

Oasby Music Group: Friends who play together, stay together

Imagine your teacher said you were going to meet your favourite musician or idol. What would you ask them? What piece would you play them? Students at the Oasby Music Group got to find out in October when acclaimed virtuoso violinist and cellist, Nicola Benedetti and Leonard Elschenbroich, spent an unforgettable day with them.



The Oasby Music Group has become a way of life for many of its 63 members. It is the vision of its founder, Laura Gardiner. The ensemble has created an inspiring place to explore musicianship and a social hub for young musicians from across Lincolnshire.

Growing up in Ayrshire, Laura was very fortunate to have an influential and inspiring teacher – Brenda Smith. She was a part of the Ayrshire Suzuki Group for many years. Also part of this group was a young Nicola Benedetti. Together they enjoyed many group lessons and workshops for years until Nicola began to study at the Yehudi Menuhin School.



Ayrshire Suzuki Group, March 1996 at the Ayrshire Music Festival. Photograph from the Ayrshire Post.

Now a string teacher herself, Laura has kept in touch with Nicola at musical events. Many members of the Ayrshire Suzuki Group were there when Nicola won the BBC Young Musician of the Year in 2004. “I remember us all saying to her ‘one year you’re going to win that competition!’ To be there when she did was a really special moment,” reflected Laura.

Back to the future

Fast-forward to today and Laura herself is actively developing young string players through the Oasby Music Group. Celebrating its fifth year, the group has already notched up some notable achievements. Currently, 18 of its young musicians are playing with the National Children’s Orchestras of Great Britain.

The Cantabile Violin Quartet, who have already worked with Nicola Benedetti, is one of a number of quartets, trios and ensembles at



Oasby Music Group. It reached the finals of the 2017 Pro Corda Chamber Music Festival on their first year of entering. They are also the current holders – for the second year in a row – of the trophy for overall best performance at the Grantham Music Festival.

Celebrating five years in style

Kicking off the new school term in style this year, which coincides with its fifth anniversary, Oasby Music Group were thrilled to welcome Nicola Benedetti and the cellist Leonard Elschenbroich to work with them.

“Nicky and I talked a couple of years ago about her coming to work with my students,” explained Laura. “But I wanted to wait until the time was right for everyone to really appreciate the value of the advice they would receive. This was the right time.”



Opening up opportunities locally and nationally

Since 2013, Oasby Music Group has grown from one to eleven ensembles, rehearsing four times a term. At first, we rehearsed in my living room,” reflects Laura. “Then we moved to the home of two of my students’ parents – a very generous gesture which ultimately got the Oasby Music Group off the ground.

“In 2016, we had expanded so much that we were rehearsing all day from 10am-7pm with groups arriving and leaving throughout the day. At that point, we had so many students, we just couldn’t fit anymore!

“It was then that I approached the Grantham International Preparatory School, where I have been the violin teacher since 2015, about moving to their school. They have been a great support to the group and I am very grateful to them.”

Laura now teaches over 70 violin and viola students a week, with the Oasby Music Group seeing over 60 attend every rehearsal. Cellists are taught by local cello teachers and invited to join. This collaboration between Laura and other teachers is vital the success of the group.

As well as rehearsals throughout the year, Oasby Music Group also runs a series of highly successful and popular school holiday courses, which are open to everyone to come along and play.

Laura invites top tutors from national conservatoires and professional orchestras to work



with the students. She has built up a regular team of tutors who return every course, while also introducing new tutors and giving students the opportunity to tutor and to learn through a mentoring scheme.

Announcing the news of Nicola and Leonard’s visit

Reflecting on what it meant to tell the children about Nicola Benedetti’s visit, Laura said, “I was so excited to tell them and to see their reactions. To many of them, Nicola is a role model, an idol, and I don’t think they believed me.”

At first, the visit was only from Nicola Benedetti – the news that Leonard Elschenbroich would be joining her came as a really fabulous surprise to the children about two weeks before the event.

For most of the group, it was the first time they would have worked with Nicola. As well as great excitement, the announcement also meant they had a clear and common goal – to prepare well to make the most of the opportunity, showing great self-discipline and determination to do so.

“When I found out I was meeting Nicola Benedetti I was over the moon. I practised long and hard and so did Laura and everybody in the Oasby Music Group,” says Olivia, 10. “It was such a privilege to meet Nicola and I will never forget it

“I was so excited for the opportunity we were being given, and the chance to play alongside one of the best violinists in the world,” adds Annabel, 14. “In preparation for the event, we all worked really hard on our parts to make the piece we were playing absolutely perfect.”

Choosing the repertoire

Deciding what repertoire to play was an interesting challenge. “There is so much choice and so much great music out there,” says Laura said. “Where to start?”

The Cantabile Violin Quartet had been working on Dancla’s “Ah! Vous dirai-je, Maman,” also known as “Twinkle Twinkle Variations”. “It’s a brilliant piece with lots of variations full of different techniques, from artificial harmonics to tricky runs up and down the fingerboard. It’s a really fun piece for talented young string violinists to play together.

“Then I chose some repertoire for our intermediate group. I combined two of my ensembles together so had to look for repertoire that would range from grade 1– 5 players. I settled on two very contrasting pieces, which would open the door to working on different styles of playing. I chose an arrangement of the first movement of *Autumn* from *The Four Seasons* and *Shenendoah*, a traditional folk song.”

“Finally, for our advanced group, which has a very strong viola section, I wanted a substantial work for them to get their teeth into. This naturally led me to Elgar’s *Serenade for Strings*”.

“The students grasped this work and really loved it. That’s the key to success here: choosing repertoire the children will enjoy playing and is of the right standard so they can get stuck in, and that really draws out all their musicality and develops their technique as an ensemble.”

Working together

This point about playing together is critical. Playing pieces solo in the practice room is one aspect of enjoying music. But working together in a group adds a whole new dimension, and as Laura and Nicola’s relationships shows, can lead to lifelong friendships. Here, Oasby Music Group students take up the story.



“As a group we have worked so hard for this amazing opportunity. Through it I have made so many new friends and have become much more confident in my orchestral playing,” adds Holly, 14. “I am so glad I joined and I have had so much fun!”

“As we were in a group, I got to experience the workshop with others,” says Tasha, 8. “I can hear all the other parts improving and all the instruments adapting to blend together, making the piece sound even better at the end.”

Shivani, 10, agrees: “I’ve been in the Oasby Music Group since it first began. I was five when I started and some of my best friends play in the group too. It’s great because we go to different schools, but we enjoy the same things. I was so excited to play with Nicola again – I got to play with her a year ago in Leeds Town Hall and I felt so, so lucky to get to play with her again.”

The big day arrives!

Clocking up hours of practice before the workshops, the students eagerly anticipated the day they could show Nicola and Leonard what they are capable of.



“When the day of the workshop finally came, I was quite nervous, but excitement was the overriding emotion!” says Holly. The enthusiasm was infectious for Sophie, 8. “I went around telling my friends I was going to see Nicola Benedetti. When I got there, I heard her playing her violin, it was amazing.”

“We were all so excited; we felt so special because not many children our age get to meet her and have her listen to them play,” adds Olivia. “She taught us so much in a short time. It was such a privilege to meet Nicola and I will never forget it.”

“When she walked through the door, we couldn’t wait to get started,” recalls Amelia, 9. “I made a little mistake, but she didn’t mind, she just said that ‘mistakes happen and just smile because it might be a funny mistake.’ I loved that Nicky helped us all – she went around each of us and showed us an exercise for shifting.” Hester, 11, agreed, “The work we did on hand shape has really helped my technique”



Encouraging, motivating and inspiring young players

During the workshop day, Nicola and Leonard were “really impressed with the children’s general musical intelligence, awareness and high level of attention and commitment”.

First, the Cantabile Violin Quartet worked with Nicola while the cellists all had individual lessons with Leonard. Then Nicola worked with the intermediate ensemble before they came together to work with the advanced ensemble. Here Leonard conducted them in Elgar’s “Serenade for Strings “and Nicky played in among the children. (A video of the performance can be seen on www.facebook.com/oasbymusicgroup).



The focus of each of these sessions was to encourage, motivate and inspire these young string players. “It was exciting because it was a chance to show an idol of mine, Nicola Benedetti, how good I was at my instrument,” says Tasha. The workshop was “a chance to get points on how to improve and strengthen my playing, not only on the violin, but on other instruments as well, because she gave me performance points.”

Tasha continues: “It was inspirational because I got to hear Nicola play a piece in a whole new way, which gave me a new understanding of the music, helping not only with technical points, but also making me think about the feeling of the whole piece and performance.”

“The concert went really well and I loved it,” says Phoebe, 7. “Especially when she said that we were one of the best taught orchestras she had ever heard. I think this is because of our teacher Laura. We were so lucky because not many people get to do something as great as this.”

Creating memories and continuing a musical legacy

The visit of Nicola and Leonard to the Oasby Music Group will have a lasting impact on these young musicians. As with any learning, reflecting on what you have learnt and how to move forward with renewed passion for what you are playing is so important. In this respect, the day and the journey to it were a resounding success.

“I learnt that I should shape my music to make it exciting,” recalls Sophie. “After her visit, I had violin dreams for a couple of nights!”

For Phoebe, the point about movement was important. “One of the things that I will remember Nicola said was to move your body with the music.” For Olivia, too, this was a key point. “She taught us so much in a short time. I listened to her advice to move our bodies when we play, and made sure that I tried to do that in NCO audition.”



For Matilda, 15, how Nicola held her instrument was as fascinating. “From where I was sitting, I had the perfect eyeline of Nicola playing her violin. It was so interesting to see how Nicola kept the violin so still. When she moved, she moved as if the violin was part of her. Her fingers were so perfectly curled onto the violin, even when she placed them down in a really difficult position.”

“It was great to see Nicola Benedetti show how to take a piece of music and make it come alive,” adds Tasha.

“Nicky and Leonard were so friendly and inspirational and I have gained a lot from this exceptional experience. For example, how different pieces can be interpreted and played differently; an idea which I will think about when playing my individual pieces in the future,” says Holly.

“From this incredible experience, I have learnt that communicating with other players in an ensemble is crucial if you want to achieve a great sound,” adds Annabel.



“I was amazed by the interactivity and enthusiasm of Leonard and Nicola,” agrees Eliot, 16. “Leonard delved and swayed into our orchestral structure, sucking in the sections. Nicola played with such vigor and intensity, creating such a powerful ambience that affected the entire group.

“However, I was most struck by how Leonard and Nicola were connected in an almost symbiotic manner – their musical expression was so emotionally in-tune. In the future, I believe we can apply these qualities to our own group, melding the players into a single body of musical flourish.”

Last but not least, it reinforced every music teachers’ favourite piece of advice, “Watching Nicola Benedetti play, inspired me to practice very hard every day!” concludes Tasha.

Looking to the future

The Oasby Music Group started off as a small group of children getting together to play. “There is something special about getting your instruments out and playing together,” says Laura.



Minims with Nicky and Leonard

The Oasby Music Group just hopes that we might inspire other teachers to go out and set up ensemble opportunities for their students. "If you're learning to play, look around for an ensemble and join in," she advises. "It'll be one of the best things you ever do."



Quavers and Crotchets with Nicky

Article by Ruth Holmes