



Violin soloist Nicola Benedetti, an alumni of the NCO, meets its current members

# 'Everyone should get a chance to play'

So says a keen member of the National Children's Orchestra. **NINA LARGE** drops in on a rehearsal and finds fun, friendship – and a visiting violin star



**C**hildren need something to aspire to – something that makes them want to fulfil their potential in the best possible way. This is the mantra of Wilmae Price MBE, who decided back in 1978 that the best way to achieve this was to encourage talented children as young as six to play in an orchestra. And so the National Children's Orchestra (NCO) was born.

And she wasn't alone. Today the UK boasts countless orchestras for young people and you can bet that almost all of today's famous names played in one when they were first starting to learn. Most of these groups have traditionally had an entry age of about 13 years, but Price was keen to cater for younger budding musicians. With the NCO she created five-age-banded orchestras taking players from six or seven up to 14 years old. Violinist Nicola Benedetti was one of them, joining the NCO aged nine.

The first thing that really struck me was how it felt to be part of that huge big sound – because even at that age you are so used to practising on your own all the time. It was such an influential and formative experience, she remembers. And it still continues – when we meet she is rehearsing as special guest soloist with the NCO for a concert in London's St John's Smith Square. The excitement from the young players is palpable. They remember Benedetti's triumph as the Young Musician of the Year back in 2004 and are thrilled to have the opportunity to play with her. One violinist bows up breathless and trills, 'I'm so happy! She spoke to me! Hero-worship aside, Benedetti takes her role seriously. 'I have to remember what I felt at that age and how important it was for me to see people who were not that much older, playing well.'

The 17-year-old violin player An Hope is a case in point. 'It's very inspiring for us. You need someone to look up to,' he says.

Benedetti is no stranger to working with children. Though still only 24 years

old, she talks about her outreach work with incredible maturity and she is clearly passionate about the need for children to be involved in music. For the past few years she has been closely involved with Sistema Scotland (inspired by the Venezuelan musical movement El Sistema) acting as the children's official travel up there every six weeks in order to fit in a day of teaching.

'I could go on forever about the benefits and importance of children playing in orchestras,' she says. 'The children's behaviour, their concentration, their social skills and self-worth are all so improved and that's not even starting on what they have achieved musically. Orchestras like the NCO have such an important role.'

It's not just about the music either: playing with a youth orchestra is as much a social and developmental experience as a musical one and the NCO teachers pride themselves on their pastoral care. 'You are doing something that is making a real difference to them, and at their particular stage of

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**The first thing that struck me was the big sound**

Nicola Benedetti



development it can be life changing,' says course manager John Mitchell.

If you listened to the NCO with your eyes shut, you'd be forgiven for momentarily thinking you were listening to a professional ensemble; indeed, many of these young musicians are hopeful professionals-in-waiting. One violinist admitted that her mother wouldn't let her bounce on a trampoline for fear of an accident that could damage her fingers, but music isn't the only thing in these children's lives and plenty of them are also highly skilled at other activities – there are talented dancers, county rugby players and rowers among them.

Above all these children learn about teamwork. 'The sort of skills you need to play in an orchestra are life lessons,' says Price. 'They have to learn to be part of a big organisation, to give as much as to take.' Double bassist Charlie Green, aged 15, agrees: 'It's important for kids to play in orchestras – you learn to cooperate with other people and how



Benedetti rehearses with the NCO for an upcoming concert



Fresh and eager: the promising young players of the NCO

to play as a group. It gives you skills for so many other things.

Larger orchestras such as the prestigious National Youth Orchestra (NYO) and NCO run residential courses where the experience is intensified even more. It doesn't come cheap – up to £1600 a year – but these days most organisations run funding schemes for those less able to afford it. The NYO, whose players are aged 15–19, insists that no one should be denied membership for financial reasons, and has several free or reduced-rate memberships. Around 20% of members of the NCO and 40% of members of the NYO are on some kind of bursary scheme.

“Everyone should get the chance to play when they are young, because they could be really good,” says 14-year-old NCO violiner Annabel Hancock. “The opportunity to make such great friends and work with these tutors is amazing.”

While the standard at the NCO is incredibly high, you don't have to be as polished as some of these children – local youth orchestras are a great way for young players to engage with music in a friendly way and the benefits remain the same. These are often the starting point for those who go on to join more competitive ensembles. Some have rigorous testing and a strict Grade eight standard policy, others ask for Grade six and have no formal audition.

Unfortunately, the arts cuts of the past few years have had a devastating effect on several of these organisations. The annual Festival of British Youth Orchestras was forced to shut down at the start of 2010 after more than 50 years of celebrating young talent. The UK's representative body, the National Association of Youth Orchestras, went down with it and the National Orchestras of Scotland have also been badly hit.

Benedetti speaks for many whose undoubted enthusiasm is edged with frustration. “The benefits are so clear and so unarguably obvious that it's just madness for it not to be more of a priority in this country.” She's something of a woman on a mission. In the future she plans to cut down on her performing (more than 100 concerts a year) and devote more time to working with youth orchestras and teaching. Indeed, next year she will visit schools all over the UK.

“Young Musicians have a freshness, an eagerness, and an excitement that gives you energy and perspective,” she says. “It makes you lose this obsession of what so much of the music industry can be about – driving constantly towards a need for perfection and away from an appreciation of what art is. Youth brings something to music that we can't possibly bring.” ■  
For more on the National Children's Orchestra visit [nco.org.uk](http://nco.org.uk)

## BIG BANDS FOR BUDDING BENEDETTIS

### LOCAL YOUTH ORCHESTRA

These vary in size from around 80 players up to a full symphony orchestra (120 plus). Most of them take players aged 15–21 but for some, entry depends more on standard than on age. As a rough guide you would need to be of about Grade 4 standard to join.

### NATIONAL YOUTH ORCHESTRA

Requires members to be of Grade 8 distinction standard. Performs across the UK and recently completed the South Bank Centre's Mahler Cycle with Vasily Petrenko conducting at the Royal Festival Hall.

### THE NATIONAL YOUTH ORCHESTRAS OF SCOTLAND

A large collection of ensembles which trains young musicians aged 8–25, in eight different classical and jazz groups,

including a children's orchestra for those aged 8–14. NYOS Strings performed at the opening of the Scottish Parliament in July. Famous alumni include Dame Evelyn Glennie and Colin Currie.

### YOUNG MUSICIANS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Open to students or recently graduated musicians up to the age of 25. Performs at major venues across the UK. It aims to cater for young musicians on the threshold of their professional careers.

### LONDON SCHOOLS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Part of the Centre for Young Musicians, run by the Guildhall School, it is the resident schools orchestra at the Barbican and plays there three times a year. Children from all over London can audition, regardless of ability to pay.