

CLASSICAL

music

The news magazine of the classical music profession • 7 July 2007 • Fortnightly • £3.95

Stand and deliver

Youth Music's new chairman Richard Stilgoe tells **Simon Tait** how he wants to raise the organisation's profile



Double act: Richard Stilgoe and Youth Music chief executive Christina Coker

Richard Stilgoe was a musical boy. He had piano lessons from the age of seven, and his music teacher at school saw his talent. But, born with an ear for a tune, he took in the score of the overture to *Oklahoma!* and asked to be allowed to play it.

'He said "No, it's rubbish," Stilgoe says. 'What a dangerous thing to say to an 11-year-old! - "I've got a pupil here who really likes music and has got something he really wants to play, so I'm going to try and put him off". But it wouldn't happen today, the ecology has changed, thank God.'

He has been one of those that has changed it, and hopes to change it more as the new chair of Youth Music, having been on the board since the lottery-funded charity was founded eight years ago.

For 20 years Stilgoe has fronted the annual Schools Proms at the Royal Albert Hall, and ten years ago he founded the Orpheus Centre, the residential college for young people with a range of disabilities, which has quietly changed both lives and perceptions. And he is negotiating with the Southbank Centre for the return of his own family concerts in the recast Royal Festival Hall.

He is a man who does not bother to count his blessings, he just acknowledges that there have been lots of them, and music has always been the most significant. 'It opens up so many opportunities in your life. It's been very exciting, every now and then somebody claps - and for young people particularly the need to be clapped and approved of, as opposed to being told to shut up all the time, is really really necessary,' he says.

Personally, a great good fortune was to be a teenager at the time of skiffle. While his parents' generation had had to struggle with the complexities of big band music, skiffle

demanding just three chords.

It was an easy music to learn, and when young rockers had got the hang of three they wanted to be able to do four and five, so a generation of decent guitar players was born, in spite of woeful school music provision; and it had to be out of school, where such crude strumming would never have been countenanced among the earnest cellists and flautists.

So, *Oklahoma!*'s overture now in the past, he had a group, called Tony Snow and the Blizzards, which actually played the legendary Cavern Club - twice: 'They didn't believe we could be that bad a second time, and we were.'

Stilgoe went to Cambridge as a putative engineer, but music took over as he became involved in the Footlights Revue and the satire wave. It was daunting, he says, to find himself among talented people who did music for fun: 'Some of us are cursed with the need to do it for a living, but for most of them it stayed a hobby, and some of the best musicians you ever meet are doctors and lawyers. I couldn't do anything else, so I was stuck with it.'

But words have been as much his magic as music has - a crossword fiend, he revealed on ITV's *Countdown* that an anagram of his name is Giscard O'Hitler - and his own career has been built on his ability to create witty lyrics to any subject, notably in association with Andrew Lloyd Webber. He was responsible for adapting TS Eliot's children's verse for *Cats*; he wrote the libretto for *The Phantom of the Opera*, and gave away his royalties on *Starlight Express* to a village in India which for some time has been earning £500 a day from them.

Soon after Cambridge he had found himself on television, first on the new magazine *Nationwide* and then Esther Rantzen's *That's Life*, before he went on the road with his own show, teaming up with Peter Skellern.

As a new tv celebrity, though, he was asked to open many things, including special schools, where there was a plangent absence of music. Odd, he says, how in ordinary schools' time management music was displaced by sport, while in special schools where there was palpably no sport there was even less of music.

He became involved with Dr Michael Swallow's Share Music project to allow disabled people access to music performance with week-long residential summer schools, and in 1998 developed the idea by setting up Orpheus, a residential centre in Surrey which now has 24 disabled residents who get the chance to learn performance and independence over a three-year stay.

Orpheus kids have performed at the Glastonbury Festival, the Notting Hill Carnival, the Royal Opera House and even for the Queen at Windsor Castle on her 80th birthday.

Stilgoe's guru, he says, has been Richard McNicol, the amateur at London Symphony Orchestra's St Luke's Education Centre, who has been a tutor at Orpheus centre.

'Richard started a whole generation of music teachers now who aren't music teachers, they're music leaders who draw children along into doing music with them,' Stilgoe says, 'and it's a much more democratic system in which you ask the children for a start what music they want to do.'

'We call them music makers instead of amateurs, because it's in English.' He believes that Youth Music's task is to draw young people into music, and through music into a more confident, more sociable, life.

'Our first job is still to give people their first experience of music,' he says. 'Our second job is to give them a second experience, which we may not be able to provide, but we need to tell them where to go.'

'So I think Youth Music needs better links with music services and music teaching in its traditional form, so that we can pass people on.' Our young musicians, as exemplified in the Schools Proms, have always been world leaders, Stilgoe says. 'Whenever they have a European youth orchestra they have to have a quota to stop it being entirely British.'

'But the top of the pyramid has always been fine, what we're interested in is how wide the base of the pyramid is. In a way, the Schools Proms can be quite dangerous because a minister can come along and see that everything's fine, because there will always be the peaks on display. It's not what's happening on the top of the Empire State Building that matters, though, it's what's happening down in the street.'

He pays fulsome tributes to his predecessor, Gavin Henderson, but as the new chairman he wants to see Youth Music having a higher profile, standing alongside the young people as they perform rather than standing in the wings. 'Most of them won't become full-time performers, of course, but it will make them a really good audience for whatever music they choose to listen to,' Stilgoe says, 'and it's just as important to train consumers as it is to train performers – perhaps we train too many performers and then disappoint them.'

Youth Music's mission is about what he calls 'OOSH music' – out of school hours – and he has been on the board of trustees since it was set up in 1999. 'It's a difficult time when kids leave primary school and suddenly exam pressure gets going, and a lot of them give up music just at the time when socially they need that feeling of doing things with people.'

Some, aged 15 or 16, have even disengaged from school altogether. 'Music can get them back in, and we have examples of that – of youngsters who have been excluded from school and decided never to go to school again, who have come into one of our music workshops in one of our action zones, done some stuff with us and asked to do more, and we tell them "Back at school is where you do more of it".'

'It's very thrilling, because we only set out to make a nice noise but if you change a life while you're making a nice noise, it's really something.'

Lives that have not needed to be changed are his own children's. All of them have had music in them; Joe is a jazz pianist/singer with, unsurprisingly, a knack for witty lyrics, who has his own trio and is a regular on the jazz club circuit.

'My children say that if there are two words in the English language they would like removed they are 'any relation?' Joe's the youngest and the only professional, I had to keep going till I had five and finally got a musician. Of the others, one sings in a choir, one plays flute, one plays drums, they all enjoy it.' And there are six grandchildren: one of whom has taken up violin; one has taken up cornet. 'You've straight away your own market research at home; it's not necessarily completely reliable, but it's a start. I can't stay abreast of every single development in world music, so now and then when a band's name is mentioned I just ring up a child.' And he has a useful age range for any in-house survey he needs to carry out, from 41 to 27 in one generation and nine years to three months in the next.

The challenge now is for the ever growing national family of young music makers to make their voices heard in the promised biggest cultural festival ever, the 2012 Olympics. Youth Music has made singing a priority, in harmony with the music manifesto, and last year produced the *Singbook*, 12 original songs of all kinds with lyrics, music and instructions for each composition's potential learning strategy.

'Youth Music gets £10m a year from the lottery and we think we're the best value of any arts money in the country,' Stilgoe says. 'Pretty soon we'll be at 1.5 million children that we've got to, which just doesn't happen with most arts organisations.'

London got the Olympics, he says, because London went to the Singapore selection gathering with a child speaking every language that was going to be spoken at the Olympics; and Paris didn't take any children. 'That group of children I want to see replicated on the opening day of the London Olympics – we can do the biggest choir you've ever seen in the world.'

'Getting a sporting legacy has no history really,' he says, 'but getting a legacy out of an event like this of young people feeling involved and doing things and joining groups and being part of stuff, and keeping it going afterwards – we can do that, and it would be such a great thing.'