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CONTENTS

THE STRAD / VOL.122 NO.1457 / SEPTEMBER 2011 **TEACHING FOCUS**

TEACHING IN THE TOWNSHIPS

THE STRING SCHEMES IMPROVING
CHILDREN'S LIVES IN SOUTH AFRICA

34

FRONT

WELCOME.....	5
SOUNDPOST.....	7
NEWS.....	8
EVENTS.....	12
PEOPLE.....	14
COMPETITIONS.....	16
NEW PRODUCTS.....	19
LETTER FROM ALBUQUERQUE.....	20
All the news from the 13th Primrose International Viola Competition	
ANALYSIS.....	23
Liability insurance for string teachers	
TEACHER'S NOTES.....	25
In a new series, Philippa Bunting questions the titles given to teachers	
NORMAN LEBRECHT.....	27
Our commentator argues that string competitions must shape up, or die	

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FEATURES

Scrapheap Orchestra.....	28
We meet the luthiers who made instruments out of junk for a BBC Proms performance	
COVER STORY TEACHING FOCUS South African string projects.....	34
Discover how initiatives in the townships of the Rainbow Nation are giving hope to deprived children and, in some cases, finding them jobs in the music industry	
Aldo Parisot TEACHING FOCUS	42
At 90, the US cellist and Yale University professor tells Ralph Kirshbaum about playing with the 20th century's great musicians and the joy he gets from teaching	
Language in teaching TEACHING FOCUS	54
Find out how the feedback you give to pupils can dramatically affect their progress	
Double Acts: Almita and Roland Vamos TEACHING FOCUS	61
The influential US teachers talk about their marriage and outwitting their pupils	
Teaching lutherie TEACHING FOCUS	63
Top violin making teachers explain what qualities lutherie students need to succeed	
Wohlfahrt's etudes TEACHING FOCUS	71
Rachel Barton Pine reveals how these basic violin and viola studies taught her to memorise and interpret repertoire, and made her a better sightreader	
Giuseppe Fiorini.....	79
Roberto Regazzi celebrates the life and legacy of the Bolognese luthier – and teacher of Sacconi – who passed on Stradivari's tools and papers to posterity	
Great Violinists: Váša Příhoda.....	88
Tully Potter analyses the playing style and career of the fiery 'Czech Paganini'	

Primary school pupils take part in a Mangaung String Programme lesson



STRINGS BRING HOPE TO THE TOWNSHIPS

Groundbreaking stringed instrument schemes in the townships of South Africa are giving underprivileged children hope for much brighter futures. **BRENDA BRENNER** explains how they work and why they are succeeding

GUIDE TO THE STRING SCHEMES

The Eastern Cape Philharmonic Orchestra's Music Investment Project

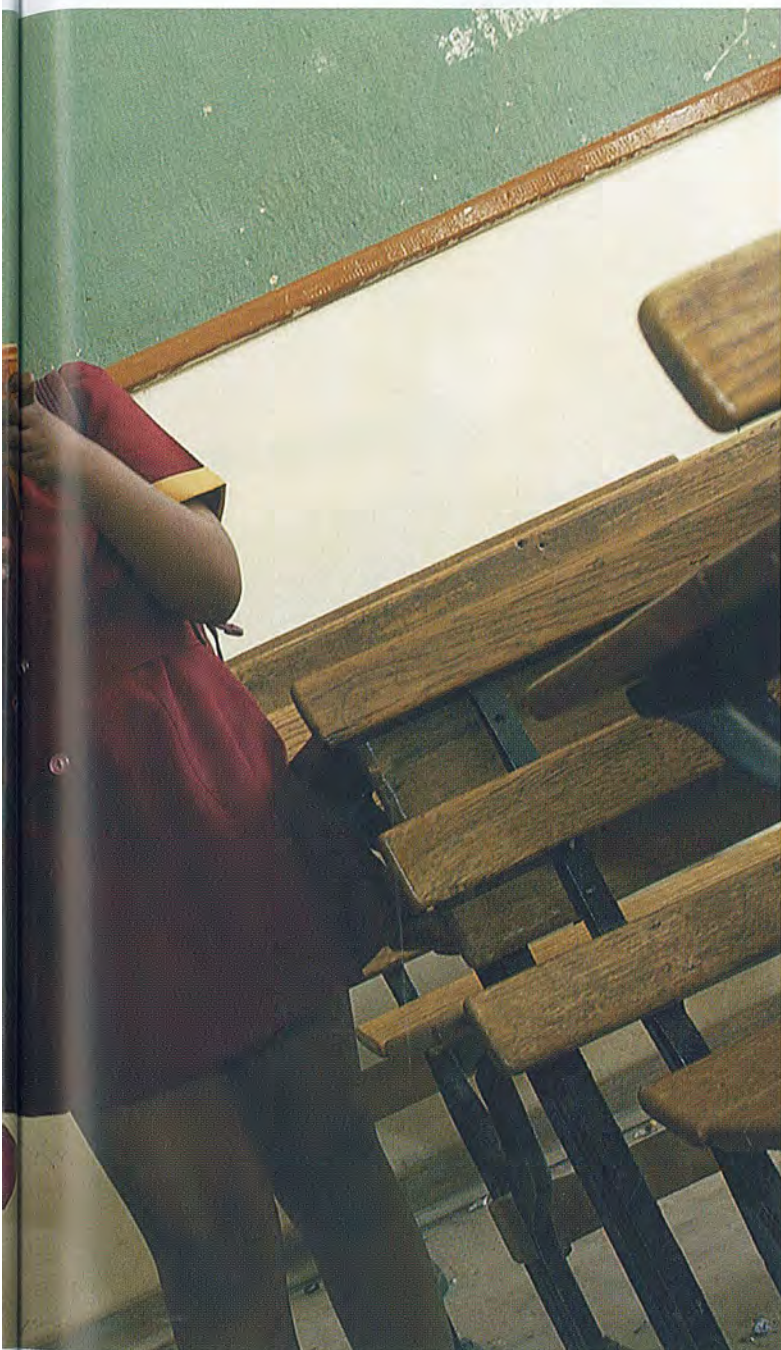
THIS INITIATIVE BEGAN in 2002 in Port Elizabeth and provides tuition for 550 pupils on recorders and orchestral instruments, and in choirs. Teachers travel to many different primary schools in townships to give small-group lessons both during and after school. Tuition is based on a traditional British approach, with selected students taking Associated Board examinations. The Bloemendal Youth Symphony Orchestra joined the Music Investment Project in 2004. It brings together pupils from all the schools involved in the scheme. Though pupils have been selected for prestigious national youth orchestras and festivals, the initiative is focused not only on creating musicians but also on opening up a variety of opportunities in the music industry. The children in this programme pay no fees for instruments or tuition.

The Mangaung String Programme

THIS SCHEME WAS FOUNDED in 1997 by the Free State Musician under the directorship of US citizen Peter Guy, and focuses on children from historically disadvantaged backgrounds in the greater Bloemfontein area. Large-group lessons are given at a number of Mangaung primary schools in the mornings, and more specialised tuition continues at the Free State Musician in the afternoons. There are four orchestras, based on ability, which come together after school and on Saturdays at the Musician. The public face of this project is the Bochabela String Orchestra (BSO), made up of the best high-school and university-aged students, which performs a wide variety of pieces from Baroque to traditional and popular African music. The BSO performs for government, corporate and community functions, providing a practical means to raise funds for bursaries which are awarded to help students attend music festivals, national orchestra courses, tours and orchestra camps. This orchestra has appeared widely throughout South Africa and has recently made successful tours of Belgium and Austria. There are currently over 430 pupils involved in the scheme. Tuition is provided by staff members of partner institutions and by music students and interns from within the programme. Each pupil pays a modest fee of US\$5 a month, which covers tuition, instruments, repairs, teaching materials and transport.

The Cape Philharmonic Orchestra's Masidlale Music Project

THIS TWO-YEAR-OLD INITIATIVE trains young violinists from the Cape Town townships using the Suzuki method, which was pioneered in South Africa by teacher-trainer Christophe Bossuat, founder of the South African and French Suzuki associations. Maria Botha, a South African who studied in France with Bossuat, heads the scheme. Tuition is given to small groups, and Botha is assisted by young township women trained by her and Bossuat. The hope is that the children involved will become members of the Cape Philharmonic Youth Orchestra and perhaps ultimately the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra.



JO VORSTER

SOUTH AFRICAN VIOLIN TEACHER MARIA BOTHA recently told me a moving account of her time working with children in the townships of Cape Town. Botha directs the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra's Masidlale Music Project, and since 2009 has provided underprivileged children with Suzuki violin lessons, in the hope that the skills they develop on the instrument might bring about broader social change for both them and their families. She recounted this story:

The little girl sat in my arms crying for some time. I was worried that she was sad at not having achieved what I had asked her to do on her violin. Her sobbing eventually ceased and she lay limp in my arms as I wrapped my coat around her shivering shoulders. She just lay there for the next hour while I carried on teaching the others. The thought never occurred to me that some of my pupils might not have eaten for days. I realised after a few months that some of them were busy in violin lessons while the other children were eating their only meal of the day in the ▶



► Brenda Brenner helps out on a visit to the Music Investment Project

▼ An older Masidlale student teaches her younger counterpart



COURTESY CAPE PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

school canteen. As time went on I became more aware that this was the norm: this is how children live in the townships.

As the director of a similar violin project in the US, I was invited earlier this year to visit three South African initiatives that provide disadvantaged children with stringed-instrument tuition – the Masidlale project, the Music Investment Project run by the Eastern Cape Philharmonic Orchestra (ECPO), and the Bloemfontein-centred Mangaung String Programme. These schemes are pedagogically diverse (see boxes on page 35), based in three geographically distinct areas of the country, and taught by teachers from various backgrounds using a combination of British, US and Suzuki-style teaching methods. They each aim to create meaningful and positive activities for at-risk young people and to teach life skills that may enable students to rise out of poverty.

The schemes' successes can be attributed to their organisers' understanding of what is known as culturally relevant teaching. The US educationalist Gloria Ladson-Billings outlines this pedagogical approach in her book *The Dreamkeepers: Successful*

The older students teach the younger pupils and can develop into excellent young teachers

Teachers of African-American Children, seeing it as an avenue to raising academic achievement. Though she focuses on African-American children in particular, her approach may have relevance for all children who face similar challenges. Her research includes a framework of concepts that are directly applicable to the South African schemes. Here are some of Ladson-Billings's key concepts, explored in the context of the work I saw going on in South Africa.

Believe that all students can improve and that it is the teacher's responsibility to help children to achieve

The schemes I observed in South Africa had high expectations of their children and treated each child as a capable individual with great potential. Despite having a clear understanding of the difficulties encountered by many of the children in their lives, the teachers didn't accept poverty as an excuse for failure. It is a testament to this that some of the alumni of both the ECPO and Mangaung schemes now play professionally in South Africa and abroad. Botha told me: 'I try to treat my pupils like ordinary kids, and I have found that this is convenient for everyone. If I find out about the bad things that have happened to them the previous day, I will be unable to treat them naturally and spontaneously as ordinary children learning to play the violin.'



→ Masidlale project leader Maria Botha

▶ Tuition on the Cape Town scheme is given in small groups

▼ A typical house in Nyanga township, Cape Town



ALL PHOTOS THIS PAGE COURTESY CAPE PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Have an equitable and fluid teacher–student relationship and extend it outside the classroom

Strong teacher–student ties were clearly evident in all the initiatives I visited. The teachers are a welcome addition to their township communities, regularly visiting students' homes as well as taking children out of the townships. In Mangaung, Francois and Tilla Henkins – teachers of (respectively) violin and cello to many of the advanced students – treat their pupils like family members, showing great concern for their future training and advancement by forging connections for them to study all over the world. I saw Music Investment Project violin teacher Melissa Witbooi discover the whereabouts of a missing violin from her students, and then drive into the township to recover the violin and arrange for it to be repaired.

Form a 'community of learners' and encourage students to work collaboratively, rewarding group efforts more than individual ones

Group identity is inherent in African culture, where people generally view themselves as part of a clan rather than as individuals. *Ubuntu* – the African philosophy of human interconnectedness – can best be translated by the phrase 'I am what I am because of who we all are'. These string programmes all include group classes at every level of the curriculum. The children naturally played and moved together, and any behavioural issues were often addressed not by the teachers but by a child from the group – subtle taps of a bow to a shoulder to let a peer know that they should stop playing, or concern from a group of young teens over a peer's absence from lessons and how that would reflect on them. In the classes I attended, the younger and more inexperienced students often insisted on playing for me together, clearly enjoying the shared musical experience. The Bochabela String Orchestra in Mangaung delighted in playing African tunes for me, coaching one another on appropriate drum accompaniments and improvising – on their instruments and vocally – on melodic repetitions in the music. The teachers remained in the background throughout – observing, dancing and videotaping the event – clearly proud of the group efforts of these students.

In a country where so many young lives are blighted by poverty and social problems, the teaching initiatives I encountered are successfully transforming children's prospects. Whether this instruction leads to a professional career, as it has in many instances, or merely serves as a source of beauty in the children's later lives, it provides a positive change. With guidance from those who hope to empower and transform them, these children are given hope and the possibility of a bright future through the study of music. ■