

Case study: Southbank Sinfonia

Unique in Europe, Southbank Sinfonia (SbS) provides a vital link between conservatoire and the profession. An agent of change in 21st century music-making, SbS offers a one year learning and performing experience, supported by a bursary, for exceptional new graduates of music colleges.

Thirty-two players are selected each year through an audition and interview process, and work together as an orchestra from February to September. Through the experiences provided during the course of the programme, the orchestra seeks to equip the players fully for the range of skills they will require in order to establish themselves in varied and fulfilling musical careers.

Orchestral Experience

Gaining a wide range of orchestral performing experience is, of course, core to the whole programme. In SbS, the players participating in the programme each year gain the opportunity to play alongside the same colleagues throughout the whole year as part of an intensive schedule which fills the majority of their week. This is a unique opportunity that none of the players have experienced over an extended period of time before starting with SbS. Although the players have been working professionally and playing in College ensembles before joining the orchestra, this will have been on a more ad hoc basis, alongside different musicians on each occasion.

As a result of working collectively over this period of time, the players are able to work on their distinctive sound as a section and as an orchestra as a whole. Through this they gain a deeper awareness and understanding of the ways in which different orchestras function musically, and therefore improve their ability to fit into different musical environments on future professional orchestral engagements.

Throughout the year, the orchestra gives around 90 different performances, and the players have an opportunity to audition to perform a concerto with the orchestra. In 2006, SbS gave 92 performances in over 35 different venues, including six premières and 34 concertos where the soloist was a member of the orchestra. Through this high volume of performances, SbS seeks to emulate the work of a professional orchestra, with short rehearsal periods, and a requirement for the players to be able to sight-read with a high level of accuracy. The players report that the improvement in their ability to work at this rate and their extended repertoire knowledge are among the most crucial outcomes of the programme.

The orchestra places great importance on breadth of experience throughout the course of the programme. A variety of repertoire is performed, including a week during the London Handel Festival looking at Baroque repertoire, playing with gut strings and Baroque bows, and covering the range of repertoire up to and including contemporary works with electronics, film music and whole-orchestra improvisation. There is also an extensive programme of chamber music performances, and players are encouraged to form chamber groups from within the orchestra, and are offered coaching on this repertoire by one of the orchestra's Artists-in-Association, along with other external professionals.

Partnerships

There has been an extremely positive response within the profession and the wider arts world to the Southbank Sinfonia project. Many conductors, soloists, specialist players and



composers actively seek to work with the orchestra, and this has enabled SbS to form creative partnerships with a range of artistic establishments. Through these links, SbS players have the opportunity to work closely alongside musicians at the top of their field, benefiting from sharing in their experience, and also expanding their contacts within the profession. To date these include high-level collaborations with:

- **Royal Opera House:** *Sharing the stage programme* – side-by-side performance and coaching; *Orchestral development* – mock auditions and professional development sessions; *Jette Parker Young Artists Programme* – artistic collaborations
- **Academy of St Martin in the Fields:** *Leadership Project* – week-long performance and professional development project
- **BBC Concert Orchestra:** *Side-by-side recording day of light music; Professional development sessions*
- **British Youth Opera:** *Resident orchestra for its two annual fully-staged productions*
- **Glyndebourne:** *Orchestra for 'Hip Hop Così' production on main stage; Chamber performances in Jerwood Studio for Chorus Development Programme*

Education & Outreach work

Orchestral musicians frequently engage in other musical activities alongside their orchestral playing work. All professional orchestras engage in a programme of education and outreach work, in which their players are involved. Freelance orchestral musicians often embark on a portfolio career which includes elements of teaching, leading workshops and working within community settings. Therefore, throughout the programme SbS aims to provide its players with opportunities to develop their skills in this area. From the first week of the programme, the orchestra works with Artist-in-Association, Peter Wiegold, on improvisation and musical communication. They then go on to develop the use of these skills in practical situations, working with Lincoln Abbotts, Learning Manager for the BBC Symphony Orchestra, who coaches them to lead workshops and to work in school settings. In 2006, highlights of the outreach programme included:

- Tales from the East, a project working with primary schools in Lambeth and Southwark, resulting in a performance of a new work composed by the children who participated in the project, based on Iranian musical ideas and four different stories originating from the Far East.
- A project in collaboration with The Samling Foundation, based in Hexham, Northumberland, working with two first schools, a middle school and a senior school. SbS players worked alongside the children, running workshops on the instruments of the orchestra for the younger children, and playing side-by-side with the orchestra from the senior school. This project resulted in a concert played to a large audience at The Sage, Gateshead, performed by Southbank Sinfonia, four Samling Scholars, and over 180 children.
- As Orchestra-in-Association at the specialist music school Wells Cathedral School, SbS players spent a number of days coaching chamber groups, working side-by-side with the school orchestra, and taking part in a discussion group for senior students about their experiences at Music College and at the beginning of their musical careers.
- A Scratch Orchestra, where members of the local community around the Waterloo area were invited to bring along their musical instruments to play side-by-side with Southbank Sinfonia in an open and relaxed rehearsal.

By working with people of different ages and from different backgrounds, the players develop their communication skills both musically and more generally. By the time they have completed the Southbank Sinfonia programme they have had the opportunity to develop a broader outlook on the possibilities open to them working within the music profession.

Professional Development

Alongside the core programme of performance and outreach work, the orchestra runs a series of professional development sessions. In 2006 this series included sessions on:

- Networking Skills, led by Tony Newton from management training company Management Advantage
- Working with Accompanists, led by accompanist Malcolm Martineau
- an introduction to Music Therapy, led by Rachel Verney from Nordoff-Robins
- Performance Anxiety, led by Karen O'Connor from the CBSO
- Leadership, led by Lord Smith of Finsbury and members of the Clore Leadership Programme
- Working with Local Education Authorities, led by Jean Carter, Music Adviser for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

Operations and Funding

Southbank Sinfonia was founded in 2002. Since then, over 120 young musicians have benefited from the programme. The organisation is a registered charity, based at St John's Church in Waterloo, London. A series of rush hour concerts is held in the church on most Thursdays during the course of the programme, with frequent external concerts throughout the week.

The orchestra receives no public funding, and has to fundraise on a continual basis. It currently needs to attract £500,000 of funding each year. Currently funding is provided through a combination of individual support, some corporate support, and applications to trusts and foundations. The fundraising team is working towards building an endowment fund which would help to secure the long-term future of the orchestra.

Text by Jan Smith