



The importance of a strong music education

'Music is not simply important, it is vital for the education of every child', says **Hilary Meyer**, Assistant Headteacher and leader of the esteemed music, music technology, drama and performing arts department at Coloma Convent Girls' School. Read about upcoming activities in the department and her thoughts on how music benefits her students.

Music is not simply important, it is vital for the education of every child. The ability to hear and produce sound is natural to all human beings and the development of the creativity bound within that is fundamental to education. All cultures have their own music. EVERY child should have access to ALL kinds of music ALL the way through their formal education and beyond.

At Coloma Convent Girls' School we believe that a good music education benefits the development of each girl and it is well supported by Coloma's Trustees, Governors, staff and parents as well as our students.

The benefits of a strong music education

The benefits to the pupils of a strong music education are well-documented. There is much research which says that children gain in confidence through participation in music. Music improves their concentration and their ability to problem-solve which in turn leads to greater examination success throughout the curriculum. Participation in an ensemble of any kind enhances team-building and collaborative skills, skills needed well beyond the confines of school.

Performance skills are certainly transferable – imagine that first interview for a job or for higher education – how much better is that child going to be, having stood in front of an audience and understood the fear, but also the excitement, of 'presenting' him or herself to others. The production of musical sound adds an extra layer of concentration and technique to do it and especially to do it well.

All the girls at Coloma who take part in musical activities benefit from making friends across all year groups. In the collective enterprise of singing a song, for example, barriers are removed and they join together for a common goal. I heard Howard Goodall say that in a football team it is just one person who scores a goal. In a choir a collective goal is scored in trying to sound as if there is only one voice. That is hugely symbolic and extremely powerful. Apart from anything else music is known to release endorphins which in turn aid good mental and physical health and music has healing properties which aid us when we are sad.

I will never forget at Coloma, when one of our choir died as a result of an undiagnosed heart complaint just a week before she was due to start her GCSEs. The collective shock and grief was unimaginable. To sing at her funeral must have been one of the hardest things the girls ever had to do but it was as if it was all we could do. Music speaks where words fail. As a school where faith is central to everything, we believe there is life after death, but expressing that through music is powerful beyond words.

The Coloma musical tradition stretches back to the foundation of the school in 1869 and the current department has had successes both within the curriculum and outside it. The school has only ever been judged in full inspections as Outstanding by Ofsted with the music department being an Outstanding department within that.

There are many girls taking GCSE and A level Music but also Music Technology and Performing Arts. At KS3 all girls have music lessons and in years 7 and 8 they also have one dedicated singing lesson. In 2008 Coloma's music department was



Above: GCSE composition at Coloma Convent Girls' School

featured in *Going for Great* ed. Macfarlane and Woods. This book was produced by the London Leadership Challenge and Coloma's music department features as world class within it.

Outside the curriculum

Outside the curriculum the school has a reputation for excellence in choral work. There are over 500 girls (about half the school) who regularly participate in the main school choir. This means that the Fairfield Halls in Croydon has been packed with Coloma community and wider audience every Christmas. The main choir divides into separate choral groups which focus on different material from gospel, blues and pop to Renaissance polyphony and complex contemporary pieces in a ridiculous amount of parts.

The girls frequently participate in competitions. For example, the Juniors have been runners-up in the Songs of Praise Choir of the Year competition and this year the St Cecilia Singers were awarded Barnardo's Senior Choir of the Year and consequently will be singing in the Barnardo's Young Supporters' Concert at the Royal Albert Hall on 28 November.

The girls have performed in the National Festival of Music for Youth every year since 2008 and in Choir of the Year biennially.

The girls sing on tour in Europe. We have been hosted by St Mark's in Venice, the Duomo in Florence, Cathedrals in Pisa, Siena, Barcelona and the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua amongst others.

We performed in the Royal Festival Hall in *El Nino* by John Adams as 'the children's choir' and sang with the LPO in the Bright Sparks GCSE concert.

Next year we will be touring in the USA, performing at St Patrick's Cathedral in New York among other exciting venues.

It is not only in choral work that girls at Coloma have succeeded. There are just under 400 individual instrumental lessons at the school, lessons which range from harp, strings, brass, woodwind, percussion and guitar to singing. Girls can participate in a wide range of instrumental ensembles from Coloma Chamber Orchestra to the King Drummers – a 'Stomp' style group in which anything that can make a sound could, potentially, be hit.

Although the girls regularly perform what might be considered 'traditional' music – *Zadok the Priest* with 500 at the Christmas Concert with imported tenors and basses – all styles of music are valued. Every year the girls hold a 'Charities week' in which they raise money for their chosen cause. They form their own bands and go on to perform throughout the academic year.

There is an annual chamber music concert at St Paul's Covent Garden where the Senior Strings may play the Bach Double Concerto, for example – not bad considering this is a comprehensive, non-selective state school with instrumentalists who are proficient enough to play this kind of repertoire. There is also a jazz ensemble and thriving senior and junior brass bands.

The music department is a busy one and the workload is extreme but the results are terrific. It is so rewarding to have concerts packed with young people keen to play and perform whether it be at Brass Evening, Jazz Café, String Night or a soiree for the A level students preparing for their recitals.

Forthcoming special events

Special events that are coming up soon would definitely include leading singing at the Royal Albert Hall in the Massed Ensemble for the Schools Prom on 15 November.

This will be a performance of *The Pearl* by Howard Goodall in which we will be joined by students from other schools and accompanied by Bromley Youth Music Trust. *The Pearl* was commissioned for Coloma's 140th anniversary by our Headteacher, Mrs Maureen Martin, and first performed by Coloma at the Royal Festival Hall in 2010. It is a beautiful work with words taken from a poem by George Herbert, a 17th century metaphysical poet and although complex at first glance, clearly sums up the essence of the school. The fact that we may learn a great deal about our world but that our spiritual relationship with God is more important

than anything else is encapsulated in the school motto 'Laborare est orare'.

This will be a lively performance with Coloma's newly formed dance academy providing movement, streamers and material to represent elements of the poem. The logistics are extraordinary but hopefully the result will be a fantastic partnership and produce a spectacular result.

There will be two Christmas services this year kindly hosted by Westminster Roman Catholic Cathedral and St George's Roman Catholic Cathedral, Southwark. In the spring there will be an Instrumental Extravaganza in the school in which we will showcase all our instrumental ensembles.

In March the Juniors will perform their annual musical. Last year our younger pupils were involved in *Alice in Wonderland*. I think the team spirit is particularly evident in a show like this with so many children to dress/paint/calm/organize, that the role-modelling of this must surely help all those who want to consider any kind of event management.

The Seniors produce a musical after the exams in July. Last year *Hairspray* was a terrific success. The girls take the lead and this could simply not be performed without their independent input.

There is so much else that could have been written here; the incredible team in the department who work unfailingly for the good of the students, the leadership of the Head, Governors and SLT without whom none of this would happen, and support of friends and family who come to concerts and pick up tired but happy offspring who have to be brought down to earth after experiencing some of the above.

I really feel Coloma is a very special place. The lived faith of the school is tremendous and music is an expression of how we can nurture all talents of all children all the time.

Hilary Meyer, Assistant Headteacher and leader of the music, music technology, drama and performing arts department, Coloma Convent Girls' School

To see the work that takes place at Coloma visit ism.org/blog.

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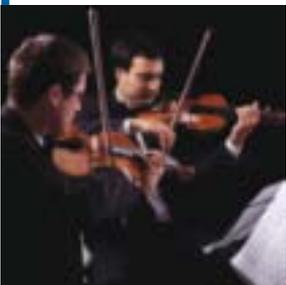
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