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Leeds music lessons given boost by use of melodica thanks to Keyboard Studies Programme

With the help of music's lesser known but accessible instruments, youngsters are learning to become performers. John Blow reports on a project that started in Yorkshire.

By John Blow

Tuesday, 5th April 2022, 11:35 am



Pupils learning to play melodica.

It's not the most recognisable instrument, nor one that's demanded too regularly on the Christmas lists of aspiring stars – not yet, anyway.

Now, thanks to a Leeds-based music education scheme, the melodica will be appearing in classrooms, where it can resonate with the country's youngest musicians.

While uncommon, the instrument – a hand-held keyboard powered by blowing air through an attached mouthpiece – has its own special place in music, be it in the minimalist works by composer Steve Reich, arrangements of Grammy

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Award-winning Jacob Collier, from the hands of Brazilian multi-instrumentalist Hermeto Pascoal, or in the dub reggae songs of Augustus Pablo.

Critics say that the UK music education system has been failing for years because of shrinking budgets, recently exaggerated by the pandemic – but those behind the Keyboard Studies Programme believe the melodica could be a low-cost solution to disappearing music lessons in Leeds.

The programme is backed by £750,000 in grant funding from the foundation of philanthropist Hamish Ogston CBE, aimed at providing children and young people with the opportunity to learn a musical instrument.

Initially established by the Diocese of Leeds, the programme has followed the example of countries such as Japan and Germany and is using the melodica as a starter instrument for young musicians learning their first tricks in the music trade. They say the advantages of starting aspiring musicians in primary schools on the melodica are clear: as a fun, portable, inexpensive, zero-maintenance instrument, it is “extraordinarily resilient to increasingly stretched school budgets and storage facilities”.

Christopher Potts, Programme Manager (Music) for the Hamish Ogston Foundation, says: “Through the philanthropic vision of the Hamish Ogston Foundation and the brilliance of the staff involved in delivering the Keyboard Studies Programme, a new era of musical prodigies beckons. That all-important first instance of musical ignition might now happen at a classroom desk with a melodica poised on top ready for deployment. The end goal could be at the console of one of the UK’s finest organs or behind a mighty Steinway Model D in a major concert hall.

“The possibilities are limitless for our next generation of musicians.”

The programme itself benefits from a simple structure which gives students a clear progression route from the melodica to the accordion, piano and then the organ. Built into the programme is the aspiration to furnish children with the foundations to be skilful, multi-talented people who might go on to study at top international universities or conservatoires.

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The idea of providing young people with the possibility of a long-term trajectory resonates with the programme's sole supporter, the Hamish Ogston Foundation.

The programme reaches 830 pupils within the whole-class programme and 150 individual lessons are being given to students who have gone on to study the accordion, piano and organ.

The initiative is not only about providing the UK's next generation of musicians with their first access point in music, but also a framework for those who want to progress.

Plans for the expansion of the Keyboard Studies Programme sit alongside the current roll out of the National Schools Singing Programme. The Singing Programme is another musical initiative supported by the Hamish Ogston Foundation which is bringing expert-led singing sessions into Catholic state schools across the UK, with schools in Dioceses from Portsmouth to Aberdeen all taking up the cause.