

Supporting the future

Mahler's Eighth is epic, requiring an augmented symphony orchestra, mixed adult and children's choirs, plus numerous soloists. The so-called 'Symphony of a Thousand' is, understandably, a rarity in concert programmes, therefore a recent outing at Manchester's Bridgewater Hall attracted attention – and plaudits. Conductor Stephen Threlfall led the 500-strong ensemble, whose musicality impressed for several reasons; not least because the majority of players were under 18. This was Chetham's Symphony Orchestra, who each year have the opportunity to perform on the Hall's home turf. The latest end-of-term concert was particularly special as it marked the 50th anniversary of Chetham's Music School, and was the final appearance of the orchestra under the baton of Threlfall, who is retiring from his post as director of music.

Concerts like these are a critical part of a musician's professional development. As well as the Bridgewater Hall appearances, Chetham's – or Chets, as it is affectionately known – also has its own concert venue on campus in the form of Stoller Hall, which opened its doors in 2017. The concert platform, which hosts notable classical events including Chetham's International Summer School and Festival for Pianists, offers students the chance to hear world-class artists on their doorstep, as well as practice their own stagecraft. But specialist training like this does

Claire Jackson tells us all about the government's Music and Dance Scheme, which provides grants and help with fees at eight independent schools and 21 centres for advanced training

not come cheap: day fees at Chetham's start at around £25,000 a year. And, unless you live locally, you'll be looking at an additional £8,000 to board. But most students do not pay anywhere near that amount, thanks to government funding made available through the Music and Dance Scheme (MDS).

The MDS – first known as the Music and Ballet Schools Scheme – was established in 1981. It was a key action to come out of the 1978 Gulbenkian report, which was commissioned to review the state of specialist music education. The report recommended that exceptionally talented young musicians and dancers should have access to elite education, regardless of their financial circumstances. State-funded support was promised to Chetham's, alongside Wells Cathedral School, Purcell School, Yehudi Menuhin School and St Mary's Music School. The scheme gradually expanded and was given its current name, the Music and Dance Scheme (MDS), in 2002.

'The MDS lies at the core of our funding and makes us fully accessible to any young

musician who can show the potential and natural musical instincts,' says Threlfall. 'It really has given so many young people a vital opportunity – in some cases it's a lifeline for their futures.'

The funding means that, in theory, anyone who can demonstrate an aptitude for music should have the opportunity to study it at an elite institution, no matter what their parents earn. Of course, we know that other factors – such as social equity and unconscious bias – affect accessibility, but this infrastructure goes some way to mitigate those barriers to entry. Around a quarter of the pupils at Chets receive full financial support and are also able to access support for sheet music, instruments and travel costs. 'All successful applicants are means tested, with an average fee of around three- to four-thousand pounds payable by middle earners – terrific value when one considers the expanse of the programme they receive,' explains Threlfall. Any state funding is open to controversy – opera subsidies get a particularly hard time from the tabloids, for example – but the financing is comparable with that of sports academies. 'When we explain the scheme in the context of football or athletics then people understand that the MDS exists in parallel to that type of support,' says Threlfall.

The 2016 report *Access to Excellence: The UK's Music and Dance Schools* comments that: 'Thanks to successive education ministers' far-sightedness and support, the Scheme [MDS] has flourished and extended its reach so that many more young people have been able to access the best training available which, in turn, has set them on the path to self-sustaining and productive careers.' That extension is largely via the Centres for Advanced Training (CATs) – institutions that provide a high level of specialist education but that aren't necessarily full-time music courses. There are currently 12 registered music CATs

Students at South West Music School benefit from the support of the state



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