



TREVOR WIGGINS

Mark Stringer (conducting) describes the scheme as the 'lifblood' of his school

spread across the country; these allow pupils to access appropriate teaching in their local area and work in harmony with the full-time music faculties. Without the MDS funding, this national network would suffer, or not function at all. Mark Stringer, chair of South West Music School (SWMS), describes the MDS as 'our lifblood'. 'Put simply, without the funding we could not exist,' he continues. 'There used to be various private trusts and foundations that would help support highly able young musicians, but these have essentially dried-up now. The remaining funding organisations tend to focus on audience engagement or initial access to music, which, while commendable, overlooks the young people with exceptional potential who need investment, too.' Like Threlfall, Stringer also uses the sports comparison, although finds that 'some people seem to have issues with helping classical musicians in a way they do not have with those aspiring to be professional athletes.'

In addition to his role at SWMS, Stringer is director of music at one of the specialist music schools, and is ideally placed to comment on their varying offerings: 'The main difference is that SWMS has no fixed building as a "home"; our infrastructure across the region comprises a technological framework combined with teams of

coaches and mentors who deliver support locally. This is complemented by events and residential courses offered to the whole network in various locations throughout the south west of England,' he says. That model enables SWMS to share an ambitious programme across an area that spans Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Dorset and down to the end of Cornwall, including large swathes of rural areas and cities such as Bristol, Exeter, Plymouth and Falmouth.

Organisations in receipt of government support naturally have an obligation (albeit sometimes unofficial) to pass on the benefits to as wide an audience as possible. During his time in post at Chets, Threlfall found it 'imperative to share our provision wherever and whenever we can throughout the UK.' This means thoughtful collaboration and creative strategy – useful modelling for music students to prepare them for the real-world music industry. 'Projects, concerts and workshops have always gone hand-in-glove with working alongside local authorities, hubs and schools to help promote or provide the fundamental musical experience for young people,' he says. 'It is also vital experience for our own students.'

At present, the MDS appears to be ring-fenced, but Threlfall suggests there 'there is anxiety about future funding and the EU aspect. While our students are mostly from

the UK, we, like others, greatly value the presence of non-UK and EU students for the cultural exchange and internationalism that is so much a part of the music picture.' And while the MDS financial structure has not changed significantly in recent years, the music education landscape has: 'Fewer primary schools have trained music teachers on their staff,' remarks Stringer. 'The opportunity to sing and play around with the ingredients of music should be a right for every child in the classroom and, I believe, so should the chance to play a musical instrument. Access to music within education is critical and should be open to all.' It's all well and good supporting elite education for talented 11-year-olds, but what if they never get the chance to uncover and explore their musicality?

Overall, however, the MDS is a bastion of hope in a challenging arts environment. As Stringer sums up: 'The many benefits of music is well understood, along with the impact it can have on academic development, and, more fundamentally, the forum it gives to express oneself as a performer and to relate to others as a member of an audience. Building confidence and self-esteem – along with respect for others – are arguably more important today than ever before. Access to music should not be available only to those who can afford to pay for private lessons.' ■

MUSIC INSTITUTIONS IN THE MDS Schools (with boarding options)

Chetham's School
Purcell School
Wells Cathedral School
Yehudi Menuhin School

Centres for advanced training

Birmingham Conservatoire
Royal Northern College of Music
Royal Academy of Music
Guildhall School of Music & Drama
Royal College of Music
Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance
The Sage Gateshead
Sheffield Music Academy
Yorkshire Young Musicians
Centre for Young Musicians
Aldeburgh Young Musicians
South West Music School