

CASE STUDY

The String Scheme

Dale Chambers, RGS Guildford



ABSTRACT

A long-lasting, complex project which built on entry-level foundations to get hundreds of primary-aged children playing string instruments in Guildford.

PARTNERSHIPS

RGS Guildford
Investec International Music Festival (IIMF)
Southern Pro Musica (SPM)
Surrey Music Hub
Lanesborough Preparatory School
St Thomas of Canterbury School
Sandfield Primary School
Boxgrove Primary School

BACKGROUND

The RGS String Scheme arose from an anxiety that fewer boys applying to our school were learning string instruments. As a strong string section forms the backbone of all 'traditional' music-making that the School's music department is proud to present, there was general support for 'something to be done.'



The scheme, led by Walija Chew who is a 'cello tutor at the RGS, flourished and continues to run nearly ten years on.



NARRATIVE

Initially, RGS approached its associated, but separately managed prep school, and after nearly six months of negotiation we set up a 'string scheme' in Year 4. The scheme was compulsory for all pupils and was taught in curriculum time with lesson and instrument provision provided free of charge. It was hoped that after this introduction many boys would carry on learning in Years 5 and 6 but this would be at their own cost. The scheme, led by Walija Chew who is a 'cello tutor at the RGS, flourished and continues to run nearly ten years on.

About a year later, amongst the climate at the RGS of a general encouragement of staff pursuing individual outreach projects, Dale Chambers, the Head of Strings, approached a local primary school with the idea of setting up a similar scheme.

It should be admitted at this point that Dale's own children attended the primary school which certainly helped to establish the relationship and made contact and access much simpler. Frankly, the primary Headteacher met the idea that the funding could be found with total disbelief, and that the RGS would be able to provide the staff with the necessary skills to deliver it. In response to this, Dale taught a Dalcroze/Kodaly course to the Year 4s for a term, free of charge, to gain trust and also to allow time to source funds.

After four years of successful delivery, the scheme was extended to another local primary school, this time through a partnership with the Investec International Music Festival. Starting in a new school, without an established link brought its challenges. Each school has its own particular culture and different understandings about the time and space required to deliver the programme were real issues. Embedding routines and gentle (and, at times, not-so gentle) pressure were required to ensure that over time there was a growth of understanding. The end result is that the scheme is now well established, in its third iteration and generating pupils who wish to continue learning.



Then a year later, IIMF suggested that if the scheme could be extended to a third school it would apply to the Community Foundation for Surrey (CFS) for a grant for a four-year project; the grant was awarded to cover instrument purchase and tuition costs for four years from 2018 onwards. This third school is a three-form intake school and roughly doubled the size of the scheme.

The String Scheme now teaches 180 children per week, in Year 4 in three maintained primary schools, in addition to continuing at the prep school. Currently, a further 40 children attend string orchestra rehearsals as they continue with their studies in Years 5 and 6 and we anticipate this will grow to approximately 90 children, as the new scheme matures. In total, The String Scheme will be teaching 270 children per week throughout the academic year for a period of four years.

Following the one off capital cost of the instrument purchase of £30,000, the annual running costs are roughly: tuition £15,000; instrument maintenance - £1,500; music printing £150.

Of those who have completed the scheme, between 15% and 20% of pupils have decided to continue with their studies. The lessons are usually arranged through the Surrey Music Hub and instruments are generally 'sold' to the pupils at around £40 on the proviso that they are bought back at the end of the pupil's use. This ensures a steady flow of half and three-quarter sized instruments cheaply available to pupils which is important as, in our experience, often the biggest barrier to continuing with lessons is not the cost of the lessons but the inertia on behalf of parents who are uncertain about which instrument to choose.



It brings together private schools, local music hubs, sponsors and children and gives many a taste of something they would not otherwise experience.



Children on the scheme give two concerts a year, one at their school and one at the RGS, and those who continue with their studies give three concerts a year, one of which is on stage at G Live as part of the SPM Family Concert, playing side by side with the professional orchestra.



FUNDING

Finding the money was challenging. Dale set about writing to local companies (estate agents, lawyer's firms etc. and to the RGS parent base of musical children). Additionally, he approached commercial sponsors through his connections with the European String Teachers Association. There were two elements: raising money for tuition costs and also sourcing the instruments. With strong support from the Headmaster and Governors, the RGS management agreed that the project should go ahead and that, in addition, the RGS would act as guarantor against any losses not covered by fundraising.



By the end of the first year, the following had been sourced:

- Instruments were loaned free of charge by a local music shop. They were then bought by the scheme at around 50% of retail at the end of the first year.
- RGS parents donated a total of £500pa with the promise of 10 year funding.
- A trust fund donated £5000.
- The local music hub paid half of the tuition costs and counted the tuition 'on its books'.
- Allianz gave a significant discount for insurance.
- Strutt & Parker estate agency gave £2000.
- The RGS paid the balance (around £2000).

Subsequent years were financially enhanced by a grant from SPM, a professional orchestra, which had in turn been awarded a contract by Guildford Borough Council to deliver, amongst other things, education outreach to children in the borough. Subsequent expansion of the scheme has only been possible due to the generous funding by the IIMF and Community Foundation for Surrey. Amazingly, the bottom line is that the RGS from the second year onward did not have to contribute financially in cash terms to the String Scheme, though, of course, the hidden cost is Dale's time: all of the administration for the scheme is essentially paid for by the RGS via his salary.

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.....”

MUSIC

The music for the scheme was written specially by Walija Chew who was a young student in London at the genesis of the Tower Hamlets project, led by Sheila Nelson. Sheila invited Walija to adapt the violin music for this scheme for 'cello.

COMMUNICATIONS

Although we have not sought publicity, the scheme generates political interest: it was visited by Nick Gibb and Michael Gove when they were at the Department of Education and will be visited by Anne Milton in the near future. BBC South Today has also run a feature on the scheme and there have been articles in national publications as well as the local press.

IMPACT

The String Scheme is a glorious meeting of need and generosity. It places music at the heart of the community, in schools where it is so sorely needed, and celebrates achievement in all its forms. It brings together private schools, local music hubs, sponsors and children and gives many a taste of something they would not otherwise experience.

So is it worth it? Dale Chambers expresses it thus: 'It is not the numbers of people who continue that is the point. It is certainly not about recruitment to the RGS - indeed, the numbers of boys applying to the RGS who have been through The String Scheme is minute in the grand scheme of things. Nor is it about the first 'graduates' of the scheme, now in the Sixth Form, who are gaining their diplomas in music on the violin or 'cello. Rather, it is those children who do not find life easy, whose home lives are not all they might, or should, be. It is the severely disabled boy in a wheelchair who struggled manfully with the 'cello for a year who, on going to a special secondary school has taken up music as part of his therapy sessions; or it is the child with serious behaviour problems, needing a constant one-to-one at school, who takes to the violin and, after, a few weeks, his carer has a 30-minute break because the child has become a normal learner. It is about the feeling of confidence that the whole school community gains as music-making becomes 'normal', routine and inclusive - it is aspirational without being elitist'.



.....
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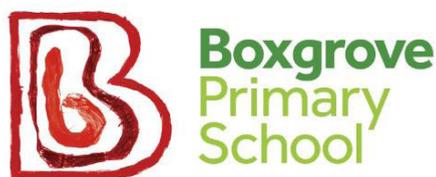
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But if you want normal, boring evidence, it is this – of all of the children who carried on learning following graduation from The String Scheme since its inception at the first primary school (8 years), only ten of those are no longer learning. This means that 100 pupils are out there in Guildford secondary schools still struggling with the complexity that is learning to play a string instrument.

Dale Chambers
Head of Strings
RGS Guildford

Dale Chambers

RGS Guildford

Dale Chambers is responsible for creating The String Scheme in Guildford and is active more widely in music education, recently serving as the Chair of the European String Teachers Association. He is also Orchestra Manager of the Southern Pro Musica which holds a substantial grant from Guildford Borough Council to provide classical music in the borough.



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