

## PAUL McCREESH

Paul McCreesh, Founder and Artistic Director of the Gabrieli Consort and Players, talks music education, Gabrieli Roar and his latest partnership project, Bach to School, in conversation with Tim Garrard.

### **Can you describe your own music education?**

Yes, sporadic, I suppose! I was lucky. I won a small scholarship for instrumental lessons from my local authority, though that funding eventually stopped. But I was lucky again because my parents were prepared to dig into their pockets, quite deeply sometimes. They didn't have a lot of money but they really valued music education.

Looking back, making comparisons with what is available today, my state schools were OK. Both had an orchestra and a choir, and I think pretty much every school did in those days - the 60s and early 70s. Nowadays, I'm sure you'd find the odd school that has better provision. But, very sadly, the general level is incredibly low or, often, in fact, non-existent. There were more things happening then, at a much broader level.

I think I was quite a musical kid, but I wasn't by any means a wunderkind. Music was certainly my main interest, and I much enjoyed playing in the local youth orchestra, but I surely wasn't going to be a solo cellist, and even getting into the National Youth Orchestra was a level too high for me. Maybe I had some talent, but I was spectacularly unfocused! Even as an adult I've had to work really hard on finding that core discipline. But I do think all of this has made me a better teacher.

### **What makes a really good teacher?**

I'm not for one minute going to presume to lecture teachers about this, but, I do have a lot of space in my life for the slightly awkward, maverick kid who does things their own way; the kid

who's not always going to come up with an A\* but has that flair. I think we all know that if a kid wants to do something, nothing will stop them! Perhaps part of teaching is to make sure that we're opening the right door for that pupil, because somebody who may have failed in one area may really thrive in another; we have to find where that is.

### **Can you tell us a bit more about Gabrieli Roar?**

Roar is unashamedly evangelical in its mission – to connect young people with 'core culture' through singing, and in so doing to challenge the way young people think. A Roar project will often be 300 young people of all backgrounds from all over the country, uniting to share something which is bigger than themselves. I do feel that if we're not introducing young people to the greatest works of art then we're not really giving them the tools to understand our world. You may be in Ely Cathedral performing a piece of Parry, but within five minutes we can talk about people throughout history, connect with plainsong of the ancient world, discuss the history of the Fens, and why Ely Cathedral is built in what is now a very small town. Everything is connected! We can also talk about religion in a really creative way outside the context of religious belief. So, for me, Roar is always a way to make young people think in a different way.

I don't run ROAR to make professional musicians of the future - though that may be a happy by-product because some of our young people are indeed very passionate about singing. I do it because, I hope, our youngsters become more rounded people and understand the world better. They will also be happier people because they've

seen a bigger range of possibilities. Perhaps they will grow up to be great teachers, or great choir animateurs, or people who work in the arts; but, if they don't do that, no matter. I hope they will want to explore the world of culture in their lives, and maybe become parents who are confident to share that with their own children. If we can give that to the younger generation then we can all achieve something of real value to society.

We've made a start, but there's no reason why we couldn't have a Roar-type project in 25 major cities in this country. That has to be the aspiration. Roar has somehow got to grow up and one day expand beyond my own passion and commitment, which is why it's great working with you guys at MTA. I want to expand Roar to be a truly national organisation, but it must never be a quango; part of it must be to offer kids the change to work with really great conductors and singers who can share their skills with kids.

### **You are a passionate advocate for widening access and opportunity for all. How big a role does educational partnership and collaboration have to play in achieving this?**

I am extremely concerned that so many of the people in professional music, and especially choral music, are privately educated. And, it seems, increasingly so. Obviously, to some degree that speaks for the quality of the education they receive so there's no criticism of the people who teach in the private sector, but as a country I think we're losing a tremendous opportunity.



So I think partnership is absolutely vital. But it has to be real partnership. However great the temptation is, we've all got to try and avoid political passions getting in the way of our commitment to the art. And we have to be very careful that we don't make a basic assumption that everything in the private sector is rosy in comparison to the state sector, because that simply isn't the case. There is some stupendously good teaching going on in the state sector. So we have to cultivate really carefully nurtured collaborative projects which are really about true partnership, aware that disparity between resources can often cause some tension.

I'm also a passionate advocate for class-based music teaching, which should never be replaced by projects. So many cultural organisations have 'outreach projects', which is a phrase I rather detest. With Roar we actually invite young people into our core activity. We share the stage with them,

and we put records out in the public domain. Ok, we didn't win a Gramophone Award this year, but we did come in the top three, which is not bad (I can't be responsible if they make the wrong decisions!). And we weren't in an 'education' category – we were in the top three of international choral recordings this year. That proves what young people can do – but Roar's ordinary kids really do extraordinary things.

**Tell us about 'Bach to School'!**

'Bach to School' is a little project that I've created, partly with my MTA partner in crime, Simon Toyne. It's built around the Bach Chorale, but engineered to work with the current restrictions facing school music. The beauty of the chorales is that they're really great music but they're very, very simple in terms of their musical demands. So we've put together a list of the best cantata-movement chorales, and we've recorded all the music live

with Gabrieli, so you've got a real orchestral accompaniment with period instruments. And I've also written short teaching notes with a little bit of background. The idea is to make it possible for every single school in the country - whether they've got a developed music tradition or a simple unison choir - to connect with Bach's amazing music. I'm in complete admiration for what teachers are achieving in schools at the moment, and I hope this little offering will be a useful resource.

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