

PLAY

The
Guildhall
School
Magazine
2025/26



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GUILDHALL
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Welcome to the latest edition of PLAY

You might remember that in last year’s issue I shared the exciting news that Guildhall School had risen to fourth in the world for Music and fifth in the world for Performing Arts in the QS World University Rankings. I’m delighted to say that this year we’ve gone one better in each, moving up to fourth place for Performing Arts and third place for Music — a testament to the creativity, commitment and excellence of our students, staff and alumni community.

In this edition, we explore both the impact our alumni continue to have on the arts, and how the arts in turn continue to shape their lives. You’ll first meet alumni Merel (Piano 2010) and Clive (Piano and Trumpet 1976), who share how music has played a vital role in their journeys following challenging health diagnoses (page 4). We also hear from Alison Balsom, who reflects on her remarkable career following her recent headline performance at the Proms (page 12), and we venture behind the scenes of the School’s new short film project, which prepares our students for a future in the film industry (page 8).

Take a trip around the globe with alumni working at the forefront of educating the next generation of artists abroad on page 24. Elsewhere, alumni Dewi (Stage Management 1999) and Xexa (Electronic and Produced Music 2023) discuss their careers post-Guildhall, and we round up the latest news from the School on page 28. Finally, don’t miss details on how you can get involved in our Big Give Christmas Challenge on the back cover.

We love hearing from you, so please let us know how you’ve spent your time in 2025 by contacting the alumni team at alumni@gsmd.ac.uk or on 0203 834 1592. You can also stay in touch year-round by signing up to our alumni e-newsletter and following our social media channels.

Thank you for being an ongoing source of inspiration to all in the Guildhall School community.

With best wishes,
Professor Jonathan Vaughan FGS
Principal



The Restorative Power of Music

Two Guildhall alumni share personal journeys that reveal what science is already telling us: music is more than art – it's therapy, resilience and a lifeline for many.



"We do not think, we **know** music transforms lives," declared the 2022 Power of Music Report. And the evidence backs it up. According to UK Music's This is Music survey, 74% of adults in the UK say that music is important to their quality of life, while 57% found it helped them cope during lockdown, and 59% said that it actively supported their mental health and wellbeing.

It's increasingly clear that music has a significant impact on healthcare, improving recovery and outcomes for people of all ages. The 2017 Big Chorus Census recorded more than two million Britons taking part in choirs, with community singing proving to be a powerful way of strengthening social bonds. Within hospitals, hospices, classrooms and community groups, music remains a vital lifeline.

Guildhall alumni are central to this movement, as teachers inspiring young people, as leaders of choirs that unite communities, and as graduates of the School's MA in Music Therapy programme. And sometimes, they are the people who need music most. Two alumni, pianist and choir leader Merel van der Knoop and trumpeter Clive Newton, have both experienced the healing power of music in their own recoveries and are using their experiences to support others.



Profile: Merel van der Knoop (Piano 2010)

For Dutch pianist and accompanist Merel, collaboration has always been at the heart of music making. "I realised early on that I loved working with other musicians, especially singers," she says. "That came from my childhood: my mum is a classical singer and teacher, and I grew up surrounded by her work with pianists, going to concerts and rehearsals, so it felt natural to me."

That passion drew her to Guildhall School in 2006 for postgraduate studies in accompaniment. "It was full on," she remembers, "but that was exactly what I wanted. I was absorbing so much knowledge from people who had been working in the field for years. Looking back, it was one of the best times of my music career as a student."

After Guildhall, Merel combined performing and teaching, while also leading choirs such as the Military Wives Choir in South London and the London Transport Choir. "The skills I acquired at Guildhall – collaboration, listening, responding in the moment – fed directly into choir leading," she explains. But when she fell ill with long COVID in December 2021, her performing life came to an abrupt halt.

"Suddenly my life was completely changed," she says. "Meditation and breathing exercises helped, but I needed something bigger to help me cope with such a huge change." She pauses, choosing her words carefully: "Something to live for."

Through the charity Long COVID Kids, she decided to create an online health and wellbeing choir for children. "They weren't being heard at all," she says. "I thought: what can I do with my skills to give them a voice?"

The choir, launched in November 2022, now meets online for 45 minutes each week. "I always say at the start: make it your own. Come late, leave early, do as much or as little as you can. For some of the children, just being part of a group is the most important thing." Sessions include breathing and mindfulness exercises, vocal warm-ups, and songs chosen to spark curiosity. "They love anything to do with space – astronauts, planets, galaxies – so I choose songs on that theme and we discuss them afterwards." For Merel, the choir has very much been a two-way street. "They've taught me as much as I've taught them."

One of the most powerful moments came when the children began composing their own song. "I didn't want to write it for them; I wanted it to be their song," Merel says. With guidance from a young singer-songwriter, the children contributed words and phrases about what the choir meant to them and what it was like to live with long COVID. "They trusted each other enough to be vulnerable. To see them express themselves openly was wonderful."

Merel's own relationship with music has changed drastically. "I hardly play the piano anymore, certainly not in performance," she admits. "Before, I was travelling and performing with a violinist, giving concerts on cruise ships. My last one was just a month before I fell ill. I miss it hugely, but it's not possible physically or financially." Instead, teaching has become her

lifeline. “Sometimes I couldn’t even put both hands together at the piano. My brain just couldn’t process it. That was frightening. But I can still teach, and my school has been incredibly supportive.”

Merel’s work with the choir has reinforced the importance of focussing on her own recovery. “I’ve always been tuned in to supporting others – that’s what accompanists do – but I’ve learned I need to listen to myself more. It’s good for the children to see that, too. Sometimes I have to cancel choir because I’ve been in hospital, and at first I’d say, ‘I’ll be back tomorrow.’ Now I’ve learned it’s okay to rest. That’s an important message for them as well as for me.”

Profile: Clive Newton
(Piano and Trumpet 1976)

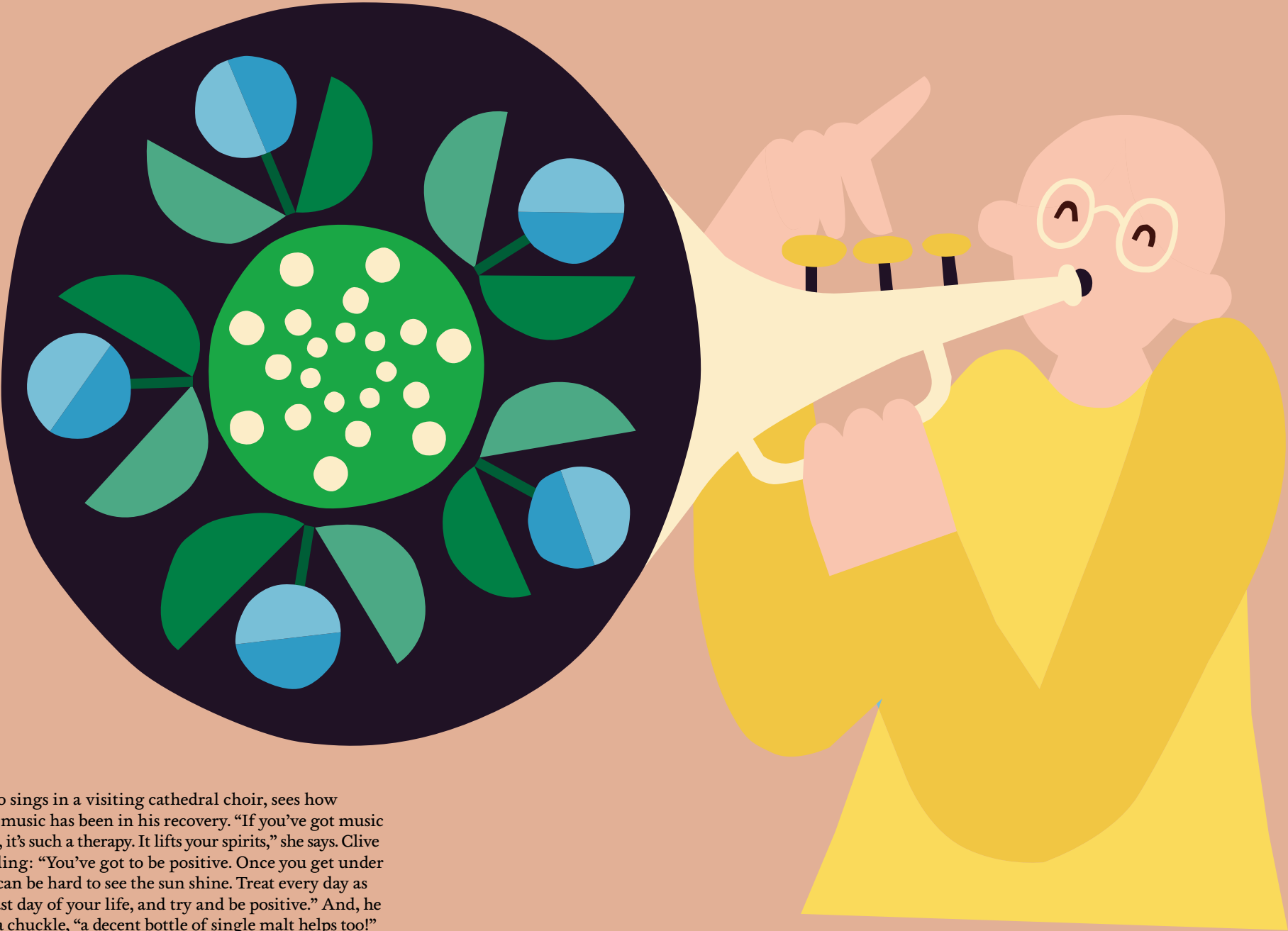
For trumpeter Clive, music has been both a lifelong passion and a vital tool in recovery after life-saving surgery. Encouraged by his father, who learned alongside him, he first played cornet at the age of nine and went on to study trumpet and piano at Guildhall from 1973-76. “Compared to Silk Street, it was very old-fashioned,” he laughs, remembering the School’s former home on John Carpenter Street.

Clive first noticed a slight huskiness in his voice 18 months before surgery, but as he was otherwise well, he decided not to worry, especially with plans for his younger son’s wedding underway. Then one day, his breathing changed, and after some consideration, he went into hospital. In 2024, Clive underwent a nine-hour operation to remove his voice box after doctors discovered a tumour so advanced it was blocking his airway. “They couldn’t believe he was still breathing,” recalls his wife, Susan. “When I told them he was a professional trumpeter, they were very interested in the strength of his lungs.” An emergency tracheostomy saved his life and afterwards, medical professionals were determined to restore his quality of life. “My speech therapist even said she was going to make it her life’s work to get me playing again,” says Clive.

The first attempt was tentative, just blowing into the instrument in his consultant’s office. But the breakthrough came at home. “The first proper piece I played was *Happy Birthday*, with my speech therapist alongside me. I then brought my consultant a book of tunes, and he said, ‘Play me Laurel and Hardy!’ We get on very well now – he says, ‘I want to see you socially with that darn trumpet!’” Clive has kept videos of those moments of triumph and shows them to *PLAT* with pride.

Clive has since learned there is a trombonist in Belgium who has been through the same procedure. In keeping with his tongue-in-cheek approach to his condition, he jokes about the potential of forming a brass band if they can find a few more members.

Today, Clive continues to play both trumpet and piano and still teaches a small number of long-standing pupils. “Music is a brilliant thing,” he says. “When I get fed up, just doing a lesson can help me a lot, and people are very supportive. I haven’t taken on any new pupils – that wouldn’t be right – but the ones who’ve been with me a long time are prepared to tolerate me!”



Susan, who sings in a visiting cathedral choir, sees how important music has been in his recovery. “If you’ve got music in your life, it’s such a therapy. It lifts your spirits,” she says. Clive agrees, adding: “You’ve got to be positive. Once you get under a cloud, it can be hard to see the sun shine. Treat every day as if it’s the last day of your life, and try and be positive.” And, he adds with a chuckle, “a decent bottle of single malt helps too!”

Music’s impact is most keenly seen through people’s stories. From Merel’s online choir, which provides a safe space for young people with long COVID to reconnect and sing, to Clive’s determination to play the trumpet again after undergoing life-changing surgery, both alumni demonstrate the profound restorative power of music.

And their journeys illustrate the human side of the statistics: three-quarters of adults see music as vital to their quality of life, and millions rely on it for their wellbeing.

For Guildhall alumni, and for communities everywhere, music is connection, resilience, therapy and joy.

Clive would like to thank his surgeon Sameer Mallick, Senior MacMillan nurse Bindu Saraswathy, speech therapists Abbie Kerr and Beth Newell, and all the staff at QMC Nottingham.

“If you’ve got music in your life, it’s such a therapy. It lifts your spirits”

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

A week of rigs, retakes and big-screen reveals: *Hidden in Plain Sight* gave Guildhall students a playful but professional taste of life on set.

Getting to grips with the reality of working on a busy, fast-paced set can be one of the hardest parts of undertaking professional engagements in TV and film for the first time. *Hidden in Plain Sight* – Guildhall’s largest cross-degree collaboration to date – tackled that challenge head-on, bringing students from multiple disciplines together with professionals from across the industry to make a series of short films. The week-long project mirrored the structure of a professional set, culminating in screenings at the Barbican for classmates, staff, alumni and industry guests.

For Professor Julian Hepple, Head of Digital, Production & Venue Support, the project exposed students to industry practice in a truly collaborative way: “*Hidden in Plain Sight* was a brilliant opportunity to give students a safe but professional environment to experiment, take risks and learn how their work connects with audiences beyond Guildhall.”

Guildhall’s largest cross-degree collaboration to date, bringing students from multiple disciplines together with professionals from across the industry to make a series of short films.



That freedom to try, fail and try again proved transformative. Acting alumna Aisha-Mae McCormick (2025), who filmed her group’s short *The Empathy Stone*, describes it as “such a valuable and fun project to be part of. We filmed both on location and in the School’s TV studio. Working with professional directors and assistant directors, and with production crew who were also students, showed us just how many moving parts go into making a film and how the magic happens off as well as on camera.”

The biggest challenge? Learning to act for the lens. “I’d spent the year before in stage productions, so it was a completely different world trying to make my performance read to camera, especially as our film was very genre-specific, inspired by Wes Anderson’s iconic style. Learning the call sheets, set routines and shot structures has given me knowledge I can carry forward into my career. It was a real challenge, but I had so much fun.”

The films were directed by Helen Iley – a writer and director whose work has been recognised by the BBC, Raindance and BFI Flare – who first worked with Guildhall on 2024’s inaugural short film series, *The Road Ahead*. With experience spanning theatre, film and teaching, Helen brings an invaluable external perspective. “This project simulates a TV or film set and gives students that chance. By the end of the week, they are as competent and confident as a normal crew and cast. It’s lovely to see their growth.”

For many actors, Helen says, the stop-start rhythm of film is a shock. “In theatre, the show must go on; on set, it’s often ‘the show has to stop’ while we move an angle. That’s usually their biggest challenge, but by the end, they’ve adapted and have also got used to hearing and seeing themselves on playback, and separating themselves from the character.”

The collaboration reached far beyond the Drama department. Stage Management students stepped into assistant director roles; Digital Design students created visual effects and titles; Costume students not only designed but were also on hand to provide last minute touch ups and fixes on set. Helen recalls the crew’s creativity: “The student camera operators don’t just follow my shot list, they



“I now feel ready for my first day on a professional set – and that’s a gift.”

suggest alternatives and build their own rigs. In one film, they designed a broom’s point-of-view shot by attaching a camera to a pole. One of those students will now be Director of Photography with me on next year’s films.”

With industry-standard kit supplied by Guildhall partners ProAV, SSL and Southby Productions, the finished films had real polish. And the Barbican screening gave students the thrill of seeing their work on the big-screen. “It’s a proper event,” says Helen. “A couple of months after filming, students see their work with an audience. It’s a celebration of everything they’ve achieved.”

The impact, though, lasts much longer. Students leave with more than showreel material – as Helen puts it: “Whether they’re actors, stage managers or designers, they come away with transferable skills and the confidence to walk onto a professional set and know exactly what to do.”

For Aisha, that boost has already made a difference: “I now feel ready for my first day on a professional set – and that’s a gift I’ll carry into the rest of my career.”



Behind the Scenes of the making of ‘The Empathy Stone’

**“I thought it
was obvious
to everyone
why the arts
are vital”**

**World-renowned trumpeter
Alison Balsom OBE FGS (Trumpet 2001)
reflects on her path from Junior
Guildhall rehearsals to centre stage at
the BBC Proms, and on the training
and projects that shaped her career.**



Over more than two decades, Alison Balsom has helped to expand the place of the trumpet on the world stage, dazzling audiences while commissioning bold new works and inspiring a generation of players.

Her journey started when she heard about Guildhall School through a fellow brass band member in her hometown of Royston. She auditioned for Junior Guildhall’s Saturday programme and soon met John Miller – “one of the greatest trumpet teachers in the world,” she says – who went on to shape both her playing and her career.

From the moment Alison walked through the doors she was hooked: “I lived for my Saturdays. By Sunday I was thinking, ‘oh no, how am I going to wait six days before I can go back?’ By my A-level years, I couldn’t wait to be there full-time.”

When she arrived as an undergraduate in 1997, Guildhall already felt like home. She had orchestral experience and had even learned transposition – “absolutely terrifying at first” – so the move to conservatoire life felt thrilling rather than daunting. “I’d been waiting for this all my life,” she says. “Those years were some of the best, being held by an institution I admired so much, and yet felt completely familiar with.”

Alison leading a masterclass at Guildhall School



Her studies were, as she puts it, “a stairway” of growth – steady progress followed by leaps forward. “The art of a great teacher is knowing when to introduce a concept and when you’re ready to receive it. I’d have periods of growth, then plateau, then they would give me a key that unlocked the next stage.”

Sometimes those leaps came sooner than expected. In her first week, Peter Gane, Head of Wind, Brass and Percussion at the time and who passed away last year, told Alison she would be performing a solo in St Paul’s Cathedral. “I thought he was joking. But they threw you into opportunities, and that was fantastic.” She still keeps sheet music annotated in her teachers’ handwriting – “like having guardian angels with me.”

“The art of a great teacher is knowing when to introduce a concept and when you’re ready to receive it. I’d have periods of growth, then plateau, then they would give me a key that unlocked the next stage.”

Since graduating, Alison’s career has become synonymous with innovative projects that have garnered great acclaim.

Among the highlights is her Baroque collaboration at Shakespeare’s Globe in 2013 (the same year she became the first British woman to win Artist of the Year at the Gramophone Classical Music Awards). A long-standing passion for the natural trumpet, which she discovered in her third year of study, led her to create a programme with Trevor Pinnock and The English Concert. Alison initially suggested two performances; the Globe responded by saying “Let’s do 20!” But that came with pressure to find funding and potential sponsors: “That was a very challenging skillset that I had to develop really quickly.”

She admits it was a nervous moment. “At the first read-through I felt like I’d pushed this rock up the hill for so long on my own and now it was about to go over the precipice. I wasn’t going to be able to stop it, it was just going to go with or without me.”

The gamble paid off. A *Guardian* critic called it “one of the most enjoyable evenings I’ve spent at the Globe.” Ten years on, Alison still considers it a defining moment: “Friends and people in the music industry couldn’t get a ticket for love nor money. Over ten years later, it’s still a career highlight: audacious, collaborative, and everything I love about the trumpet.”

“Being a trumpet soloist is a bit like being a professional tennis player. You’re constantly on tour, going round the world. You have to keep yourself in peak condition. And you have to dedicate yourself fully.”

Another pinnacle was her performance of the Haydn Concerto at the Last Night of the Proms in 2009. This year, she returned to the same stage to perform her swansong – the Hummel Concerto with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Elim Chan. “It feels like the perfect progression, a bookend to this part of my career,” she says, shortly after announcing her retirement as a soloist. Speaking to *The Times*, she explained: “Being a trumpet soloist is a bit like being a professional tennis player. You’re constantly on tour, going round the world. You have to keep yourself in peak condition. And you have to dedicate yourself fully.” The demands of touring, family commitments and the limitations of the repertoire, led her to conclude, “I do feel I have said everything I want to say with the repertoire that’s available.”

Alison’s artistic choices often aim to expand perceptions of the trumpet. She has championed new repertoire, from Wynton Marsalis’ *Trumpet Concerto* to a piece written for her by Thea Musgrave, whose distinctive compositional voice brought an entirely new approach to the instrument. “The trumpet is an instrument of today, in terms of its artistic scope and the variety of colour, style and genre it can cross. It’s only held back by the limits of people’s imagination.”

Balsom’s commitment to her art extends beyond performance. She is a passionate advocate for music education and the arts, believing that live performance is essential to cultural



Alison performing at the Last Night of the Proms

life. “I thought it was obvious to everyone why the arts are vital. In this little country where we punch so much above our weight culturally, it is taken for granted that the standard of the arts in this country is as high as it is. To keep that at the centre of society is getting harder and harder.”

Her advice for current students? Seek out live performances, listen beyond your own instrument, and be discerning. “London offers life-changing concerts all the time. They’ll constantly refresh your passion.”

As she steps into a new chapter, Balsom is clear that Guildhall training equips graduates for far more than a single path. “There are so many interesting ways to spend the rest of one’s life that Guildhall will train you well for, and it doesn’t always have to be the exact thing you’re doing right now. It’s not a binary succeed-or-fail situation.”

“I thought it was obvious to everyone why the arts are vital. In this little country where we punch so much above our weight culturally, it is taken for granted that the standard of the arts in this country is as high as it is. To keep that at the centre of society is getting harder and harder.”



Crufts 2025 Best In Show

THEN & NOW

With a career spanning four Olympic Games, Crufts and global spectacles, Dewi Wynne (Stage Management 1999) reflects on lessons learned at Guildhall, the scale of his early projects and why stage management is ultimately about people.

I grew up just outside Wrexham in North Wales, in a Welsh-speaking town, so I was involved in Eisteddfods and performing from about four or five. Then came school plays where I remember watching the teachers operating lights and stage managing, thinking “what’s that?” That curiosity eventually led me to a performing arts course instead of A Levels. One of my lecturers, who had taught at Guildhall and designed for the Royal Opera House, persuaded my mum to apply on my behalf. I wasn’t convinced at the time, but to my surprise I got in.

Two phrases from my training have stayed with me: “Go into production file mode” and “What would Soozie do?” That production file – where every day a new problem was added, from budgets to lighting plans – was my strongest memory of first year. Even now, when challenges pile up, I still hear those words. And Soozie Copley, who taught Stage Management, remains a constant touchstone: what would she do?

While at Guildhall I gained work experience on *Jesus Christ Superstar*. As soon as I graduated in 1999, the company manager offered me a role on the Millennium Dome production (what is now The O2). There were 30 stage managers on that show – two of us fresh from college, the rest seasoned professionals – and they took us under their wing. The scale was extraordinary: aerialists dropping from the roof, performers on mobiles 30 metres up, trampolines, bungees, even a carousel. Thankfully, the worst injury was a broken finger, but the potential for something more serious to happen was always with me. Even now, when things go wrong, I remind myself: nobody died.

My career since has taken me to four Olympic Games, countless major events,

and eleven years stage managing Crufts, an international dog show held annually in the United Kingdom since 1891.

Athens 2004 was a highlight – I was leading 1000 people across the Olympic Park when suddenly security blocked our rehearsal route. Later that day, a man in a suit approached me, handed me his card, and asked me to report anything unusual. When I checked his card he was Secret Service!



And yes, they say never work with animals – but I’ve had to take the bull by the horns, literally. At Windsor Horse Show it once took six of us to hold a bull before releasing it into the arena. Guildhall didn’t train me for that! There’s even a YouTube clip of me at Crufts trying to cue a dog who simply sat down and stared at me. You can’t give stage directions to a dog.

What all these experiences have taught me is that stage management is ultimately about looking after people. That applies just as much to wellbeing as logistics. Early in my career no one spoke about the post-event comedown. After the 2002 Commonwealth Games a group of us admitted months later we’d all struggled in silence. Now, mental health is openly discussed, and the support available is far better.

If I could give one piece of advice to today’s graduates, it would be this: be a sponge. Soak up everything around you. Don’t feel you have to know it all straight away. At the Dome I kept quiet, listened and learned, and when one of my ideas was finally taken on board it meant so much more. There’s a balance between confidence and patience – sometimes you’re right, but it pays to wait until you’re sure.



Dewi Wynne

Lessons that resonate globally

Three Guildhall alumni reveal how they are inspiring the next generation of musicians worldwide – and how their own Guildhall experiences continue to shape their teaching today.



Music has the power to travel across borders, generations and classrooms. Guildhall alumni are part of a global network of musicians who are not only performing internationally but also shaping the future of music through education.

In the UK, the picture has recently been stark. Research by Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives shows that GCSE entries for expressive arts subjects have fallen by a third since 2015, and 42% of schools no longer offer GCSE Music. Yet while opportunities at home may currently feel limited, Guildhall graduates continue to champion music education worldwide.

From a conservatoire in Madrid, to a singing academy in Reykjavik, to the vibrant musical culture of Hong Kong, three alumni share how they are passing on their craft – and how Guildhall shaped the way they teach today.

Dr Oscar Colomina (Composition 2006)

For Oscar Colomina, Dean of Madrid's prestigious Reina Sofía School of Music, teaching has always been about dialogue. "I understand teaching in the Socratic tradition," he reflects. "It's about sharing questions, helping others ask the right ones, and finding answers together."

After two decades teaching in the UK, including at the Royal Academy of Music, Oscar returned to Spain in 2020 — stepping into his new role just as the pandemic began.

In Madrid, he has reshaped the curriculum to reflect the needs of today's musicians. Alongside Reina Sofía's intensive one-to-one lessons and more than 300 concerts a year, he has strengthened entrepreneurship, and championed artistic identity and wellbeing.

On the Artist Development course he created, "We ask students: who am I, what is my context, where do I want to position myself? The idea is to help them identify their own 'happy place' — where they stay true to themselves while serving others — while understanding that this will almost certainly shift throughout their lives, and that this is ok."

The Entrepreneurship strand requires Masters students to develop projects, supported with School funding. "Like Guildhall, we combine rigorous musical

discipline with reflection, entrepreneurial skills and an awareness of music's social role," Oscar says. "That shaped me profoundly at Guildhall, and I strive to bring that spirit here."

He has also introduced a wellbeing programme, inspired by his own Tai Chi practice. "Students often ask for a physiotherapist, but what they really need is awareness to understand their bodies and minds, to prevent injury and manage performance anxiety. It's about developing healthier self-talk and ways of thinking. They quickly realise they're not alone."

Alongside his role as Dean, Oscar continues to compose. Two premieres are on the horizon: *VISITACION[e]S*, an orchestral song cycle for soprano and orchestra on grief and bereavement, with the Orquesta Nacional de España in November 2025, and *Wells of Oblivion* with the Orquesta Sinfónica de Tenerife in April 2026. "I believe in the all-rounder approach," he says. "A composer is stronger if they also perform, conduct and teach, and an educational leader is more grounded if they keep creating and engaging artistically."

Much of that philosophy, he adds, was formed at Guildhall. "You could be whoever you wanted, without judgement. Meeting contemporaries years later, it's amazing to see how that environment shaped us to grow in authentic, richly fulfilling and diverse ways, because Guildhall gave us space to explore and to try."

Oscar in conversation at the Reina Sofía School of Music



Guðrún Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir

(Opera 2003)

When Icelandic mezzo-soprano Guðrún Ólafsdóttir became Director of the Reykjavik Academy of Singing last year, she brought with her a belief that music education should be about joy and access as much as excellence. “It’s not only about singing but about expressing and performing,” she says. “This role allows me to help build the next generation – not just professional singers, but also those who simply want the joy of singing and performing.”

Guðrún studied Opera at Guildhall, where she met her husband, guitarist and fellow alumnus Francisco Javier Jáuregui. Together they have built a career performing as a duo, recording albums, teaching and festival-directing, balancing lives between Spain and Iceland. The pandemic prompted a permanent return to Reykjavik with their two children, where they now both teach and perform.

Founded more than 50 years ago by Garðar Cortes, the Academy of Singing trains students from seven and up in vocal technique and performance. “Everyone has private voice lessons, music theory and group classes. Advanced students also study complementary piano, opera and musical theatre,” Guðrún explains. Recently the children’s and musical theatre departments staged *Oliver!* with nearly 50 young people on stage. “Brilliant chaos,” she laughs.

She is clear about the stakes: “As children we naturally sing, dance, draw – it’s part of who we are. Singing is my focus, but music in general is such a strong form of expression. It’s important that it’s well funded and not just for the elite – that’s something I’m fighting for here.

“Society benefits from people who are educated, who appreciate culture. Some of our students become professionals, but many don’t – and that’s fine. Music education still gives them listening skills, concentration, teamwork, self-expression, appreciation of arts and literature. It enhances their lives.”

It was the School’s alumni who drew Guðrún to Guildhall: “Two of my

favourite singers, Sir Bryn Terfel and Anne Sofie von Otter. And I’d been to a masterclass with Laura Sarti, who later became my teacher.”

What did Guðrún take from Laura into her own teaching? “Everything!” she exclaims. “Her technique, approach to music, her passion.”

But she does have her own approach. “I emphasise expression and understanding – asking, ‘Who are you in this song? What’s the message? Who are you speaking to?’ I treat songs like monologues – you’re a character, not yourself. That often helps with stage fright too, because instead of worrying what people think of you, you’re absorbed in the role.”

We are always looking for reasons to be optimistic about music education, so does

Guðrún have any to share? “Yes!” she says, smiling. “Iceland has just approved the creation of a National Opera, a state-funded institution like the National Theatre and Dance Company. This will create opportunities for soloists and choir singers, which is very exciting for our students.”

Now, as a leader and teacher she’s had to take a step back from performing. “It’s very difficult. In my office I have a picture my aunt painted – a bird balancing on a strawberry – it symbolises life. I’m not only an artist, I’m also a wife and mother with two kids. Balancing art and parenting is complicated. Many women, especially after 40, disappear from the stage. It’s hard to maintain both a directorship and a performing career. Nevertheless, I continue practicing and performing, which is still my passion.



Johnny Pun

(Piano 2021)

“Music is a family,” says pianist and accompanist Johnny Pun. “Don’t just solely focus on your own instrument and be open-minded to gain inspiration from others. Pianists can try breathing like wind players too!” For Johnny, accompaniment is not background but active collaboration, and it’s a philosophy that now shapes the way he teaches in Hong Kong.

Johnny spent part of his childhood in Nigeria, where he discovered the joy of choirs. “Even as kids, we had a big choir culture. I saw choirs everywhere, especially in churches. I can remember singing music from *The Lion King* at school!”



Returning to Hong Kong, he entered an intensely exam-driven education system which came as a shock. “Kids take ABRSM [Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music] grades early, often aiming for grade eight before secondary school. Nowadays some even take performance diplomas in primary school,” he says.

It was accompanying his school choir that lit the spark. Rehearsals were intense – three evenings a week after school, three hours at a time, plus daily sessions in the summer to prepare for festivals. “That’s when I fell in love with accompaniment,” he says.

That passion led him to study at Hong Kong Baptist University and later at Guildhall, where he graduated with a Masters degree in Piano in 2021. Despite being on the soloist course, he found he was inundated with opportunities to pursue his passion for accompaniment, which he credits to his teachers Pamela Lidiard, Caroline Palmer and Iain Burnside. Although it was a different approach than he was used to, “In Hong

Kong, we’re used to blunt criticism. In the UK, teachers were very kind, which was nice,” he says, though he sought out directness, which he found was the best way to improve.

Johnny returned to Hong Kong and, in an unexpected turn, decided to pursue a career in law. But the industry wasn’t for him and, following an intervention from his family, he decided to quit and return to his true love – music. Soon after he took on his first student in accompaniment and has since built a thriving career.

One turning point came from an unexpected source: the harmonica. “In Hong Kong, there’s a surprisingly high level of chromatic harmonica playing, with world champions based here. In 2018 I accompanied a classmate at the Seoul International Harmonica Festival, where he won the grand prize. That opened my eyes to how much an accompanist can contribute musically, not just ‘play on the side.’”

Today Johnny works with many young harmonica students, often blending their methods with his classical training. “Some start with number notation, which gives them fresh ideas. I’ll bring those approaches into classical teaching – and vice versa. I’ll show a violin student a video of a harmonica player and how expressively they play.”

He is also addressing the pressures of Hong Kong’s accelerated exam culture. “I worked with students who went from Grade 5 in September to Grade 8 in June. I could tell they learned the pieces by rote memorisation, so some of them still had difficulties in recognising notes or rhythms properly. The instrumental teachers are incredibly busy so that’s where I step in and help fill in the gaps.”

Outside of teaching, Johnny co-founded the International Association of Collaborative Musicians in 2023, creating opportunities through concerts, dinners and cross-professional networking. “Funding is always a challenge. Opportunities are everywhere but you have to be proactive, to go out and socialise. You have to learn how to fish for yourself. I don’t think increasing funding is always the solution.”

So what’s next for Johnny? He has just returned from the 10th World Harmonica

Festival in Germany, where two of his competition partners won in their respective categories — including Matthew Yip, who is now the newest World Harmonica Champion! Beyond that, he says he will “continue to explore and push the boundaries of what an accompanist can contribute to, and hopefully be able to inspire and nurture other like-minded pianists who share my passion.”



From Madrid to Reykjavik to Hong Kong, Guildhall alumni are shaping music education in ways that respond to local needs while carrying universal values. Whether through Oscar’s vision of musicians as “critical readers of reality,” Guðrún’s fight for access and joy, or Johnny’s redefinition of accompaniment, each reflects the Guildhall spirit across continents.

At a time when the arts are under pressure in the UK, their stories remind us that music education is not just training for a career – it is a way of deepening human experience, building resilience and nurturing community.

Xexa*(Electronic and Produced Music 2023)*

When Xexa joined Guildhall's Electronic and Produced Music department, she was looking for "techniques, not recipes". What she found was a way of working that still shapes her every day – a discipline that's taken her from Guildhall School's studios to international stages and the release of her new album, Kissom.



Each morning begins with the “non-negotiables”: a scan of her inbox followed by the gym. “If I leave emails for two days, my agent checks in,” she laughs. Her exercise habit stems from a Guildhall class called *Body Matters* and has become central to her routine. “If you make music and you also train your body, your career can last longer. As artists, we think so much – producing, conceptualising, planning the next thing – that there’s an imbalance. We don’t practise the body the way we practise our minds and instruments.” The benefits are practical too: “Now my luggage doesn’t feel as heavy and my body’s less tired after performing!”

Unlike the stereotype of the nocturnal musician, Xexa thrives in the morning. “At Guildhall, I realised you can train your creativity. I aim to finish by dinner because I know that after eight hours of working solidly, I get exhausted and steal time from sleep.”

Graduating meant building her own structure. “Growing up, I had always lived by routines, and suddenly I had ‘so much time’ and it’s easy to think, I can always do the music tomorrow. You have time, but you’re not on holiday, so that’s why I have to be strict.” A home studio in London keeps her creativity close at hand. “If I have an idea, I don’t want to travel in case it is lost or, at the very least, transformed.”

Leaving Guildhall wasn’t a sudden lurch into the unknown. She produced and performed while studying. “There’s no ‘go!’ signal for your career,” she says. “If you feel ready to run, you should run.” It was the School’s flexibility that helped her seize opportunities. “I performed frequently but didn’t miss major assessments. The School welcomed my opportunities, and that let me start my career.”

Xexa’s route to Guildhall involved a little bit of luck: “Just a couple of weeks before the deadline to apply, I found it by searching for ‘best electronic music school’ online.”

That decision led to some of the world’s most famous stages. Her first international gig was at Berlin’s infamous Berghain on a Sunday afternoon at the end of a 72-hour marathon. “It was unforgettable. I even got my first fan mail afterwards! It meant a lot.” Two years later, she was at Primavera Sound festival in Barcelona. “I was on at the same time as Lana Del Rey, so I thought nobody would come!” Instead, the 1000-capacity tent filled, with a queue forming outside. “It warmed my heart.”

The biggest change to her daily rhythm has been the release of her new record, *Kissom*, a year in the making. “This is the album I imagined before studying at Guildhall and the reason I applied. I love studying sound, patterns, structures and sonic languages, and I wanted to explore rhythm in a way I hadn’t before.” The record draws on rhythms from her heritage – sounds from São Tomé and Príncipe, and Angola. “It asks how to synthesise them without losing their feel. It’s also a play on both English and Portuguese. ‘Ki’ is ‘what’ in my language; ‘som’ is ‘sound’ – so Kissom, what sound. Also, it sounds like ‘kiss-song’ in English, so it’s like a sonic kiss, for you!”

For the album, she leaned into micro-sampling, pushing her sound design into a space some call “pop.” She laughs at the label. “Pop is just what’s popular in a moment. Many genres were ‘pop’ before they had a name.” Inspiration comes from archives, the African diaspora and today’s political climate. “It ignites resilience. I don’t want sound just because it’s nice. I want sound with purpose.”

Her daily life revolves around what she calls the triangle of her artistry: the studio, collaborations and education. Right now, the focus is simple – bringing *Kissom* to audiences everywhere. “I try not to fixate on outcomes. If you knock on a door enough, it eventually cracks. Perseverance makes the crack, even with soft knocks.” Balance is key too: “curating the right jobs, noticing when to say yes or no, and keeping career and life in dialogue. I’m doing my best!”

You can follow Xexa on Instagram @xexarecords, and explore her music on Spotify and Bandcamp

Find out more about the School's Electronic and Produced Music Department here gsmd.ac.uk/epm





Guildhall School rises into the top three global institutions for Music

Guildhall School of Music & Drama has been ranked **third in the world for Music** in the QS World University Rankings 2025, up from fourth place in 2024.

The School has also risen from fifth to **fourth in the world for Performing Arts**.

Meet the 2025 Gold Medal Winners

South Korean soprano **Seohyun Go** took home this year's Gold Medal, wowing the Barbican Hall audience at the final of the School's most prestigious music prize. Currently undertaking Opera Studies at Guildhall School, where she studies with Head of Vocal Studies Samantha Malk, Seohyun impressed both judges and audience alike with music by Marx, Respighi, 임태규 (Taekyu Lim), Liszt, Richard Strauss, Mozart and Ravel. She was joined in the final by outstanding fellow performers **Manon Ogwen Perry** and **Redmond Sanders**.

Recent Music Gold Medal winners continue to make their mark on stages across the world. **Thomas Mole** (2021) takes on the title role in Billy Budd for the 2026 Glyndebourne Festival. **Alexandra Achillea Pouta** (2023) performs with the Idrisi Ensemble and was a Samling Young Artist in 2024, while last year's winner **Strahinja Mitrović** – the first double bassist to win the prize – has been named one of Classic FM's 2025 'Rising Stars'.

In Acting and Production Arts, the Gold Medals went to **Aisha-Mae McCormick** (see page 10) and **Lauren Jones**.



Lauren Jones receiving the Hazel Sharples Memorial Prize 2025

Aisha appeared in the Globe's five-star production of **The Crucible** this summer, while Lauren, who followed the Design Realisation pathway, has just completed her degree. Lauren also received The Lord Mayor's Prize and the Hazel Sharples Memorial Prize 2025, awarded to an outstanding third-year Production Arts student and voted for by their peers.



Seohyun Go performing at the Gold Medal final



Guildhall School alumnus champions £50,000 scholarship to support rising talent

In the summer of 2025 Guildhall School announced the Nicky Spence Scholarship for Vocal Studies, created to support talented singers from UK state schools who may not otherwise have the financial means to study at Guildhall. The first scholar arrived at the School in September 2025.

The initiative, led by acclaimed tenor and alumnus Nicky Spence OBE FGS, has already raised £50,000 through generous donor support, “My own upbringing never foretold success, and I would like to help establish more state school representation on our stages” explained Nicky.

Nicky’s scholarship joins a significant number of financial awards at Guildhall School which are supported by alumni, including Dominic West, Damian Lewis, Alfred Molina, Jess Gillam, Alison Balsom, Sir Bryn Terfel, Hannah Stone and Elmira Darvarova, as well as those who give anonymously each year or through gifts in their wills. We are deeply grateful to all alumni who choose to give back to the School.

“My own upbringing never foretold success, and I would like to help establish more state school representation on our stages”

Guildhall School awarded AHRC Doctoral Focal Award to grow and diversify audiences in the creative economy

ADAPT-AI: Analysing and Diversifying Audience Participation with Creative Technologies & AI, Doctoral Focal Award is a new initiative based in the Faculty of Arts & Humanities at King’s College London, in partnership with Guildhall School and London South Bank University, combining research expertise in the creative industries, digital humanities, media production and performance practice.

The seven-year programme – supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council – will support 20 doctoral researchers working with leading cultural and digital partners including the Barbican Centre, Southbank Centre and Royal Shakespeare Company. Together, they will explore how creative technologies and immersive media can reach and engage more diverse audiences.





Guildhall launches 'Propel Pathway' to improve access to conservatoire study

Supported by Purposeful Ventures, Guildhall School has introduced the 'Propel Pathway', a two-year pilot scheme designed to support state-educated musicians from low-income households who aspire to study for a BMus (Hons) degree.

The programme comprises two streams: 'Pre-application Propel' is open to Year

12 (or equivalent) students aiming for entry in September 2027, offering six participants 20 hours of tuition with Guildhall tutors. 'Post-application Propel' supports applicants to the BMus (Hons) programme who showed potential at audition but require additional preparation, providing the same level of tuition with the goal of readiness for September 2026 entry.

"Too often young people with the inspiration, the talent and the vision to create a better world lack the opportunities or resources to make it all the way to our doors," said Armin Zanner FGS,

Vice-Principal & Director of Music at Guildhall School, "I'm excited to discover how, with this new support, more young people can join us and realise their full, extraordinary potential."



'Propel Pathway' is part of Guildhall's broader strategy to widen participation and create more inclusive opportunities in higher education. Other recent highlights include 'Originate', the eight-month young actor training programme run in collaboration with RADA, Theatre Peckham and Young and Talented, which won the NEON 'Widening Access Partnership Award'. The Supported Application Scheme also saw record success this year, with 18 participants enrolling at the School – the highest number in the scheme's history – while over 20% of participants in the 'Get Backstage' programme, which introduces young people to careers in Production Arts, have progressed onto undergraduate study at Guildhall.

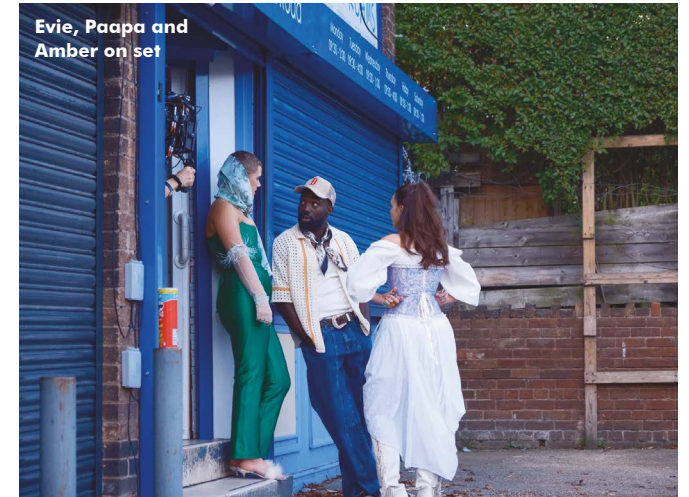
Find out more at gsmd.ac.uk/access or talk to the team at access@gsmd.ac.uk



Alumni duo premiere debut short film, supported by Guildhall funding

Amber Gadd and Evie Ward-Drummond (Acting 2023) began their Guildhall journey as part of the first cohort of the School's Supported Application Scheme in 2020. Five years on from stepping into the building as students, what are they up to now?

With support from the School's Guildhall Futures Fund (now part of the Making It artists development programme), they recently held a sold-out screening of their debut short film 'Laundreams' at North London's Phoenix Cinema. The film was co-written, directed and performed by the pair, and features fellow alumnus Paapa Essiedu FGS (Acting 2012). Set in Evie's family's laundrette in Sheffield, 'Laundreams' is "a love letter to the women who wash your knickers and the community that upholds them."



"It's been a learning curve for us," said Amber and Evie, who were both recipients of scholarship funding while at Guildhall. "We didn't know anyone who could help with funding, but we found ways — we pitched to lawyers and bankers, wrote letters and threw them into people's gardens — and some very kind people believed in our film. We were able to shoot, backed by an Oscar- and BAFTA-winning team! 'Laundreams' has already won an award at Bolton Film Festival, and now we're in pre-production and fundraising for our next short, 'Miss Universe.'"



To learn more about or support 'Laundreams' or 'Miss Universe', contact Amber and Evie at laundreamsfilm@gmail.com. For information on funding for alumni projects, visit gsmd.ac.uk/making-it-fund.

1880 SOCIETY

GUILDHALL SCHOOL

“Gifts in wills are nothing short of life-changing. I know this personally as my ability to accept the hard-won offer of a place at Guildhall to study Opera was only possible thanks to a scholarship funded by the extraordinary Margaret Easton.

Margaret was a devoted music lover and daughter of the great bass-baritone Robert Easton. Her generosity has transformed my life, allowing me to pursue my dream – it also means that I get to carry her passion and legacy forward through my work.”

Redmond Sanders, Margaret Easton Scholar

Everyone who includes a gift in their will is welcomed into the 1880 Society, named for the year the School was founded.

By doing so, they become part of a tradition that stretches across generations, standing alongside others who have helped shape the School’s story — past, present and future.

Please visit gsmd.ac.uk/legacies or contact Meg.Ryan@gsmd.ac.uk / 0203 834 1561 to learn more.

Guildhall Short Courses

Whether you’re looking to reignite a passion, develop new skills, or simply try something different, Guildhall Short Courses offer inspiring opportunities across music, drama, writing, and the wider creative industries. As a Guildhall School alum, you’re eligible for an exclusive 10% discount on selected short courses.

Discover the full programme at gsmd.ac.uk/shortcourses or get in touch with us at shortcourses@gsmd.ac.uk

Big Give Christmas Challenge

Your gift doubled. Their lives transformed.

From 2–9 December 2025 every online donation will be matched, doubling your impact to fund vital scholarships.

'Your support enables me to fully dedicate myself to artistic excellence. I am truly grateful for your belief in young musicians like myself, and for making our aspirations possible.'

Caetano, double-bass scholar

Our Christmas Challenge strives to give exceptional students the freedom and stability to thrive, while ensuring that the future of the creative industries reflect the rich diversity of society.



Scan the QR code or visit bit.ly/46Zcole from midday on 2 December to midday on 9 December to donate, and have your impact doubled at no extra cost to you.*

Contact Zoe, Becca or Meg at development@gsmd.ac.uk or 020 4582 2415 if you need assistance.

Throughout the giving week, join us online for Eight Days of Christmas, a daily celebration of the Guildhall School experience and the direct impact of your support.

To donate by Direct Debit, cheque, charity voucher or via our US charity partner, please visit gsmd.ac.uk/scholarships. Every gift makes a difference. *while matching lasts

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