

A passion for percussion

DULWICH RESIDENT KATE BROADBENT COMBINES PLAYING PERCUSSION FOR THE NATIONAL YOUTH ORCHESTRA WITH RACING DIRT BIKES

BY LAWRENCE DIAMOND

Kate Broadbent has a passion for drumming and dirt bikes. But it was the former – in her capacity as an orchestral percussionist – that was recently put to the test when at the end of 2022, she was selected to join just 155 other young musicians from around Britain as a member of the National Youth Orchestra.

To gain that place she had to go through a rigorous audition process that tested not only her skills as a musician, but her mettle and commitment to working as part of a large and diverse musical team.

The result is that Kate will now join the orchestra as it performs in concert halls in Liverpool, Nottingham, Birmingham, Coventry, Saffron Walden and London; take part in outreach work teaching more than 700 other young people from different backgrounds in an effort to encourage their musical passions; and get involved in livestreaming from the Barbican across the world in an NYO first.

I'm exhausted just thinking about that busy schedule, but Kate, who had to run from the rehearsal room at Warwick university – where the orchestra was based for two weeks earlier this year – to her hotel room just to be able to Skype me on her lunch break, is taking it all in her stride.

"We're doing four pieces in total and they're quite long," she says. "But rehearsals are really good. We did six hours yesterday, and we'll do another six hours today. And there's a lot of percussion in there which is great. There are really loud dramatic bits, and really quite nice melodies, so it's a good mix."

But how did a simple desire to play the drums along to her favourite Abba songs lead to gaining a prestigious place in one of Britain's most respected youth orchestras?

"Originally I wanted to play the drum kit, because I wanted to hit things and I wanted to hit things loud," she says. "So I started with the drums and played those for a couple of years."

"I had always thought percussion was just the bongos, so when my dad suggested I could start percussion, I was really excited because I thought I was going to get to play the bongos. But then I started it and I realised there are so many different instruments and there are so many different things you can do with it, and I kind of got hooked from there."

Her natural aptitude for the instrument – combined with hard work and an inspiring teacher who exposed her to the world of orchestral music – meant that Kate soon immersed herself in the role of the percussionist in the orchestral set-up



– and its important position as the lynchpin that holds a multitude of other musicians together.

One piece in particular made her realise how central her role could be. "I think it's in Danzón No 2, there are some amazing parts, including this massive part for the claves. You wouldn't expect two small wooden sticks to hold the orchestra together for half the piece but they do."

For a young woman who spends her time racing dirt bikes around the forests of Wales (more on that later), the pressure of being the sole heartbeat of an orchestra is something she thrives on.

"It is quite stressful, because for percussion there is just one instrument. It's not like the violin where there are 40 instruments and you can hide in there. Every single entrance you have is basically a solo. And I really like that."

Talking to Kate it's clear that she's incredibly mature for her teenage years, and this shines through when she discusses the importance of her role in the NYO beyond just keeping time and hitting the drums really hard.

"It's more than just playing percussion. The NYO is everything. It's trying to inspire people, it's involved in reaching out to the next generation. It's not just playing in the orchestra. Playing in the orchestra is part of it, and obviously it's a big part, but there are so many other things that go into being a member of the NYO."

A brief glance at the orchestra's website reinforces what she says. With its mission statement to inspire musicians from all backgrounds (50% of the orchestra are from state education, while female and non-binary musicians take 61% of leadership positions and 29% of musicians are black, Asian or ethnically diverse) and its desire to give young people the chance to grow and express themselves in a safe and welcoming environment, particularly in this post-pandemic era, the NYO seems like an incredible place to hone your musical chops and to grow as a young adult in this often confusing and crazy world.

But while the NYO is hoping to create a whole new wave of professional musicians to send out into the world, it's got a job on its hands with Kate, who also feels the pull of her second passion when it comes to deciding on her future career path. For when she's not performing Scheherazade in front of concert hall audiences across the UK, she can be found hurling herself over, under, and through forests and rivers on her beloved Motocross bike.

Furthermore, on the evenings she's not practising her marching band stick work, she can be found pulling entire engines apart and putting them back together with her dad. It's not the most common of passions for someone normally found on the drum riser – so how did she come to discover it?

"I was very interested in remote control cars, and then I realised from watching videos on YouTube that you could do the real life thing with monster trucks! But I thought that was a little bit expensive for a 10 year old," she laughs.

"Then I discovered dirt bikes and I asked my dad about it – he used to be a rally driver so he understood. And he was like, 'Cool, OK, if there's a track in London you can go and try it.' And lo and behold there was! So I went to the now closed course down in Docklands and learnt how to ride a dirt bike. Once I figured it out I was hooked!"

This led to her riding all over the south of England as well as weekends in Wales taking part in enduro races, where you have to push not only yourself, but your bike, to the limit of its endurance. Naturally this sparked an interest in Kate to fully understand her bike so as to optimise its performance. So from tuning a drum skin, she now found herself learning how to tune an engine.

"At first my dad would teach me how to fix things. Then I bought a secondhand pit bike, which is a bit smaller than a dirt bike. It was only £80 but the engine came in pieces in an Aldi bag! So my dad and I spent a month fixing that, and he taught me nearly everything I needed to know during that time. Now I have a collection of 20 motorbikes."

Keeping these two very different activities alive involves some serious time management from Kate but with her passion for percussion, her love of motorbikes and a mature head on her young shoulders, it's no surprise that she makes it work.

Indeed when she talks about her motivation to ensure that she makes the most of her talents it's no surprise to me that she's already reached such a high level across two very diverse disciplines.

"I'm proud of where I've got to because I've worked very hard. And I would say to people, even if it's complicated, stay committed. You have friends asking you to come and hang out, but I would just focus on what you want to do in the future because it can pay off. Take pride in what you do, or it might go to waste."

Although this south London native enjoys walking in Dulwich Park, picking through the stalls at Brixton Market, or just taking in the atmosphere on Lordship Lane, it's clear that Kate is incredibly focused on her future.

Whether that will involve standing on stages in concert halls around the world, or on the top step of the podium at Brands Hatch or Silverstone is yet to be decided. But one thing's for sure, it's going to be a thrilling – and loud – journey getting there.

“I BOUGHT A SECOND-HAND PIT BIKE. IT WAS ONLY £80 BUT THE ENGINE CAME IN PIECES IN AN ALDI BAG”

ABOVE: KATE BROADBENT