

# A classical star is born?

Now that BBC Two's *Classical Star* has its first winner in pianist Sophie Cashell, she and academy director Matthew Barley tell **Nina Large** why the show really matters

**N**ine contenders in a house, all given different tasks to do, two voted off each week... Sound familiar? Following the extraordinary appeal of *X Factor* and *Fame Academy* it was probably only a matter of time before classical music was given its very own 'fly-on-the-wall-docu-competitor'. So came the BBC Two show *Classical Star*, in which the winner, 18-year-old Irish pianist Sophie Cashell, scooped up nothing less than a four-album record contract as her prize. Sceptics may have been reaching for the remote control while chuntering about dumbing down – and indeed the concept of the show as a three-week long competition ending in a final performance was radical for the classical music industry.

After auditions all over the country, 18 exceptional young musicians aged 12-19 were chosen to have a preliminary workshop. From there, nine were invited into the 'academy' run by a music director, the cellist Matthew Barley. The TV-format requirement of a panel of judges – conductors Charles Hazlewood and Jason Lai, double bassist Chi-Chi Nwanoku, and music manager Steve Abbott – weeded the contestants down each week.

From the first programme it was clear that Barley didn't mince his words. He argued that a lot of his classical music colleagues were boring, and that their presentation of the music was dull. 'It was a



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bold statement,' he admits, 'But it's true. Classic FM has gathered millions of listeners but tickets sales prove that they are not going to enough concerts. The music speaks to people but the way it is presented on stage does not. Musicians have a real duty to respond to that. Otherwise they are turning people away from the concert hall.'

**THE BIG FINAL: the jury's verdict is made (above); Sophie Cashell gets a winning hug from Matthew Barley (left)**

The competitors were given tasks including performing in a shopping centre in Milton Keynes and a bar in Hoxton, learning how to tango and making a short recording, as well as learning about the musical worlds of DJ Gabriel Prokofiev and jazz pianist Julian Joseph. 'The 20th century was an age of specialisation in classical music which brought enormous benefits,' says Barley, who himself defies classification, answering to the names of cellist, improviser, teacher and husband of violinist Viktoria Mullova. 'But I think we lost the real sense of music

just being music that reaches out to ordinary people. That is what I am trying to put back.'

Unlike competitions where each performer has half an hour to wow the judges, the concept of a three-week academy allowed talent to be both located and nurtured, and would still have been a valid idea even without the cameras. But could the fact that it all had to translate into good TV have robbed the show of any meaningful success? 'Of course the TV cameras focused on the characters which people would want to watch, but that was irrelevant to the actual experiences that we all had,' replies Sophie Cashell. And to the intrinsically optimistic Barley the cameras added something positive: 'All the pressure, distractions and stop/starting is exactly like life and it was great training for them to have to focus on the music, despite everything else.'

However, Barley was also well aware that being broadcast on national TV added a huge responsibility to his role, and it was one he





**PLUCKY FINALIST:**  
Scottish guitarist  
Ian Watt plays Rodrigo

took typically seriously. 'Knowing it might be seen by millions focuses your mind in a wonderful way. Having to explain to the non-musical producers why it was important to do certain things made me constantly rationalise the reasons for what we were doing.'

'I've been doing workshops like this for 20 years now, but the public perception of classical music lags behind and people still think of it as a crusty tradition. Having it on TV gives the chance to show that there is really vigorous, healthy stuff going on.' Charles Hazlewood takes the thought further: 'We need to do things like this. It's one way that the BBC can really up the ante for making people appreciate classical music.'

Critics might have felt there was too much emphasis on the exploration of other musical areas – that by trying to ally itself with other trendier styles of music the show was missing the point of supposedly being about classical music. But thinking back to the night in Hoxton where the competitors had to perform to a group of kids who had no experience of classical music at all, it was actually the core classical works which moved them the most – notably Chopin's *Funeral March*, performed by pianist Emily Hooker.

As an accomplished bassoonist in her second year at the Royal Academy of Music, finalist Karen Geoghegan admits, 'I always thought I would be an orchestral player, but now I think maybe solo is the way I want to go. The academy has opened that extra door which as a bassoonist I thought I would never have.' Cashell, also in her second year at the Royal Academy, is similarly positive: 'Before, I was very much in my own classical music world, working away in practice rooms. The academy was a very special time and all of us managed to get something different from it.'

If one feared the competitors were just performer-wannabes in the worst *X Factor*

mould, reassurance came when their unquestionable talent was shown, especially in the final concert with the London Sinfonia at LSO St Luke's. Above all, record contract or not, nobody was going to dictate to this intelligent group of young musicians. 'Some things I didn't necessarily agree with and some I did, but everything made me think,' remembers guitar finalist Ian Watt.

While thrilled with her win, Cashell is a largely un-star struck Classical Star. 'Some might not take it seriously – it is a bit of an unusual way of getting somewhere in the

**'Some things I didn't agree with, but everything made me think'**

classical music world. But in a sense I have been working for this my whole life, and this was just a novel way of getting there.'

The students refer to Barley as something of a mentor, and you get the feeling that he will be in touch with several of them for many years to come. 'Matthew was very inspirational, his outlook is so refreshing,' says Cashell, whose first disc will be released in January (the choice of repertoire is still under discussion). 'I know none of us will be immediately seen as a wonder – we will have to prove that we are worthy. But at the same time it has given me a chance and perhaps people will be more likely to come to my concerts. It's a whole new chapter of my life.' ■

## THE FINALISTS AND THE WINNER IS...



**IRISH EYES...:**  
Sophie Cashell  
takes the prize

### **SOPHIE CASHELL** Piano

Aged 18; from Dublin, Ireland.

**Played:** Shostakovich: Piano Concerto No. 2; Scarlatti: Sonata, L104; Chopin: Nocturne in C-sharp minor; Kapustin: *Motive Force*

**HAZLEWOOD:** 'She drew us in bit by bit. That yearning exploration of the music goes into every piece of music she plays.'

**BARLEY:** 'She is a true poet. Her Shostakovich was such a sincere performance – the flow of the line transported you with just a single phrase. She can deeply move you – that's what it's all about.'

### **RUNNERS UP...**



### **IAN WATT** Guitar

Aged 16; from Aberdeen, Scotland.

**Played:** Rodrigo: *Concierto de Aranjuez*; Vianna (arr. Nelson Anderaos): *Carinhoso*; Jobim (arr.

Barreiros): *Felicidade*

**HAZLEWOOD:** 'Ian's music making used to be a bit closed off, like it was going on in his head. But during the academy he learnt how to connect his own personality with the music. Now the wiring is all in place, I think he will do something very special with the guitar.'

**BARLEY:** 'The slow movement of the Rodrigo showed his personal connection with the music. He is one of the most honest young musicians I've come across.'

### **KAREN GEOGHEGAN** Bassoon

Aged 19; from Livingston, Scotland.

**Repertoire:** Hummel: Grand Concerto for Bassoon & Orchestra; Monti (arr. Marc Reiff): *Czardas*; Gershwin (arr. Dave Arnold): *Summertime*

**HAZLEWOOD:** 'Karen played about the most technical piece the bassoon has. The fact that she played it with such effortlessness meant people didn't perhaps realise quite what a feat it was.'

**BARLEY:** 'My highlight of the entire evening was the Gershwin. I've never heard a bassoon played like that. With her sound and focus she is already one of the great wind players in the country.'





**WINNING TOUCH:** Sophie Cashell plays her way to victory in the *Classical Star* final at LSO St Luke's