

# Sound Connections Case study

*innovate*

**Bexley North Borough Orchestra 2015-16**  
**London Symphony Orchestra**

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*"It makes me feel proud and when I perform."* Christabel, Year 5 pupil

## Summary

In spring 2015, the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO) was awarded funding through Sound Connections' Innovate Fund to pilot and launch a brand-new children's orchestra for young musicians in Thamesmead and Erith, Bexley. Delivered in partnership with Bird College – the borough's Music Service and lead Music Education Hub partner – the Bexley North Borough Orchestra was created to provide children aged 9-10 (Year 5) with a progression route to continue their musical development following the borough's provision of First Access whole-class instrumental tuition for all Year 4 pupils.

Growing up in one of the most socially disadvantaged and culturally-isolated areas of London with very little access to music-making opportunities, children in Bexley's northern wards of Thamesmead and Erith face a combination of financial, geographical and cultural barriers to regular participation in music-making – not least the physical barrier of over seven miles to travel to the Music Service's established youth ensembles based at the Sidcup Centre in the south. Creation of the Bexley North Borough Orchestra was designed to combat these challenges, bringing young musicians together on Saturday afternoons during the autumn and spring terms to continue development of their instrumental skills, rehearse alongside professional LSO players, receive mentoring from older, more experienced musicians, and experience the thrill of live music performance.

With the achievement of the orchestra's founding 23 musicians showcased in an inspiring concert for over 40 parents, friends and family in February 2016, the Bexley North Borough Orchestra is now set to continue as part of the Music Service's ongoing provision – supporting and enhancing the establishment of a satellite music centre in the north of the borough for children in this culturally-isolated area.

## **Project**

### **a. Background and aims**

The Bexley North Borough Orchestra (BNBO) aimed to empower and motivate young people in Thamesmead and Erith to continue their instrumental learning as founding members of a new local ensemble. Based within the participants' own local community, the BNBO aimed to create inspirational musical activities in an area of low cultural provision, engaging children aged 9-10 (Year 5) who had just completed one year of First Access whole-class instrumental learning (pre-Grade 1) at three primary schools – Business Academy Bexley (Erith), Parkway Primary School (Erith) and Willow Bank Primary School (Thamesmead) – all within a one-mile radius of each other.

Alongside the young participants, the project aimed to engage older, more experienced musicians aged 14-18 as Youth Mentors, providing a valuable opportunity for them to develop skills in leadership, teaching and instrumental support for the younger musicians. Drawn from the borough's existing senior ensembles based in the south, the Youth Mentors would provide a valuable insight into some of the barriers to musical engagement facing younger pupils, whilst acting as role models and a point of inspiration for the young musicians to aspire to.

### **b. Activity**

To reduce barriers to access, the activity took place locally at Business Academy Bexley (BAB), where the borough's Music Service had been trialling taster activities in non-orchestral instruments with a view to establishing a satellite music centre in the north of the borough alongside the established Sidcup Centre in the south. From September 2015 – February 2016, the following activity took place:

#### **Planning & Set-up: July – Oct 2015:**

- Consultation with the Music Service's student council to discuss barriers to musical engagement – particularly in the north of the borough – and the potential skills to be gained through peer mentoring.
- Invitations to the BNBO Launch Workshop sent to all parents of Year 5 pupils. Pupils reminded by instrumental tutors visiting the schools, and through additional visits from the BNBO Coordinator one week before the launch.
- Delivery team meeting with LSO staff, Music Service staff, instrumental tutors and Youth Mentors.

#### **Delivery, Term One: Nov – Dec 2015:**

- Orchestra Launch Workshop, with 14 young musicians and two parents in attendance.
- Regular Saturday rehearsals during November and December, with a consistent membership of c.12 young musicians. Rehearsals consisted of a mixture of warm-up activities, full orchestra rehearsals exploring a range of repertoire including popular and film-music scores and Latin ensemble pieces (tango and cha cha cha), and sectional rehearsals led by the Youth Mentors.
- Throughout the rehearsals there was a consistent pool of Music Service instrumental tutors, professional LSO players and three Youth Mentors working with the orchestra.
- The BNBO's debut concert, giving a 30-minute performance – including five pieces as an orchestra – alongside a solo performance from an LSO player, a certificate presentation for the founding BNBO members, and speeches from the LSO and Music Service staff.
- The concert was attended by 16 parents and family members, showing a growth in parental engagement during the autumn rehearsals.

### Mid-point reflection and planning: Jan 2016

- Delivery team meeting with LSO staff, Music Service staff, instrumental tutors and Youth Mentors.
- Consultation meeting with BNBO members, evaluating the first term's activity and exploring their desired future performance and repertoire opportunities.
- Recruitment of eight new BNBO members – opening the orchestra up to Year 4s within the participating schools to begin their progression beyond Year 4 First Access tuition, and supporting the future sustainability of the orchestra.

### Delivery, Term Two: Jan – Feb 2016:

- Regular Saturday rehearsals during January and early February in preparation for a spring half-term concert, with an increased consistent membership of c.23 young musicians.
- Additional creative session with composer Michael Betteridge – whom a number of the musicians had met on a previous LSO Discovery project – exploring existing orchestral works using the LSO's online resource, LSO Play.
- The BNBO's spring concert, giving a 30-minute performance – including five pieces as an orchestra – alongside a performance from an LSO String Quartet and speeches from the LSO and Music Service staff.
- The concert was attended by 44 parents and family members, and was followed by refreshments to encourage the parents to stay and chat with the instrumental tutors, LSO players and Youth Mentors.

### c. Outputs

Over the course of the project, the following outputs were achieved:

- The Bexley North Borough Orchestra was created – a brand-new ensemble for elementary musicians in the northern wards of Thamesmead and Erith.
- 23 young musicians aged 8-10 took part in between 12-25 hours of workshops and rehearsals over 4 months.
- 3 Youth Mentors supported the young musicians – developing skills in leadership, mentoring and conducting – and took part in a conducting masterclass with a professional LSO musician.
- 2 end-of-term concerts were delivered, reaching a combined audience of 60 parents and family.
- 4 Music Service instrumental tutors supported the orchestra rehearsals, developing their own skills in teaching and performance alongside professional LSO musicians.



*The Bexley North Borough Orchestra had three sections – violins, trumpets and clarinets – determined by the instruments that the pupils had begun learning in their respective Year 4 First Access instrumental lessons.*

## Outcomes

**1.** *The young participants of the project will have **improved music skills**, building on their whole-class tuition learning and developing their musical ability past First Access. The Youth Mentors will have greater aspirations and **acquired leadership skills** from the inspiring LSO players, and be empowered as motivators and role models who can lead these participants in musical activities.*

Throughout the rehearsals, the young musicians showed continued improvement in musical skills – developing their ability beyond the limits of First Access instrumental tuition. Alongside increases in instrumental technique and overall musicianship, participation in BNBO developed the musicians' ability to listen to each other, follow a conductor and perform together as an ensemble, as well as building their focus, self-esteem and confidence to perform in front of an audience.

During the post-project evaluation, the young musicians were asked, "what new skills have you learnt?" with responses including:

*"I have learned how to recognise notes again, and write them."*

*"I learned how to play the back-scratcher piece and Jingle Bells."*

*"I have learned different ways to improve my performance."*

*"I learned some new music notes on the clarinet and some new tunes to play."*

*"Playing with other people."*

*"Teamwork and lower notes on the clarinet."*

The BNBO was also a hugely valuable opportunity for the three Youth Mentors, developing their skills in leadership and mentoring, and their confidence to act as inspiring role models for the younger musicians.

One of the Year 5 clarinetists became upset during a rehearsal and would only talk to one of the Youth Mentors, demonstrating the pastoral value of having older musicians in a mentoring role alongside the instrumental tutors and project coordinators. Another of the mentors was particularly interested in conducting, and relished the opportunity to have a conducting masterclass with a professional LSO player (and experienced conductor) who was there working with the orchestra. The Youth Mentors also supported the evaluation of the project, monitoring the young musicians' progress throughout the rehearsals and feeding back to the BNBO Coordinator and instrumental tutors at regular intervals – developing valuable skills in evaluation and assessment during early musical development.

**2.** *The young participants will have **increased engagement** with Bird College (Music Service) by attending regular extra-curricular music activities for the first time, exposing them to new musical and social possibilities which will encourage the participants to take ownership of their musical development. This participant-driven engagement will feed back to the parents and carers, developing a **more positive attitude** towards supporting their children's instrumental learning.*

During the post-project evaluation, the young musicians were asked for one word to describe the orchestra, with answers including "wonderful...magical...great...awesome...tremendous...I felt amazing...fantastic, and when I saw my mum afterwards I felt proud." There were examples throughout the project of participants taking real pride in the orchestra, remaining loyal throughout and demonstrating ownership as one of the founding members. This was a real aim of BNBO –

encouraging the participants to take ownership of their musical development and feed back to their parents about their desire to continue engaging in musical opportunities.

This sense of ownership was exemplified by one Year 4 participant who was keen to attend BNBO rehearsals during the spring term, but had been advised by his school's First Access instrumental tutor that he wasn't quite ready to do so. The pupil was so determined that he found out from his friends when the orchestra took place and got his parents to bring him anyway. He then flourished throughout the rehearsals.

With the orchestra's numbers increasing from 12 in the early rehearsals to 23 at the spring concert, this was reflected in increased parental engagement – from just two parents attending the Launch Workshop to 44 parents and family members attending the spring concert. After the concert, the parents completed a short questionnaire asking them, *"what do you think your child likes or gets out of coming to BNBO on Saturdays?"* Their responses included:

*"Being able to be part of something good."*

*"They get to spend time doing something they enjoy. Something positive to look forward to."*

*"Learning a new skill and learning to work well with others."*

*"An interest to help him concentrate. Good for his self-esteem."*

*"He enjoys music and it keeps him busy."*

*"Enjoyment, education, confidence, responsibility."*

*"He is learning a musical instrument and achieving something challenging."*

*"She gets to socialise and make new friends. She gets to fulfil her potential."*

The increased engagement amongst parents was extremely encouraging, with many seeing the value and impact of their child's music-making first-hand at the spring concert. After the concert, five parents asked the Music Service violin tutor where they could purchase a violin and which one they should buy, in addition to five families who had already bought a violin for their child during the course of the project.

**3. Bird College (Music Service) and LSO will develop an *increased understanding* of the support structure needed to transfer the learning from this project into future activities to most successfully engage hard-to-reach participants. The partners will also have *deeper knowledge* of the impact of the new Bird College North Borough Music Centre at Business Academy Bexley on target group attendance and engagement with music-making activity.**

The funding from Sound Connections allowed the LSO and Bexley Music Service to develop a strong collaborative relationship, ensuring that the project was highly focused on engaging a specific group of hard-to-reach young people. Both the LSO and the Music Service developed a greater understanding of how to successfully engage hard-to-reach participants, with the following characteristics of the project seen as key to its success:

- Location – delivered in the target participants' own local community. In addition to accessibility through proximity, this engendered a sense of pride and ownership amongst the participants. It was *their* community orchestra.
- Price – free for the young musicians to attend.
- Partnership working – the strength of the partnership between the LSO, Music Service, local schools and instrumental tutors.

- Parental engagement – whilst this was a challenge in the early stages of the project, it is vital to the success of out-of-school activities for this age group. We saw that as the project progressed, the young musicians’ enthusiasm fed back to their parents, and their own engagement increased.
- Involvement of Youth Mentors and professional LSO musicians – providing role models for the young children to look up to and be inspired by.
- Repertoire – ensuring that the music being learnt is engaging and fun for participants of this age group, and taking opportunities to ask them what *they* would like to perform.
- Ownership – finding ways to build pride in the project amongst participants. For BNBO, simple things like presenting certificates at the opening concert and giving all participants matching t-shirts helped to achieve this.

## Progression and legacy

- The Bexley North Borough Orchestra is set to continue as part of the Music Service’s regular activities, cementing a progression route for continued engagement in instrumental learning for elementary musicians in the north of the borough.
- The BNBO will be performing with higher standard ensembles based at the Sidcup Centre over Easter, highlighting a further progression route for continued instrumental development. The BNBO will also be performing in the LSO’s *On Track Takeover Festival* at the Barbican Centre in June 2016 – their first performance outside of their home borough – followed by a performance with other borough ensembles at the Royal Festival Hall later that month.
- The BNBO played an important role in helping to establish a satellite music centre in the north of the borough – the ‘Bird College North Borough Music Centre’ at Business Academy Bexley – increasing the provision of music-making opportunities more evenly across the borough.
- All three of the participating schools are now buying in ‘Progression 1’ instrumental tuition, giving pupils access to lessons in smaller groups beyond their Year 4 First Access tuition. This demand was generated from the pupils themselves.
- One of the Youth Mentors is keen to pursue a career as a music teacher, and has asked to do work experience at both the LSO and the Music Service whilst continuing her involvement with BNBO.
- There was a real desire amongst many of the BNBO participants to explore other instruments, and during the post-project evaluation they were asked, “*what do you hope to do next in music?*” Their responses included:

*“I would like to play a concert with them around the world.”*

*“Play different instruments.”*

*“Play the trumpet.”*

*“Perform for lots of people at schools.”*

*“Composing music.”*

*“To get better.”*

## Feedback from Bird College:

*“Bird College Music Service largely exists to give children opportunities through musical experiences. As a tutor and leader on this project it has been fantastic to see these children be given such a great opportunity and to see the young people embrace the opportunity and give the orchestra so much*

*time, commitment and loyalty. We feel proud of them and through feedback know that the parents and children are proud of themselves.*

*It has also been great for all of our music teachers to work alongside the LSO players. The players have not only taught the children a great deal but also been an inspiration to pupils and staff alike. A project like this would have been very difficult to put together without Sound Connections and the London Symphony Orchestra, I feel sure that the children will never forget the wonderful musical experience that this project has enabled us to provide for them, thank you from us all”.*

**Andrew Raybould, BNBO Coordinator and Music Service Schools Manager**



*BNBO during a Saturday rehearsal, spring 2016*