

Lockdown has fired up creative thinking across Scotland



David Kettle

It's a time of existential challenge for everyone involved in the arts, but it's also a time in which flexibility and creativity have never been more vital. As RSNO chief executive Alastair Mackie observed in these pages just over a month ago, "I'd be disappointed if this time didn't initiate change and propel us forward." It is a time, too, to think carefully about what an orchestra is actually for – to quote Mackie again, to acknowledge that it should be "more of a community of artists and audiences, less of an entertainment club."

The absence of live performances also provides an opportunity to reflect some of the less high-profile work that orchestras engage in – work that often goes unseen and uncelebrated, but which embeds ensembles in their communities. Central to this, of course, is education – not merely as a way of evangelising about classical music in the pursuit of broader audiences, but more importantly as a way of emphasising an organisation's role as a community resource, with responsibilities to bring art and culture to the people it serves, to encourage creativity and confidence, provide fresh experiences, and hopefully play a role in youngsters' lives.

It's something that's become increasingly evident during lockdown. Scottish Opera has provided its pandemic-themed Fever! resources for eight-to-12-year-olds online, and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra will be running its NEW VIBE project online in July, in partnership with the Child and Adult Mental Health Service.

The RSNO, meanwhile, has completely reconfigured a previously planned project to hold it online. Its long-running Takeover project usually invites a group of 16-to-18-year-olds into RSNO HQ to take over the running of the organisation, and put on a concert in just two days. During lockdown, however, that hasn't been possible.

"Young people were having so much removed from them, from their



A Zoom rehearsal of the Going Places project, which saw young musicians collaborating with RSNO players and composer Nathan Hall, pictured top left

daily structures to social networks to music," explains the orchestra's head of learning and engagement Laura Baxter. "We wanted to provide an online space where young people could still connect with each other and with us and our musicians, and still be creative."

The result is Going Places, launched earlier this month, and still available on the RSNO's YouTube channel. It brings together 21 young participants, Denver-based composer Nathan Hall and staff and musicians from the RSNO to collaborate on a brand new

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music and video work inspired by travel, memories of distant lands, and the importance of home.

Hall drew out not only the young participants' musical skills – including cellist Luke Duncan duetting with RSNO violist Katherine Wren – but also other abilities, including a range of language skills (from Gaelic to BSL) as well as animation and poetry. "What I love about the project is that it's very much about them," explains Baxter. "I was a bit worried at first that they might end up talking about all the things they'd lost, but not at all: they talked about all the things they were planning to

do. It was very uplifting in that sense."

How have the young participants themselves found the experience? Pretty uplifting too, it seems. "The project has shown me that even over the internet, people can still connect and create something really interesting and entertaining," says 17-year-old Iona Morrison, who's missed out on the end of her final year in school, and is down to study music in Aberdeen next year. "Lockdown has been a bit of a rollercoaster for me, so this project has been a really good way to distract myself. It really sums up my experience of lockdown, in that it brought me comfort to still be able to be creative."

Adam Haacker, a 17-year-old trombonist from Fife, agrees. "I've learnt a lot about how creative you can be with the things around you. Throughout the process, everyone has really supported each other as we've all been tackling new things together. And the homemade feeling of Going Places is very 2020, and expresses a lot about lockdown in itself."

And, Baxter confirms, the project is set to have a substantial impact on the RSNO itself. "I absolutely think that the work we've done with the young people online, and how we incorporate online meet-ups, will have lessons for the future. It will never replace live music, of course, but it's not a bad compromise at the moment." ■

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