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Having a blast

Children with Asperger's syndrome are being given a chance to forge friendships – some for the first time

Rachel Pugh

An electric atmosphere dominates the theatre as 13-year-old Jennifer Renshaw brings an end to her blues-style improvisation with the words: "I want to be me." The spell is broken only when one of the listening children blurts out: "That was better than The X Factor!"

Jennifer has a beautiful voice, but what makes this scene remarkable is that all the 11 children, including Jennifer, in the studio at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in Manchester have Asperger's syndrome – an autistic condition impairing their abilities to communicate, express themselves and make sense of the social signals most of us take for granted.

The children are participating in a 12-week music theatre project that started in September, called the Floating World, and put on jointly by Manchester Camerata chamber orchestra and the Royal Exchange Theatre. It is aimed at 10- to 13-year olds – an age when pupils are changing schools and their difficulties with social skills become most obvious, and often problematic.

Already, several of the young people have made friends – some for the first time, others have discovered new artistic talents, and there is a palpable excitement about the musical they are going to perform at the RNCM this Thursday, based on a Japanese creation myth, in which the wagtail made islands from the sea by wagging its tail.

The £18,000 after-school project – funded jointly by Youth Music and the Royal Exchange Theatre – has been initiated by Charlotte Spencer, head of learn-



Elliott Hughes: 'I've found a whole new world of people like me' Christopher Thomond

ing and participation at Manchester Camerata. She knew what could be achieved after having seen the results in a similar project in Yorkshire in her previous job at Opera North.

"The whole idea is not about the final product but about the process," she says. "It is about giving them confidence. It's a level playing field coming to us. The children do not necessarily understand each other's foibles, but they just accept them. There are youth club groups for youngsters with Asperger's nationally, but nothing for this age group that encourages them to be artistic."

The children have been recruited

through the Autistic Society and Inscape schools, which specialise in autism. Some of the group members are at mainstream schools, others in special schools.

The weekly sessions are led by composer and animateur Chris Bartram, who also took part in the Opera North project, Liam McCormick and Amanda Dalton, from the Royal Exchange, percussionist Janet Fulton and trombonist Tim Chatterton, both from the Camerata, and two postgraduate students at the RNCM. The project is being evaluated by clinical psychologist Andrew Beck from Manchester children's hospital.

The project has had its challenges.

These are children who cling to routine and have difficulty relating to their peers. The project leaders have been trained by Leeds-based occupational therapist Sarah Hewston, who set up the original Opera North project (and is running a third in Leeds in January). They learned about keeping speech practical, incorporating rituals into sessions, and devised "passports" for each child with their likes and dislikes and how to calm them.

This session – like all those up to now – seems like organised chaos. In one corner, Kristian is resisting joining musical activities suggested by Bartram, who turns the boy's attempts to hug him into a mirroring game. Gradually, Kristian is drawn in and ends up going to the piano with Bartram and starting a musical feature with himself as a wagtail.

A loud braying turns all attention to 10-year-old Elliott Hughes, who has donned a foil-covered box to give himself a robot body and is puffing down a euphonium. "This has got to be the most fun place," he says later. "In school, where there is only me with this problem, I feel isolated. But here, I've found a whole new world of people like me."

Fiona Hughes, mother of 11-year-old Dylan (no relation to Elliott), feels the project has had a profound impact on her Kylie-obsessed son, who is in a mainstream school and has struggled to come to terms with the diagnosis delivered two years ago. She says: "This project has answered a lot of questions for him as well as for me. This is the first time he has been able to meet other children who are like himself. He's also got a friend for the first time."

Bill Taylor, headteacher at Inscape Cheadle in South Manchester, has two pupils taking part in the Floating World project. "We mustn't fall into the trap of thinking that sameness and predictability are what autistic kids want," he says. "Projects involving other organisations like this give pupils opportunities to experience settings that we could not possibly recreate in schools."