



## **Up! Orchestra Case Study: Young Musical Director - The Earth Journey project, Spring 2020.**

Basic profile data (made anonymous):

Gender: Female

Age: 19

Ethnicity: White British

M is a valued member of the Up! Orchestra, an inclusive ensemble designed for young musicians aged 13+. The abilities and instrumentation of this group is very diverse, making use of strings, brass, winds and world percussion as well as keys, drums, guitars, motion technologies and iPad based synthesizers. Each term the group creates a piece of music without the use of notation, devising content from scratch and committing it to memory. Without the knowledge of the young musicians, this musical material is usually quite complex, involving challenging keys, ever changing rhythmic content and wide combinations of instruments. Various themes are explored each term to put a story behind the music such as the environment for example. Having a concept that the young people can understand and identify with inspires them before improvising and shaping a work over the course of the five fortnightly sessions.

Being older and a more experienced member of the group, it was decided to give M the opportunity to come up with a concept to then create music from. She was also given the task of leading and directing whole ensemble as well as going to the breakout groups during rehearsals to monitor the progress of each section. This was possibly a little daunting to begin with, but M had tutors mentoring her to help turn her ideas into plans in her notebook which she could then share to the young musicians each session.

M has attended Up! Orchestra for a number of years and has a real love of music. Primarily a trombonist at approximately grade 3 level, she also plays the saxophone, flute and the drums. M has dyspraxia, a form of Developmental Coordination Disorder (Dsd) and with weekly school life sometimes being a challenge for M, her music making is a highlight of the week and she has made great progress over the years. M herself has often pointed out that she feels frustration day to day and music is an escape route. M as often said she feels a struggle in that she is too able to attend a special school, but has felt a struggle to keep up with her regular school and college demands due to the extra time she needs to get language based work completed.

Socially, M benefits by discussing her everyday problems with people of her own age as well as with tutors in the breaks, allowing her to share her problems. Making music with those same young people transforms M's mood and gives her a creative outlet where she is looked up to by younger

members of the group. As M has grown older it has become apparent that she is reaching the upper end of the age range and now that she is at college, it is perhaps time to give her more responsibility at rehearsals.

At Up! Orchestra sessions, M has always encouraged younger participants and also shared her musical views if ever things were going wrong during rehearsals. Her opinion had always been valued and due to her age and experience, this spring seemed a perfect opportunity to build M's leadership skills and also let her create a musical work. It was exciting for the other young musicians to have 'one of their own' lead the project in the spring term 2020 instead of one of the tutors.

From the viewpoint of the staff, it was interesting to see M lead a group of young musicians with a variety of educational needs. She can sometimes have an impatient streak so monitoring the way M led sessions alongside tutors where needed was very useful. Throughout the term M really become more comfortable speaking in front of the group as well as getting her ideas across patiently, understanding others if they made mistakes. She was also given the chance to brief the tutors before each rehearsal, giving instructions on what areas would be worked on at the session.

When the sessions started, M was mentored so that she felt comfortable getting her musical ideas from her head into her notebook. She chose the idea of Earth Journey, a piece of music in a number of sections portraying a pure, clean, green world ruined by industry and rubbish which future generations would then clean up.

In terms of a short term outcome, M was able to see how musical ideas for a large ensemble are created and then put down as plans on paper. She was able to get a greater idea of what effort and organization is required behind the scenes. By the second and third session, M was more organized and less reliant on tutor input. M had never conducted a large group before, nor had she ever had to deal with rehearsing separate groups within a rehearsal. After some mentoring before each session, she soon picked up skills needed to start and stop the rehearsal and communicate with the young players exactly where mistakes were and how to fix them.

M went away from the first session having been shown how to write her ideas down concisely. Planning a rehearsal is vital when working with c.25 young people playing such a wide range of instruments. M's idea for the term had lots of content in four sections. This gave us a rehearsal per section and a final session at the end of term to perform the whole piece.

M used a notebook which her mentor wrote in to begin with so that she could copy that rehearsal plan and format in preparation for the next sessions. The piece of music for the term had a clear structure which M had explained well but after a few sessions, the pre rehearsal briefing was often from an empty notebook.

After some slightly disorganised rehearsals in sessions one and two, M's mentor put her ideas into a clear written plan so that M could communicate and show the young musicians how each section should sound. It was great to see M feel more comfortable talking in front of a group, directing musicians more confidently and generally being in control by sessions three and four. Once the skeleton of the music was in place, M then did find confidence to add ideas to her notebook, adding guitar effects for the final session as well as moving around the room more to direct specific players during the performances.

The Up! Orchestra project and M in particular is a great example of how these sessions provide young musicians a platform to explore music and sounds at a pace comfortable with them. In her time with the group, M has progressed until taking over for a term, learning leadership skills and realising where her strengths and weaknesses are.

In the spring term in particular, the Up! Orchestra project was Ms student led creation of her piece of music telling her story of planet Earth. Not all of the young musicians respond in the same way to verbal instruction. To help with this potential problem, we used another way to show what sounds we wanted to make and develop. All kinds of sound worlds were explored and to help get M's ideas across we used images printed on posters. These included rainforests, the sea, factory chimneys and smoke as well as futuristic images. These pictures gave everyone a chance to develop and 'see' the types of sounds M wanted to use within her musical work.

Another challenge was the varied amount of work M had done to prepare the sessions. Her empty notebook in the early sessions led to more tutor input than planned, but M had near total control by the final session. It was the first time the group had been led by a student and based on the success of this, our enforced summer term lockdown period was also led by an older student.

Without seeing how the young people worked so well under M's leadership we may not have considered this. As a direct result, the summer term was led by Tommy who managed to produce and edit a charity single which was recorded in isolation by all members at home, and then mixed by Tommy complete with a video.

Having let youngsters at the upper end of the age range take on a role of leading the group, it is definitely an option of running a term of music making for us in future. A downside is letting the young people lead often chaotic early rehearsal as they naturally find their feet. Tutors can always step in however to steer the rehearsal in the right direction. With a student leading the bulk of the session, tutors can then attend to specific players and fix any problems they are having. The ability of the young musicians really impresses more and more each term and for future products, all staff involved would be very open to the idea of letting students and young people direct some sessions when previously that idea would have caused some trepidation.

I hope that much of the successful elements of the Up! Orchestra can be transferred to other Surrey Arts ensembles, following the model of generating such musical enthusiasm, creating new works and developing new skills as instrumentalists.

*Written by Carl Woodcroft, UP! Orchestra tutor and mentor.*