that.'

Another harsh reality is that the RSNO's Engage for Schools is competing with other groups – and other musical genres. 'This is great from a classical standpoint,' says Wilson, 'but we're also getting other opportunities from other performing groups, and I'm on the lookout for these kinds of projects for all kinds of music. We've had an Argentinian folk duo come in for a day, and also Ghanaian drummers who worked on music and dance.'

For Wilson, though, the scheme's true value will be in encouraging pupils to engage with classical music on a personal level. 'I really like the idea of young people developing a relationship with someone in that way, to make things real. Classical music just isn't part of the life experience of many young people, so getting to know a classical musician who's passionate about their job can really help.' Minchin agrees that it's essential to look at what the RSNO's scheme can offer in terms of work and career opportunities, whether that is within classical music or not, rather than simply encouraging youngsters to get involved in a rewarding pastime. 'Our focus is on young people's employability skills and engagement, and that was really the angle we took in the Takeover project.' By opening up the orchestra's resources – sending musicians out to build relationships in schools, inviting youngsters in to run the organisation, and finding flexible and responsive ways of taking musical concepts into schools – she's aiming to change the RSNO's whole philosophy. Will it work? Come back and see in ten years. **MT**