

# Dramatic changes

An ambitious project to expand the facilities of London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama is due for completion next year, as Nina Large discovers

If you're asked to find London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama, you might know it was somewhere in the City of London, even near the Barbican Centre perhaps, but you'd have to look pretty carefully to find the entrance, down an alley in a gap between the sweeping brick walls of Silk Street.

In 2013 the opening of Milton Court, a massive new state-of-the-art building clad with several hundred metres of glass, which mixes living and working spaces with the performing arts, will finally allow the new-look Guildhall School to reveal itself.

The conservatoire nestles in something of an artistic quarter on the Barbican Estate – with the Barbican Centre, LSO St Luke's and the Museum of London all a stone's throw away. Twice awarded a Queen's Anniversary Prize for its outreach and opera programmes, the Guildhall School itself is a melting pot of artistic endeavour, with musicians, actors and theatre technicians studying together.

The £90m project is currently the UK's largest in both the higher education and performing arts sectors. It will include a 225-seat theatre, a studio theatre and a TV studio suite, as well as teaching, office spaces and public foyers and cafés, spread over six floors. Most excitingly, perhaps, it will also open the doors to the capital's newest public concert hall, a 610-seat venue (comparable to Wigmore Hall) that comes with all the bells and whistles of the latest design and acoustic technology. 'We want to ensure that students can enter their profession at the highest level,' says principal Barry Ife. 'Milton Court gives us the world-class training and performance centre we need to match their talent and aspirations.'

As well as fully adjustable acoustics in the hall to suit each type of performance, there will also be a multi-functional concert platform and audio and digital broadcast systems. Cleverly, the building also boasts a matching rehearsal space of the exact same size for each of the three performance venues, so that productions can be moved seamlessly from rehearsal to stage.

## MOVING MUSIC

How the Guildhall School of Music has changed location over the years



seventies style: the current Barbican site

In 1880 the Guildhall School of Music opened in a warehouse in Aldermanbury, in the heart of the City of London. Just six years later it moved to larger premises, and in 1935 it added '& Drama' to its name.

In 1968 they introduced music therapy as a study course, leading the way in outreach work. Two years later they took on their first stage management students.



The school moved to its present Silk Street premises in 1977, designed for 340 students. As numbers increased, so did the conservatoire's reputation with musical alumni including Sir George Martin, Jacqueline du Pré, Sir James

Galway, Bryn Terfel (left) and Dave Holland.

With over 800 undergraduate and postgraduate students, and 400 Junior Guildhall pupils, the Guildhall received planning permission for Milton Court in 2007 and work got underway the following year.

Ife describes the building as the 'shopfront' they have been needing for years. These days it seems it isn't enough to work away behind closed doors, and there has been a big move in arts and higher education to try and face outwards in a bid to make themselves more approachable. The Royal Opera House did

it with their Floral Hall as did the Barbican's new entrance on Silk Street, and New York's Juilliard School of Music has recently completed a development. 'The point is we want to encourage a real sense of engagement from Londoners,' says Ife, 'and a sense of excitement and curiosity about what we do, which we hope they will come and be a part of.'

The Barbican Centre is extremely happy with the building since the new concert hall could potentially increase the scope of its own programming. 'You could say it's the Queen Elizabeth Hall we never had,' says Sir Nicholas Kenyon, the Barbican's managing director. 'It gives us a new opportunity to diversify our programme further with smaller-scale music making, both contemporary and period.'

Since Ife took over at the Guildhall in 2004, one of his greatest missions has been to seal the relationship between the Guildhall and its cultural neighbours. In 2009 the Guildhall School, Barbican Centre and London Symphony Orchestra (LSO) jointly created the LINK alliance, which includes an initiative known as 'Centre for Orchestra' whereby the LSO coaches and supports students both at the Guildhall and in the early stages of their career. In addition the Barbican and Guildhall have also created a joint outreach division, and within the next few years they plan to run all their venues, including Milton Court, as a single entity. Next spring, the Guildhall will present the first of many operas in the main Barbican theatre, giving students enviably high-profile opportunities.

There is little doubt that future students at the Guildhall will benefit tremendously. In addition Ife feels the Milton Court development has great international significance: 'With 7-8 per cent of UK GDP being due to the cultural and creative industries, the idea that the City of London is not just a financial centre but also a cultural centre is very important. Milton Court will be a massive additional investment in the cultural infrastructure of the capital, and of the country.' n



brave new sound world:  
an impression of the new 610-seat  
Guildhall concert hall; and  
(above) its glass-fronted exterior