

Discovering Brass for beginners

The Wallace Collection has been taking Discovering Brass - an exciting programme taking valveless instruments into London schools to introduce beginners to brass music. **Clair Tomalin** outlines the results

PHOTOS: COURTESY THE WALLACE COLLECTION



provides a highly enriched learning experience that reaches far beyond establishing vital playing fundamentals. It also includes follow-up benefits via the online **Practice Cave** and website, where children and teachers have access to further reading, videos and sound-files relating to the individual chapters covered in the sessions. The cross-curricular topics and online accessibility expand knowledge, and build awareness of the global, cultural and social importance of brass music throughout history, placing the role of lip-blown brass instruments in context.

After having been introduced to the programme some 12 months ago in a consultative role, The Wallace Collection recognised the overwhelming benefits that the package could offer smaller groups, down to one-to-one lessons.

In parallel, it also recognised that to solve the wider conundrum of early engagement with brass, it was critical that the programme was versatile enough to provide fast-track support for children with a recognised acumen for music and/or to serve a whole-class delivery scenario. To find an overall solution, it also needed to offer schools, music services and local authorities the ability to meet the key requirements of today's music education principles, whilst providing added-value elements, such as continual professional development for staff.

The support of London Music Fund enabled the Discovering Brass projects to come to life, empowering The Wallace Collection to deliver a comprehensive introduction to brass music, whilst incorporating project legacies that would support the stakeholders' future expansion of the programmes, which provide an all-in-one, multi-level solution to getting children interested in playing brass instruments.

Discovering Brass commenced in November with an Introduction Workshop at each school, presented by The Wallace Collection Trumpet Ensemble. This was the first time that the children had been introduced to the natural trumpets, and it was evident that seeing the professional musicians and students from the Royal Academy of Music perform so impressively was an inspiring way to launch the project - even ten sessions later, children were talking about playing at 'that first concert'.

Offering insight into the way the programme has been adapted to work with the large groups, The Wallace Collection's Tony George (tuba and ophicleide), who has been key in delivering the project, explains: "With 30 children at each session, it was important to engage and maintain engagement through variety. We only had 45 minutes - one hour at each school per session, so

Introducing brass music to children is the first challenge, but retaining that engagement after the initial excitement becomes the real deal-breaker. Finding an all-round solution to this conundrum is paramount in securing the future of all genres of brass playing. Without the grass-root foundations being set firmly in place, there is no route for development, and the pursuance of enjoyment and, indeed, careers through this form of music is left dangling precariously for the future.

The Wallace Collection, which is committed to the advancement of music education, has identified an exciting, all-encompassing programme that brings a new dimension to the introduction of brass music at an early age. A programme that is versatile and flexible, yet comprehensive enough to

be used across the full spectrum of music educators, from schools to music services and local authorities, and from private teachers to the all-important amateur musicians who give up their time to run training groups.

Over the last few months, the ensemble has been running parallel projects entitled **Discovering Brass** across three London primary schools, engaging a total of 90 children from Anson Primary School with Brent Music Service, St. Mary's Catholic Primary School with Havering Music School, and St. Peter's Catholic Primary School with Barking and Dagenham Community Music Service. Working in partnership with the respective schools and music services, 12 weekly delivery sessions have taken the participating children, music service tutors, classroom teachers, teaching assistants, head teachers and Royal Academy of Music students on an extraordinary journey, leading them towards an end-of-project concert at the magnificent Duke's Hall in the Royal Academy of Music, on 8 March.

The secret to the success of these large-scale projects has been attributed to the adoption of an innovative brass education package, **Brass for Beginners** - an introductory programme adapted for use in the UK by its Chicago-based originators, Chris Hasselbring and Kirsty Montgomery. The original package combines the use of specially designed polycarbonate natural trumpets (valveless and ideally distraction-free) with an array of structured programme support materials, available in print and online for both teachers and students. Through the progressive chapters, which follow the adventures of a time-travelling caveman, Ragnar, the programme

“

I'm overjoyed!
I have been
blown-away by
how successful the
Discovering Brass
projects have been –
John Wallace CBE

“

Discovering Brass -
compelling enough
to retain young
learner engagement –
Clair Tomalin



John Wallace CBE leads beginners at St. Peter's Catholic Primary School

we needed to keep the children on full throttle the whole time. Using the school halls for the sessions meant that we could provide children with freedom of movement and could comfortably split them into various smaller groups for creative and development tasks. This freedom was particularly helpful in providing a relaxed environment, and we saw their confidence grow with a significant increase in their interaction and creative input as the project sessions progressed.

We used a variety of games (many without the instruments) to ensure the sessions and knowledge-sharing was fun and memorable. The teachers and learning assistants found these games particularly challenging, but this approach helped to ensure that every minute of each session kept the topic in focus, both informatively and sublimely, whilst at the same time developing the fundamentals of music and playing."

Tony continued: "We selected 'conductors' to lead body-percussion and creativity sessions - these really honed the children's watching and reaction skills; if we were investigating the Schofar calls of the ancient Israelites, for example, the warm-up games would incorporate the relevant rhythms through clapping and mouthpiece buzzing, before we moved onto the natural trumpets. If we were introducing the topic of the trumpet events that formed an important part of the Olympic Games back in ancient Greece from 776BC, we would have our own Olympic Games and find champions for the longest, lowest and highest notes, and so on. This was a particularly great way for the children to learn and explore what they needed to adjust - e.g., to have better control of their breathing, embouchure and articulation.

"The opportunity to share some of the historic predecessors of the trumpet enabled us to explore the social significance of the instruments - particularly interesting in very diverse inner city schools."

As an enhanced element of the programme delivery, the Discovering Brass projects also welcomed a number of special guests, who immersed themselves into the sessions or provided fascinating presentations. Most notably Peter Holmes, the leading light of the European Musical Archaeology Project and a world-leading expert on ancient brass instruments, visited each school, enabling the children to see and play his vast selection of replica instruments, which brought the pictures and words of the resources into real-life context for the children.

To end the sessions with memorable impact, so that children were encouraged to persevere to the next stage of playing a modern brass instrument, The Wallace Collection will return to each school as a mixed ensemble playing all brass instruments, to put the finishing touches on the specially composed and improvised concert items based upon what the children have been learning over the preceding months. This will enable the young participants to perform alongside professionals in a special concert to the rest of their school. The projects then culminate with a joint concert, which brings all three schools together on stage in Duke's Hall with The Wallace Collection and Royal Academy of Music students. This 45-minute snapshot concert will provide a remarkable performance experience for the children and an impact-full climax to the Discovering Brass projects.

John Wallace CBE, of The Wallace Collection, reflected: "These projects have been an incredible learning curve, and not just for the children. Whilst everything appeared to be achievable on paper, it is always a concern as to whether the theory can actually be put into practice, but I'm over-joyed! I have been blown-away by how successful the Discovering Brass projects have been. With the social and cultural diversity of the participants across the schools, the outcomes represent a very solid case for this programme becoming a first-call approach for introducing brass throughout the UK and beyond.

"The natural trumpets were an inspirational component of the programme by Chris and Kirsty, not least for the instruments' robustness against the inevitable failed juggling attempts of young hands! Without the distraction of valves or slides, the children are focused on producing notes in the harmonic series - the basis of all brass playing - and oh how they loved to play! It was heart-warming to see the delight on their faces when they heard the sounds they produced.

"Because the natural trumpet has only a specific range of notes, I believe this has been key to the children's enthusiasm - even when they play different notes to each other, the harmonic range of the instrument means they were complementary sounds, making it difficult to hit a 'wrong' note and so boosting their confidence to try.

"It's not surprising that the trumpets are so effective though - a huge amount of research and development has gone into the design of the instruments, and the attention to detail means the end product is well-tuned across the range and far exceeds expectations for a so-called beginner instrument. Some of the visiting professionals are already looking to purchase one from us to add to their instrument collection!"

John Wallace concluded: "Obviously, we realise that the children involved in the Discovering Brass projects have had the benefit of an enhanced delivery of the programme - more of a Discovering Brass Platinum version. However, the extra opportunities that we've provided are bolt-ons, which can be achieved in a plethora of different ways to suit each individual provision - perhaps a great way for schools and music services to collaborate with local bands for school visits and performances? Through the first-hand experience gained from the Discovering Brass projects, it's safe to say that the core programme has proven itself to be extremely scalable, flexible and adaptable. Whether it's used for a one-to-one teaching session, a small group introduction to brass playing, or to embrace the whole-class delivery approach, it retains purpose, offers structured direction and provides all the added value demanded for engagement with the larger outreach of music services and schools.

"An innovative, scalable solution for the introduction of brass music, which is compelling enough to retain young learner engagement and adaptable enough for use by the full spectrum of music educators? Job Done!"

Further information about the Discovering Brass projects can be found at: www.TheWallaceCollection.world Enquiries about the Brass for Beginners programme, resources and natural trumpets should be directed to info@thewallacecollection.world