

CASE STUDY

Romany Wood

Martin Leigh, King Edward's School, Birmingham



ABSTRACT

An ambitious medium-complexity project bringing a vast primary-aged choir into Birmingham's jaw-dropping Symphony Hall for a bespoke performance alongside the KES / KEHS symphony orchestra.

PARTNERSHIPS

King Edward's School
King Edward's High School for Girls
Birmingham Symphony Hall
Primary Schools

BACKGROUND

It was an idea rooted in opportunity and generosity. King Edward's School (KES), working in partnership with King Edward's High School for Girls (KEHS), has a symphony orchestra of unusual scale, quality, and ambition. It's an extraordinary asset, 98 players strong, one we wanted to develop and promote by sharing it with others. The opportunity was King Edward's outreach programme, with its 200 annual events, its links, at last count, with 223 state-maintained primary schools, and its annual reach of 12,000 boys and girls. King Edward's Outreach won Best Independent-Maintained School Partnership at the TES Independent School of the Year awards in 2015.

The city of Birmingham is an opportunity, too. Its diversity is thrilling, the needs of many communities - often side-by-side in geography with areas of great affluence - real and pressing. At its physical heart is Symphony Hall, one of the world's great concert halls; at its educational core the two independent and seven grammar schools operating under one foundation, the Schools of King Edward VI in Birmingham. Both the foundation and King Edward's School share a charitable purpose, widening access through assisted places, and through outreach work. The foundation funded the King Edward's Summer School, for instance, and its financial support made a project as complex and ambitious as Romany Wood possible.



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But it all started with a pupil at my wife's former school. He came from horrible deprivation, from one of the most excluded parts of Birmingham, and was a musician already of tremendous skill and still greater potential. His intelligence and energy, and the paucity of opportunity available to him I often remember, and he was the person I wanted to reach and whose aspirations I wanted to transform through Romany Wood.

The vision was to share KES/KEHS Symphony with primary-age pupils from across our city; to perform together at Symphony Hall, to make music and meet each other, and to build relationships and links between disparate communities. The participating schools would have the chance to start or grow a choir, the music leaders were to be generously supported, encouraged and trained; KES/KEHS Symphony would be challenged by and developed through an unfamiliar repertoire and the different musical challenges of working with solo voice and choir; a performance would be an opportunity to learn together in and from a world-class concert hall.



Romany Wood is a cantata for massed children's choirs, symphony orchestra, soprano soloist, and narrator. The music, by David Gaukroger, is both accomplished and attractive. Its vocal lines are completely appropriate for young voices, its music combining skilful pastiche with witty appropriation; the words, by David Carr, tell the story of a woodland wedding. It's a work I had performed before, and I had a good relationship with the composer.

And, whilst the preceding sounds impressive, and the vision behind it ambitious, it's these individual relationships that make a project of this size and ambition possible to conceive, and practical to enact. My relationship with the composer, and our contacts in the primary and preparatory schools; the relationship of a certain head with her peers, the trust that allowed us to offer a group of partnered schools this huge proposal, to be heard and be believed; the confidence that the splendid boys and girls of King Edward's would acquit themselves with skill and élan, be flexible, generous, and positive in making great things happen.

NARRATIVE

The project was conceived in June 2015, ran through the 2015-6 academic year, and culminated in a performance in June 2016. Contacts were refreshed and renewed in autumn 2015, through visits, invitations to concerts, and through the King Edward's outreach programme. And Symphony Hall was booked (it's important to remember that major venues work several years ahead, and bookings need to be made significantly in advance).

The participants were grouped into hubs by geography and by musical experience: it was more convenient for schools in the East of the city to work together, for instance. By contrast, one preparatory school is effectively a choir school, and its pupils would need significantly less support than others.



The first gathering of music leaders was in February 2016, a workshop day, run at one of the hub schools. The project was introduced, its vision outlined and its timetable agreed, and an experienced choral animator worked with the group. Her brief was not only to teach the choir leaders the music of Romany Wood, show its strengths and warn of its pitfalls; but also to build confidence in them, model for them techniques for working with young voices, for building choirs. The leaders left with a packet of vocal scores or libretto booklets tailored to and sufficient for their choirs, a full score, and CD recordings of the work, and of its accompaniments. Although many of the music leaders were tremendous musicians, others had little experience; these recordings meant that the work could be taught without a piano and our packets meant that the cost of reproducing music was assumed centrally.

Symphony Hall is a large venue, and the vision of the project was not only that Charlie from Edgbaston would perform on stage with Sam from Chemsley Wood, but also that their parents and extended family would see them so doing.

Rehearsals started in the summer of 2016, assuming that one new musical number would be mastered in each weekly rehearsal. Members of King Edward’s staff and trusted musical colleagues were available to visit each school during this time, to support and to encourage. The whole enormous choir was rehearsed in two groups (we could not find a space large enough for it to rehearse together) in the weeks before.

Symphony Hall is a large venue, and the vision of the project was not only that Charlie from Edgbaston would perform on stage with Sam from Chemsley Wood, but also that their parents and extended family would see them so doing. Music has the potential not only to raise children's aspirations, but also change the way they are perceived by their peers and family; memories of Charlie's last, dreadful, parents' evening could be washed away by an angelic young face on stage. Tickets were thus allocated to each school according to the number in each choir. Although the tickets had a face value, and every ticket was paid for (and thus given value greater than its cost), the head of each participating school was asked to make an individual decision about how much to charge. This means that Charlie's parents paid the full face value of their tickets, but Sam's entire family were able to come for a nominal charge; that financial disadvantage was as far as possible not a factor in whether the parents were able to attend.



But this was not the only barrier. Symphony Hall and the city centre of Birmingham are close physically to some communities, but worlds away in accessibility and aspiration. Lifting these families' horizons was part of the business of Romany Wood. We encouraged the most enterprising heads to work together, chartering a fleet of buses to bring families from their clusters of schools to the centre of our city and their children's performance. This was the hardest outcome to measure, but our instinct is that this may have been the most profound good to come of our project.

The concert itself brought together 800 participants from 15 diverse schools, required a feat of logistics akin to the D-Day landings (you might be surprised how few lavatories there are backstage in the world's great concert halls), and raised nearly £1400 for Birmingham Children's Hospital.



IMPACT

The outcomes are hard to measure - although the photography we commissioned tells its own story. But heads and music leaders were kind in their response:

'Romany Wood is an initiative which has captured both hearts and minds of children and teachers.'

‘Without doubt this project has greatly enriched the lives of our children and families and will raise aspirations that all children can “aim for the stars”!’

'It is a once in a lifetime experience singing in a venue such as Symphony Hall and they are very excited.'

'The enthusiasm for music on their faces is amazing to see.'

WHAT'S NEXT

What comes next? The relationships cemented by Romany Wood continue in formal and informal collaboration, and the project lives on in memory and in choirs throughout Birmingham. Many of the participating schools continue to improve, in which improvement pupils' musical involvement surely has its part to play. We believe that the success of Romany Wood has helped teachers and leaders to take risks and to think big thoughts, promoting aspirations, not only musical, but social and academic too. There are boys, now my pupils at King Edward's who might not have applied to an independent school without the encouragement of Romany Wood.

And we are thinking big, too. We hope to commission a second work from David Gaukroger, this time telling the story of our city, its extraordinary achievements and its glorious diversity. If funding permits, this will make possible the purchase of sets of classroom instruments for participating schools, instruments to be used for the first time to perform Second City.

Martin Leigh

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BIOGRAPHY

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King Edward's School

Martin Leigh is Director of Music at King Edward's School in Birmingham.



Taken from the publication:

ALL TOGETHER NOW...

How to set up outstanding music partnerships between schools

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