

30 YEARS YOUNG

In its heyday, the BBC's Young Musician of the Year attracted 18 million TV viewers. Now the competition has turned 30, **Nina Large** asks the makers and past winners to reflect on its astonishing impact



TOP BRASS: horn player David Pyatt collects the 1988 Young Musician of the Year prize from the Duchess of Kent; (left) founder Humphrey Burton



The BBC Young Musician of the Year is not so young any more. It was, in fact, in 1978 that the competition first aired on BBC One, gripping the UK public's imagination as young, talented soloists were whittled down to battle it out in the concerto final. Time, then, to look back.

Apart from local music society competitions that were generally for a lower standard, there were actually very few opportunities for young instrumentalists back in the 1970s. As series producer Roy Tipping says, it was 'a complete vacuum'. For him, the crunch came when he was asked to make a series of programmes of the Leeds Piano Competition in 1976, and both he and presenter Humphrey Burton were disappointed to see that there were no British finalists competing. 'This wasn't a fair reflection of the talent in Britain,' he says. 'We knew there was a tremendous wealth of youngsters out there – not just pianists, but wind, brass and string players too. So we set about finding them, and by golly we did!'

And so the idea was borne out of discussion between Burton, Tipping and the late director Walter Todds to create a series of programmes

that would showcase the cream of young British talent in a completely new way. Grouping the competitors by instrument was specifically designed to ensure that there were four different types of instrument and not, say, four violinists in the final (the fifth category, percussion, was not added until 1994). That first year the finalists included pianist Stephen Hough and clarinettist Michael Collins – now world-class soloists, both were beaten to the title by trombonist Michael Hext.

With the series following the musicians right from the first round to the final, the public had the chance to see a completely different side to classical music and get right into the thick of the competition. As Anna Crookes remembers from her piano win in 1982: 'We pretty much had a captive audience because there were only three TV channels to choose from and because it was broadcast on a Sunday night. *Young Musician* was by default like the equivalent of the *X Factor* and everybody watched it.'

Presenter Humphrey Burton encouraged viewers to make their own opinions about the players and debate in homes across the UK became heated over who should win. 'The general public really got involved,' he remembers. 'Kids at school took an interest in it and families would all watch it together. I tried to give challenges to the viewers to make them think about the players themselves. And even if I didn't agree with the jury's opinion I still tried to make sense of it for the viewers.'

The series was supposed to be a one-off but the response was so overwhelming that the controllers at BBC asked for another. 'We were flabbergasted at how much it took the public imagination,' says Tipping. 'But we said we'd die young if we did it every year! Since it took about 18 months to organise we said we would only do one every other year, and that's the way it has stayed ever since. We also felt that there wasn't enough serious



talent to justify a yearly competition and we would see the same people re-entering. A two-year gap would give people a real chance for improvement and justify re-entry.'

By the second competition in 1980 a massive 18 million viewers tuned into watch oboist Nicolas Daniel win the final. Compare that to the top BBC TV viewing figure for any programme in 2007: just 13 million for a special episode of *The Vicar of Dibley*. Daniel recalls: 'The fact that an instrument like mine could be seen for a substantial length of time in people's living rooms was really important.'

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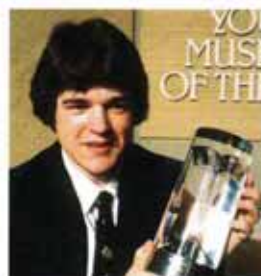
Of course, with that sort of viewing figures the pressure on the winner was inevitable. Crookes remembers people stopping her as she walked down the street: 'I had celebrity status overnight and I was completely bemused by it. Suddenly I had all these people writing to me asking my fee for a concert. I didn't even know that people got paid to play – I thought they did it for the love of it!' Daniel had a similar experience: 'I was forwarded hundreds of letters a week from the BBC with all sorts of offers that were financially tempting.' Luckily he had a wise mentor in his teacher Janet Craxton: 'After doing a number of

ON THE PODIUM: PAST YOUNG MUSICIAN WINNERS



1978 **MICHAEL HEXT**
Trombone

Since winning the first ever Young Musician of the Year Competition, Hext has pursued a successful orchestral career. He has held the title of principal trombone for the Hallé Orchestra, the London Philharmonic and, currently (above), the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House.



1980 **NICHOLAS DANIEL**
Oboe

Daniel works as both a soloist and a conductor and has made over 20 CDs. He founded the Haffner Wind Ensemble in 2003 and has been closely involved in new repertoire for the oboe. He was recently appointed Prince Consort Professor at the Royal College of Music.



1982 **ANNA MARKLAND**
Piano

Anna Markland has earned a considerable reputation not just as a pianist but also as a teacher, adjudicator, and singer – under her married name of Anna Crookes. She is a founder member of the award-winning vocal ensemble I Fagiolini, and has made numerous recordings.



1984 **EMMA JOHNSON**
Clarinet

Emma Johnson is, like 1978 Young Musician finalist Michael Collins, one of very few clarinetists to have established a busy international career, with a repertoire of over 40 concertos. She is signed to Universal Classics, and was made an MBE in the 1996 Queen's Birthday Honours.



1986 **ALAN BRIND**
Violin

Brind stopped playing the violin for a short time, thinking he might prefer professional snooker instead. He returned to his instrument and made several solo recordings before becoming an orchestral musician, playing for the Philharmonia among others.

WIND POWER: the 2006 wind category finalists line up



YOUNG MUSICIAN OF THE YEAR

JUST THE START: 'I needed to improve more,' reflects Nicholas Daniel about his 1980 win



concerts that were all great opportunities she said, "That's quite enough work. Don't take any more until I say. Now let's concentrate on lessons." And she clicked the diary shut.'

It became clear that an element of support and guidance was needed for the winner – something that both Tipping and Burton got involved in – and post-competition care of the finalists became formalised in 1992 when the Young Concert Artists Trust (YCAT) took over the role, offering a level of support quite unique for a competition.

Like Daniel, other winners, including cellist Natalie Clein in 1994 and violinist

Jennifer Pike in 2002, have chosen to retreat from the tempting offers of stardom and concentrate on their studies before feeling ready to perform more consistently in the public eye. 'I needed to capitalise on what I'd achieved but doing concerts was not the best way of doing that. What I needed to do was improve more and practise hard which is probably what the most successful winners have done,' says Daniel.

There is no question that winning the competition was giving these young performers the chance of a lifetime, but the debate was whether that exposure was

actually too soon. Was the competition being aimed at players who, for all their *Wunderkind* talent, were simply too young? There were never picket lines outside Television Centre but there was certainly opposition, most notably from the European String Teachers Association in the 1980s. Others argued that an older age range, up to 22 or 23, would be more beneficial to a winner who might at that age be more ready to step into the spotlight.

Though Pike was the youngest winner to date, at just 12 years old, there have been winners for whom the competition was part and parcel of the path they were already

WINNERS (CONTINUED)



1988 **DAVID PYATT**
Horn

David Pyatt was just 14 when he won the competition. Since 1998, he has been principal horn of the London Symphony Orchestra. He has also recorded solo discs, including an acclaimed CD of Mozart's horn concertos, and in 2007 premiered a concerto by John McCabe.



1990 **NICOLA LOUD**
Violin

After winning aged 15, Loud continued her studies at the Royal Academy of Music in London and the Juilliard School in New York. She works with the major UK orchestras, and is also an accomplished chamber musician. In 2003 she was elected an Associate of The Royal Academy of Music.



1992 **FREDDY KEMPF**
Piano

Even before his win at just 14, Kempf had national recognition, performing Mozart's Piano Concerto K414 with the Royal Philharmonic aged eight. He has since become a major international soloist and in 2001 won Best Young British Performer at the Classical Brits.



1994 **NATALIE CLEIN**
Cello

Following her UK win, Clein became the first ever British winner of the Eurovision Competition for Young Musicians. For several years she avoided high profile appearances but has recently come into the spotlight again and now has an exclusive contract with EMI.



1996 **RAFAL ZAMBRZYCKI PAYNE**
Violin

Four years after winning, Zambrzycki Payne was awarded the title of BBC Radio 2 Young Musician, and released his first commercial recording with EMI. He also works extensively as a chamber musician, particularly with the trio Dimension.

on. By the time of her win in 2004, 16-year-old Nicola Benedetti had been the subject of a BBC Scotland documentary, had had serious interest from record companies and signed with IMG Artists. But even she acknowledges the 'musical circus' which ensued after her win. 'I had to suss out the right advice and I learnt very quickly who to listen to,' she says. 'I had to stay very headstrong and remember who I was, why I was doing it, where my focus was and how serious I was about being not just "good" but "great" by the time I got to 35. It was hard not to listen to everybody's judgement.'

Nonetheless, it seems that for all of the winners, the experience has been one which has changed their lives, and largely for the right reasons. The competition remains unique in its ability to allow young artists huge public and media exposure in whatever way they choose to use it, whether it's straight away or after a few years. Besides enjoying the success of a varied career, the thing Daniel is most proud of is his personal part in expanding the oboe repertoire: 'I got a newsletter from Faber the other day listing the pieces they publish for the oboe, and I realised that three-quarters of pieces on it were written for me. It is a great feeling to have done something really positive – I simply would not have been able to get to a place where I could start to do that without Young Musician.'

'Nothing can compare to it, both in terms of experience and exposure,' agrees Benedetti,



'It was hard not to listen to everybody else's judgement'

who watched the competition as a child and felt inspired by violinist Nicola Loud's 1990 win to try and get there herself. For all the competitors, one of the most exciting elements is getting to play with a major British orchestra in the final and Benedetti was no exception. 'At the end of my performance I was happy enough – the whole thing had given me a great orchestra, amazing conductor, a great hall, a great concerto... I couldn't ask for more.'

Pianist Freddy Kempf won in 1992, a time when the competition expanded to embrace a wider range of young talent including

televised masterclasses with competitors from previous years and the introduction of Young Composer of the Year. Alongside the music there was also a fashion show and semi-finalists were given the chance to wear clothes designed by Paul Smith. 'The early 1990s were a really exciting time and I feel very lucky to have done it in that year – it was a very important time in my life,' he remembers.

The balance of the programme content was also beginning to concentrate more on the personalities

of the players which, some argued, was at the expense of broadcasting the music. The current executive producer Tina Fletcher explains: 'TV has developed and these days the audience expect to be able to relate to the characters they see. It is important that we can engage with the players as ordinary teenagers who have a passion to perform classical music.' But, she insists, this is not at the cost of the music, as this year saw more performances aired than ever before: early rounds were on Radio 3 and online, where there is also an archive for people to access whenever they want.

'All successful "brands" have to move with the times,' says Fletcher. 'But this has to be done without losing integrity. The restructure and reshape of Young Musician 2008 has the essence of the original concept at its heart: that is identifying musical excellence in young British performers today.' ■



1998 **ADRIAN SPILLET**
Percussion

Adrian Spillet was the first, and still the only, percussion winner of the Young Musician competition. He has performed at many major UK festivals as well as giving numerous TV and radio broadcasts. In 1999 he formed the percussion quartet 4-Mality.



2000 **GUY JOHNSTON**
Cello

In 2001, a year after his win, Johnston became the youngest ever soloist at the first night of the Proms, playing the Elgar Cello Concerto. He performs as a soloist worldwide with leading orchestras and conductors, and is a founder member of the Aronowitz Ensemble.



2002 **JENNIFER PIKE**
Violin

Jennifer Pike, the youngest ever winner at just 12, has gone on to perform with almost all the major UK orchestras and tours the world both as soloist and recitalist. Earlier this year she became the first classical musician ever to win the South Bank Show Breakthrough Artist Award.



2004 **NICOLA BENEDETTI**
Violin

As a result of her winning performance, Benedetti famously landed a record contract with Deutsche Grammophon and her third disc was released earlier this year. She is passionately involved with humanitarian causes, working with schools across the UK as well as UNICEF.



2006 **MARK SIMPSON**
Clarinet

As well as winning the Young Musician competition, Mark also won the BBC Proms/Guardian Young Composer of the Year and pursues a successful career in both fields. His works have been performed by leading ensembles including the National Youth Orchestra.