

Main picture: Jennifer Pike returns to her roots at Chetham's  
Below: Pike when she won the 2002  
Young Musician of the Year Award

# Guiding star

Chetham's School of Music is where some of the UK's best musicians have spent their formative years. Jennifer Pike, one of its most successful alumni, gives **NINA LARGE** a guided tour



**A**t first glance it may look like the lunchtime rush of any school, but as you walk across the medieval courtyard you start to notice instrument cases and scores of music tucked under the arms of the uniformed students. I'm at Chetham's School of Music – the largest specialist music school in the UK – and today is something of a homecoming for 22-year-old violinist Jennifer Pike, who first came here aged seven. As we walk around, the place buzzes with countless friendly faces including those of former teachers whom she greets with genuine warmth and excitement.

Her father is a musician and teacher at Chetham's, and Pike was first given a violin aged five. When she enrolled at Chet's (as it's fondly known) two years later, she was a year younger than the rest of her year group, but that was no obstacle. 'It was bewildering in some respects but amazing to be immersed in music so completely.' Director of music Stephen Threlfall was immediately aware that she was a unique talent. 'We all felt – wow – this is somebody who has a natural affinity with the instrument and incredible insight into the music.'

Being the youngest was something she was going to have to get used to. In 2002, when she was just 12 years old, she entered the Young Musician of the Year competition, alongside the usual number of Chet's students (this year over 80 have entered). She became the youngest-ever winner with her performance of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. It was Chetham's that kept her feet on the ground. 'I absolutely loved it, but it didn't feel too daunting. When it came to interviews I felt I could really talk about the music – Chet's prepared me very well for those situations.' Media attention and offers of performing were well managed and Threlfall was keen not to separate her from the school system. 'We just wanted to keep it very careful and make sure the education was flowing too.'

Indeed the academic side of Chetham's is something to which she regularly refers. Approximately a third of the school timetable is devoted to music but students tend to average eight GCSEs and stick to three A levels, so the academic side is far from overlooked. You might expect her to have put a particular music teacher on a pedestal but after lunch, Pike bumps into her old chemistry teacher and says: 'It was people like this who really helped



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**It was people like this who really helped me**

Jennifer Pike on her former Chemistry teacher, Paul Przybyska

me. They instilled this feeling of being rounded. One could become a little narrow-minded in a place that specialises in something – but that's the wonderful thing about Chet's. Music is about life, and Chet's is brilliant at it.'

We head to a lunchtime concert at the stunningly beautiful 15th-century Baronial Hall. These are something of a Chetham's institution, with two happening simultaneously every day, both here and in the newer Whiteley Hall. Pike groans, 'Argh! They were terrifying! If you can play in front of your friends and teachers then you can play in front of anyone. Give me the Barbican any day!'

Of course, they provide incredible training, offering students the chance to get used to the adrenaline of performance. But performing comes with hours of practice – often up to three hours a day – and the skill of learning to listen and work on your own is something taught right from the start. Students as young as eight will be left to work for 40-minute sessions. 'It was a little daunting at first, but I see now how fantastically important that set-up is,' Pike says, as she leads the way to the practice corridor. When we get to room B15, where she spends so many hours, she laughs, 'Here it is! Chetham's has produced some phenomenal musicians; it's amazing to think what has been achieved in these rooms!'

The biggest news at Chetham's is the opening of a state-of-the-art new building in March. Pike dons a hard hat and boots to scour the site and is thrilled to think about the benefits for future students. There will be recording and editing suites, a dedicated outreach centre for the school's renowned



Jennifer meets some current Chetham's students



One of the famous  
 lunchtime concerts  
 in the 15th-century  
 Baronial Hall

community projects, performance spaces and lots of big practice rooms. 'Music is such an emotional, personal thing – in order to create and be inspired you need to be in a place that makes you want to do it. This new building is going to be wonderful.'

Alongside the old medieval buildings (the UK's oldest public library is also in Chetham's grounds) yet right in the hub of modern day Manchester, Chetham's offers a unique experience. Students perform regularly at the Bridgewater Hall and neighbouring Manchester Cathedral and the staff themselves hail from the Hallé Orchestra, BBC Philharmonic, Manchester Camerata and Royal Northern College of Music. Guest conductors are also a regular feature – recently the students have worked with Paul McCreesh and the Gabrieli Consort, the BBC Singers and the Hallé. 'Guest musicians get a buzz from the students and the improvement the students make is tremendous,' says Threlfall.

After leaving the school Pike continued her studies with a postgraduate degree at the Guildhall

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Jennifer Pike

School of Music and Drama (aged just 16) and she is currently finishing an undergraduate music degree at Oxford University. 'Some might say it wasn't necessary, but one can easily stand in front of an orchestra, do the notes and that's it. I think that's really sad. It's not just about the solo line – there is always something else going on and I wanted to find out about it all. That's what will help me with performing.'

Around the time she was at the Guildhall, concerts started to slowly build up and she's performed with most of the major UK orchestras. This year she has given around 55 concerts. Balancing this work with being a New Generation Artist, recording for Chandos and doing a degree has been tough, she admits, 'but student life has actually kept me sane, allowing me to continue loving performing music.'

As for the future she just wants it all to carry on, and when she leaves Oxford this summer you can be sure we'll be seeing even more of her. 'I'm not going to feel like I'm jumping in at the deep end because it has all been a steady curve. I've always wanted to perform and

I hope it continues – life is the biggest stage of them all ■

*Jennifer Pike performs at London's Goldsmiths Hall on 15 Feb 2012*

**CHETHAM'S OTHER FAMOUS ALUMNI**

- **STEPHEN HOUGH** pianist (below)
- **MIKE LINDUP** founder member of Level 42
- **WAYNE MARSHALL** organist
- **GUY JOHNSTON** cellist
- **DANIEL HARDING** principal guest conductor of the LSO



STEPHEN HOUGH: GUY LAWRENCE/PAUL HARRIS