

ZOOM IN TO
YOUTH VOICE

YOUNG TRUSTEE JOURNEY: JESSICA COOLING KENT MUSIC



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JESSICA COOLING KENT MUSIC

Orchestra Manager, Jessica Cooling tells us about her journey from young musician to board member of her county music hub, and shares some advice for those looking to recruit and work with young trustees.



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TELL US ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND AND HOW YOU GOT INVOLVED IN MUSIC...

“I grew up in Knockholt, a small village in Kent between Orpington and Sevenoaks. My great-grandfather started a small garden centre in Chislehurst in 1913, selling home-grown plants from his back garden, and 107 years later we have grown into a blossoming business with four sites across the South-East, two of which are in Knockholt! Although I do enjoy gardening, and have done bits and bobs for the business, **Coolings Nurseries** isn't quite the same as music and, well, you can probably guess what won! As with many young musicians, I started singing in my local church choir pretty much as soon as I could read fluently and reliably – I haven't really stopped since! The first school I went to, Combe Bank Prep School in Sundridge, was a very small school with a very enthusiastic music teacher. Having lessons in singing, piano, flute, and eventually percussion, I was able to join multiple ensembles and performance groups.

Moving up to the Senior School, I regularly helped with the Junior Orchestra, as well as playing flute in the Orchestra and other ensembles. I spent a large proportion of my time singing in choirs and small ensembles – and I still do! After 12 years at Combe Bank, I jumped head-first into a Music Scholarship at The King's School, Canterbury. Alongside A Levels, I was heavily involved in **extra-curricular music**, holding the **principal percussion** seat for the orchestras in my final year, alongside the position of Head Chorister, singing regularly in **Canterbury Cathedral**.



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WHEN DID MUSIC GET SERIOUS FOR YOU?

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I went on to **study music at Royal Holloway, University of London**, focusing on Performance and Composition. I inevitably joined far too many ensembles and orchestras, always having more rehearsals than lectures each week, learning valuable musicianship skills as well as sneaking in some socialising! I was involved in the **Orchestral Management** scheme, learning about how orchestras work “behind the scenes”. This included running the annual tour, coordinating players and the library, and working with the **London Mozart Players** (LMP) in side-by-side concerts. At some point along the way, I did actually manage to do some work relating to my degree and graduated last summer. After working at Windsor Castle for the summer, I approached LMP to see if there was any space in their office for a “helpful human”.

Thankfully, there was a need, and in October I started working for LMP. Quickly moving from two days a week, to three, and then four, I was helping with some library and marketing tasks, along with some unique projects and activities. Now, I am the Orchestra Manager, and although during this tumultuous time there are no live concerts, we are just as busy as ever with “At Home with LMP” and preparing for the seasons ahead.

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HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED AS A TRUSTEE WITH KENT MUSIC?

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During school holidays, I took part in **Kent Music's** Summer School, then joined the County Choirs, Wind Band, and Youth Orchestra. Between the ages of 9 and 20, I participated in over 40 concerts and residential courses, introducing me to a plethora of new music and some incredible friends.

Being in contact with young musicians was such a learning curve musically, but also socially. I learned how to use Kent's public transport system, how to plan a meet-up with twenty friends, and, most importantly, how to source good food for hungry teenagers! To this day I am still friends with people I met on my first Wind Band course at Benenden as part of Summer School, it was a huge part of my life, and continues to hold a special place in my heart. When I left the County Groups, I didn't want to lose touch with Kent Music. I signed up to receive regular emails from the organisation, and less than a year later read their plan for introducing Young Trustees. I was elated – it was a way to stay involved (without musically embarrassing myself), have an input, and keep Kent Music entwined in so many young people's lives.

I knew that **I couldn't pass on an opportunity to give something back**, so pulled together an application in between revising for my final exams at University. Miraculously, it worked, and I was invited to interview. It was the most wholesome interview I have ever attended – being an organisation that focuses on children, there was an interview with three young musicians from Orchestra One. Thankfully, two were percussionists, and some bonding over hitting things loudly earned their trust! The other young trustee on the board is also a percussionist, so there is a chance they were biased at the time...

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TELL US ABOUT YOUR FIRST BOARD MEETING...

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The first board meeting was not as scary as I had expected. During university, I had to attend many meetings as a **Student Rep**, so I had an idea of what the board meeting would be like. However, this was a new step outside my comfort zone, with many new people with a lot more experience than me.

Eventually, I figured that if they chose me, I couldn't do too badly. Fortunately, there were three other newbies, and **before the first meeting there were a couple of training sessions** that helped me understand the legal aspects, liabilities, and what would be expected of me. As luck would have it, the other young trustee, Kyle, played alongside me in the percussion section of some county groups, so, before starting, I already had a friend! **We were both assigned seasoned trustees as buddies or mentors to help with the first few meetings**, who offered helpful advice as well as some tips and tricks. During the meeting, there were some confusing moments – I don't fully understand the accounts yet – but also some moments where I found myself feeling quite at home. Everyone was very supportive, and **I was even complimented afterwards on how I involved myself and spoke up about various topics.**

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HOW HAVE THINGS GONE SINCE THEN?

“There have been three further board meetings, one even happened on Zoom! As I’ve got to know the other board members, and as my understanding of the inner workings of Kent Music has grown, I have been more vocal and confident in discussions. I’ve taken more time to look at board papers in depth before the day, and often manage to email questions beforehand to help understand any tricky bits. This allows me to think further and give input during meetings, rather than trying to comprehend when the discussion is moving on. There are many moments in meetings that I can’t give input on, but I’ve learned that **often, a simple nod of support or recognition can be more valuable than most words** (especially on Zoom).”

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE WHO MIGHT WANT TO BECOME YOUNG TRUSTEES?

All I can say is go for it! The worst that can happen is they say no, but at that point you’ll have prepared the application and tidied up your CV to a working standard, which will be hugely helpful in the future! If you’re invited to interview, they’ll be looking for **qualities rather than experience**; how you think and develop ideas will be much more important than how many gold stars you were awarded in primary school. You’re not expected to be a professional with an impressive skill set, so don’t try to force yourself into that mould!

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WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE ADULT TRUSTEES WHO WANT TO WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE ON A BOARD?

“**Being courteous and respectful** is a given, but also a lot of the time you'll have more of a steer on whether a whacky idea can be implemented so don't be afraid to shoot us down if it's awful! It's **much better to be brutally honest** than to have a board attempting to follow up on an idea that just won't work.

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WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE AND WHAT HAS THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING A YOUNG TRUSTEE INSPIRED YOU TO DO?

“**Being on the board of trustees has given me a much clearer understanding of just how much a music charity has to do to keep afloat.** There will never quite be enough funding, there will always be complications, but above all, there will always be more passion somewhere! Everyone working in this sphere is there for a reason, and it's not money or fame. Inspiring the next generation of vaguely-musically-inclined-humans is so rewarding, and the benefits are second to none. I aim to keep the ethos of Kent Music in mind during all aspects of my future work. **It would be a dream come true for the government to recognise the importance of the arts,** and whilst I am not in a position to do much about it now, I aim to support anyone heading down that difficult path.

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We're pleased to be sharing these resources in solidarity with AMIE, the Alliance for a Musically Inclusive England, a group of organisations from across the country who want all young people to have access to music-making opportunities.



Design by Camara Pinnock.

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Supported using public funding by
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