

CLASSICAL

MUSIC

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Seize the moment

Clare Stevens finds the music education community in celebratory mood at the first Music Learning Live festival, held at The Sage Gateshead

Educationists need to seize the moment and make the most of music's place in the sun, in case there is a change of government within the next couple of years. That was the message that singing ambassador Howard Goodall was most anxious to press home in his keynote speech at MusicLearningLive!2008, a three-day national festival of music education presented by Zone New Media in partnership with The Sage Gateshead from 31 January to 2 February. His usual fluent, impassioned address on the value of singing had gained an additional sense of urgency, he said, thanks to a recent encounter with the director of a Conservative party think-tank on culture, who had been highly critical of current thinking on music education and wanted to revert to a curriculum centred on European classical music and notation skills.

'I pointed out that the Third Reich had tried this with Orff Schulwerk,' Goodall told his Gateshead audience, 'but his views made me think very hard. It is not my business to tell people what to believe politically, but do not make the mistake of thinking that this golden period of support for music education will go on for ever. In September David Cameron announced the Conservative party's abandonment of the principle of ring-fencing money for schools to spend on music, and the last two Conservative manifestos proposed to reduce the curriculum to five core subjects. Every penny of the £332m pledged for music education by the present government last autumn is ring-fenced, but we need to move very fast to do as much as possible with it while we can, just in case at a later stage we don't have the attention or the funding we have now. If in the next two years the school building programme stops and [government-funded national initiative] Creative Partnerships is dissolved we will be in a very different place.'

'I'm not saying this to be negative, but to be realistic. We have to make very rapid progress and make sure that if the government does change we are in a strong position. I believe we have two years when people are listening to what we are saying. If we do it well, perhaps we can build on it, and then we'll have a crescendo, not a diminuendo.'

Taking place a year after State of Play, the music manifesto's festival and conference at London's Roundhouse, MusicLearningLive was intended to have the same motivational and inspirational effect, combining practical workshop sessions with performances, networking opportunities and a substantial trade exhibition. While the location clearly made it easier for music practitioners from the north of England and Scotland to attend, the fact that delegates also came from as far away as Plymouth and Bristol indicated that the organisers had succeeded in creating a national event.

Schools minister Lord (Andrew) Adonis apologised for the fact that, ironically, his welcome address to a conference celebrating live music had to be delivered on video, but he used the occasion to announce the appointment of Richard Hallam, director of Oxfordshire Music

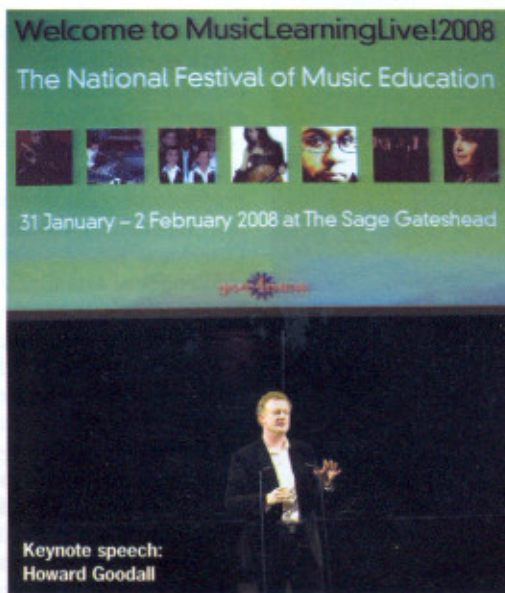
Service, as participation adviser to the department for children, schools and families. He is charged with the task of helping to ensure that music services across England are more consistent in the standard of provision they offer to children in the schools for which they are responsible.

Marc Jaffrey, now development director of the music manifesto, was the brains behind The Classroom of the Future, a 'soft space' in the Sage's basement music centre where delegates could find out more about the latest developments in music technology and how it is being used by initiatives such as Musical Futures to develop personalised learning within the music curriculum. One of the best presentations was by Nicola Killean, director of Sistema Scotland, on the progress of plans to introduce the Venezuelan orchestral training project to the Raploch housing estate in Stirling; preliminary development is well under way and the intention is to run the first teaching sessions this summer. Examination boards, software manufacturers and instrument makers and retailers were among those offering seminars aimed at taking the mystique out of their products and services. Reflecting The Sage's importance as a centre for folk music education, workshops included sessions on setting up a school ceilidh band, and a ceilidh for delegates in the Northern Rock Foundation Hall concluded the programme for the second day of the festival.

The Sage is also a partner, together with Faber Music, Youth Music and advertising agency Abbott Mead Vickers, in the new national singing campaign for England, Sing Up, which has made substantial progress since its official launch last November, so it was hardly surprising that the festival had a strong focus on vocal music. The programme included presentations by the Voices Foundation, and workshops on playground songs led by members of Birmingham's professional chamber choir Ex Cathedral, and on choral conducting for beginners by Ed Milner, director of The Sage's Vocal Force initiative which aims to train singing leaders for the north-east. Choirs popped up everywhere, both timetabled – like the 40-minute recital by the 100 or so youngsters of Scunthorpe Cooperative Junior Choir or the four virtuosic numbers by a *cappella* quartet Mouthful, led by The Sage's head of learning and participation Katherine Zeserson, that kicked off proceedings on the first afternoon – and unsched-

uled, like the small groups that suddenly burst into song next to the cloakroom queue or on the balcony above the cafe.

While the public spaces and main auditoria of TSG are rightly acclaimed, the venue has its drawbacks for an event on this scale: some of the seminar rooms proved difficult to find and there is no ideal space where a trade exhibition can attract attention. And there were some complaints that an over-full programme and awkwardly laid-out brochure meant that some presentations were poorly attended. But on the whole the festival appeared to have been successful, and there are plans for it to take place again in January 2009. ●



Keynote speech:
Howard Goodall