

# Summer breeze

AT A LOOSE END THIS SUMMER? STARTING YOUR OWN RESIDENTIAL COURSE MIGHT BE EASIER THAN YOU THINK, AS **ABI BLISS** DISCOVERS

Launching a new venture is the last thing on many people's minds right now, but that hasn't deterred Eric Beach from New York quartet So Percussion. As he recalls, 'last summer we were sitting around with some friends who were talking about summer schools and all at once the four of us realised that it's not impossible for us to do'.

Last year's dream has materialised into this year's reality: a fortnight of intensive coaching and performing with college-level percussion students at Princeton University in the US. So Percussion's plans were supported by two crucial factors: firstly, the group saw hosting a residential course as a natural expansion of their existing educational activities; secondly, as classically trained musicians known for exploring their more experimental side (through collaborations with artists such as electronic duo Matmos), they felt they could offer something different. 'A lot of programmes focus on either orchestral or solo playing, but there isn't really anything that focuses specifically on percussion chamber music,' adds Beach. 'We thought we could fill a gap there and do something we were really excited about.' Anyone considering running a summer school should ask themselves if they can do the same.





Faced with organising practicalities, Beach started cold-calling colleges to see if they had space. 'Most universities' dorm buildings just sit there during the summer not generating any revenue unless they get programmes in to fill them,' he explains. Ultimately, the question of venue was solved by the group's friend, Steve Mackey, chair of Princeton's music department. He was composing a new piece and suggested that the workshop process could be incorporated into a summer school at Princeton. Two other members of staff, Paul Lansky and Dan Trueman, will also be joining So Percussion as tutors on the course.

### **'SOMEWHERE LIKE ETON WILL HAVE QUITE A LOT OF ALLURE FOR FOREIGN APPLICANTS'**

Back in the UK, the OnyxBrass quintet is preparing to host its first summer school after 15 years together. The ensemble will cover solo, chamber and orchestral work during the five-day course held at Eton College. 'We each have a foot in all three of those camps', explains tuba player and main organiser David Gordon-Shute.

Once more, existing contacts were priceless. Gordon-Shute is a tuba teacher at Eton and also runs a rowing course there. Like Beach, he approached other schools for quotes. 'The big difference with Eton was they were the only place to suggest that they could run the summer

school and employ OnyxBrass to do it. So they were prepared to underwrite the project – whether it was a success or failure. It's certainly the leg-up that we needed.'

He agrees that the Windsor public school's prestige is an added bonus: 'Somewhere like Eton will have quite a lot of allure for foreign applicants, and I imagine for some British applicants as well. It is an extraordinary and beautiful place.' The benefits are mutual, however: 'Summer schools are important to [private] schools, because they've got to look after their charitable status.'

Running a summer school usually involves a certain financial risk, and it's wise not to entertain notions of filling every place and making vast profits on your first attempt. Even with a top-notch location and OnyxBrass' respectable profile,

Gordon-Shute estimates that this inaugural course will attract around 40 suitable players out of 70-80 potential spaces. If you're worried about cash-strapped but talented students being put off by the cost, one option is to seek out sponsors. OnyxBrass has secured six bursaries and one Yamaha-sponsored full scholarship this year, with the hope that Eton will offer additional support in the future.

Another route is not aiming for profit at all. The charity Music For People hosted a successful summer school for 148 musicians at

Giggleswick School in North Yorkshire last year and will welcome around 250 this August. Volunteer organiser Jill Snowdon explains that running the school as a non-profit organisation keeps the price as reasonable as possible, fitting in with the school's aims of increased access and a diverse curriculum for its students, who are mainly adult returners. 'There's a lot of cross-fertilisation between the courses – and that's not counting the marriages we've had!' she laughs.

Unlike So Percussion and OnyxBrass' focus on aspiring professionals, Music For People's school doesn't require references or auditions from applicants. This can lead to awkward mixes of instruments, but, like the adage about lemons and lemonade, if life deals Snowdon a surfeit of saxophones, she makes a saxophone choir. Running on a voluntary basis also means that Music For People can tap into the resources of the Making Music network for publicity and information about grant funding.

Once you have the fundamentals of location, tutors and money sorted, be clear about what you want people to take away from the course. For So Percussion, it's opening their students' eyes to the potential of percussion chamber music and the work of modern composers such as Steve Reich, John Cage and Iannis Xenakis. 'We feel really strongly that it's a percussion festival, but it's a composer-centric one,' says Beach. 'Hopefully after two weeks people will go away and continue exploring that stuff on their own.'

For Gordon-Shute, OnyxBrass' school provides a golden opportunity to nurture young players' aspirations. 'One of the key things we want to do is make sure

that stronger players have a chance to play with us. Like most sports, you raise your game when you're playing with or against someone better than you.' Trombonist Lindsay Schilling is a key guest on the course. 'He's there not only for his expertise but because I think he's a great mentor figure for young players.' Gordon-Shute believes that the week also allows the group to engage in some talent-spotting: 'We're talking to people we work with regularly about being able to offer student places in the group at a couple of concerts.'

However exciting it is to see your summer school plans coming together, it's vital to remain businesslike and organised. As Snowdon notes, even volunteers can't get away with being amateurish. If, like Music For People, your school will be open to under-18s, there's a whole extra level of paperwork to tackle – with Criminal Records Bureau checks and policies for first aid, for example, in place for our insurance purposes. 'It's all part of being prepared and you do have to allocate your time to make sure you fit all of that in,' she says.

If you stay organised, however, the only headaches you'll remember will be the volume-induced ones. Snowdon sums it up: 'You get so much more out of it than you put in. It's just about seeing what a fantastic effect the week can have on someone. They can literally be somebody very different by the end. It's the power of music, and the power of stretching yourself.' ■

*For more details about British and international summer schools on offer this year, check out our supplement overleaf*

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