

PLAY

The
Guildhall
School
Magazine
2024

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**GUILD
HALL**
SCHOOL

Welcome to the latest edition of PLAY

The 2023/24 academic cycle was another extraordinary year for Guildhall School, and much of our success is rooted in the brilliance of our students, staff and alumni community — who continue to make a real difference to the School and the world around us.

We were thrilled to be ranked the UK's top institution for Arts, Drama & Music by the Complete University Guide for a third year in a row, and globally we've risen to fifth in the world for Performing Arts in the QS World University Rankings. Beyond the rankings, it's the inspiring journeys of our alumni and current students that truly define us.

In this issue, we focus on the people who make Guildhall School what it is. Catch up with your fellow alumni and read about how they're shaping the future of their art forms, from Monica Dolan's (Acting 1992) standout performance in *Mr Bates vs The Post Office* (page 16) to the groundbreaking work of Samantha Béart (Acting 2009), Max Davidoff-Grey (Electronic Music 2017) and Elisabeth Swedlund (Vocal 2016) in the world of video games (page 10). Follow Benson Wilson (Opera 2019) through a day in his life as a singer (page 26) and hear Helen England (Music Therapy 1992) reflect on her journey from student to Chief Executive (page 12).

We'll also explore some of the work making a difference to the students and staff in the building right now. Read on to learn about the School's pioneering Get Backstage programme (page 4), which opens doors for young people curious about technical theatre careers, and catch up with the progress of an innovative leadership programme from Guildhall Ignite (page 14).

We'd love to hear what you've been up to. Whether you're creating, teaching or exploring new directions, please share your story with us. You can reach the alumni team at alumni@gsm.d.ac.uk or call 0203 834 1592. If this magazine inspires you to read more, make sure you are signed up for the alumni e-newsletter and follow our alumni social media accounts for all the latest news, events, and trips down memory lane...

Thank you for being part of Guildhall's ongoing story!

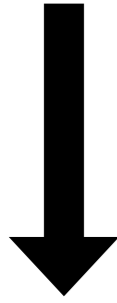
With best wishes,
Professor Jonathan Vaughan FGS
Principal



GET BACKSTAGE



*It was welcome news that drama schools across the UK saw an uptick in applications to study technical and backstage courses this year, including here at Guildhall School. Yet, as Alistair Smith, editor of *The Stage*, recently cautioned, it may be too soon to “break out the bunting” as the UK’s theatre industry continues to grapple with a critical shortage of skilled technicians.*



School has a responsibility to tackle this critical issue. Launched in 2022, our Get Backstage programme, funded by our Access and Participation Plan, addresses state education pupils' lack of theatre access or awareness of behind-the-scenes roles and aims to increase BA Production Arts application and enrolment rates for marginalised young people.

Get Backstage combines education and career information, introducing participants to technical careers through workshops, industry visits and Q&A sessions with students, teachers and theatre professionals. It endeavours to increase participants' confidence, ambition and career prospects, and provides a unique opportunity to develop an application portfolio with expert guidance.

This isn't a new issue; back in 2007 there was a warning from Creative and Cultural Skills cautioning that there would be a skills gap of 30,000 technicians by 2017. From there, Alistair writes that "the situation has only become worse, exacerbated by the pandemic, during which many skilled technical theatre staff left the sector".

One of the root causes of this crisis is the lack of awareness among young people about the breadth of careers available behind the scenes in theatre, film, and TV production. This problem is particularly acute in state schools, which often lack the resources and facilities to introduce pupils to backstage crafts. In contrast, independent schools typically have working theatres and regularly offer trips to live performances.



As Ashleigh Hope, Head of Access and Participation at Guildhall School, highlighted in an article for *The Stage* earlier this year: "For too many young people, the opportunity to experience live theatre is simply not available. If you don't get the chance to see what happens on stage, it's unlikely you'll consider what happens behind the curtain or think about the types of careers that can be found backstage."

As one of the top 10 performing arts institutions in the world (QS World University Rankings 2024) Guildhall



Alongside workshops with Guildhall School's world-class teachers in our outstanding technical facilities, 2023 programme highlights included attending a performance of Disney's *Newsies*. Eleven participants across years 11 and 12 watched the crew reset for the evening performance, took part in a Q&A with the production team (which included Guildhall alumni) and joined a backstage tour. A visit to the Roundhouse also saw them explore technical spaces and learn about the roles needed to put on concerts and events.

"The group that came to see *Newsies* and had the Q&A with our tech staff afterwards, were the most engaged and enthusiastic group I've known," said *Newsies* Stage Manager Matt Henry. "I hope many of them join the industry."

The impact of Get Backstage has been significant. In 2023, 100% of participants rated their experience five out of five. Before the programme, only 27% of participants rated the likelihood of applying for a Production Arts degree as four out of five; after the project, this rose to 90%. To the team's delight, three participants have since enrolled at Guildhall School as undergraduates, and another has already begun the application process for next year!

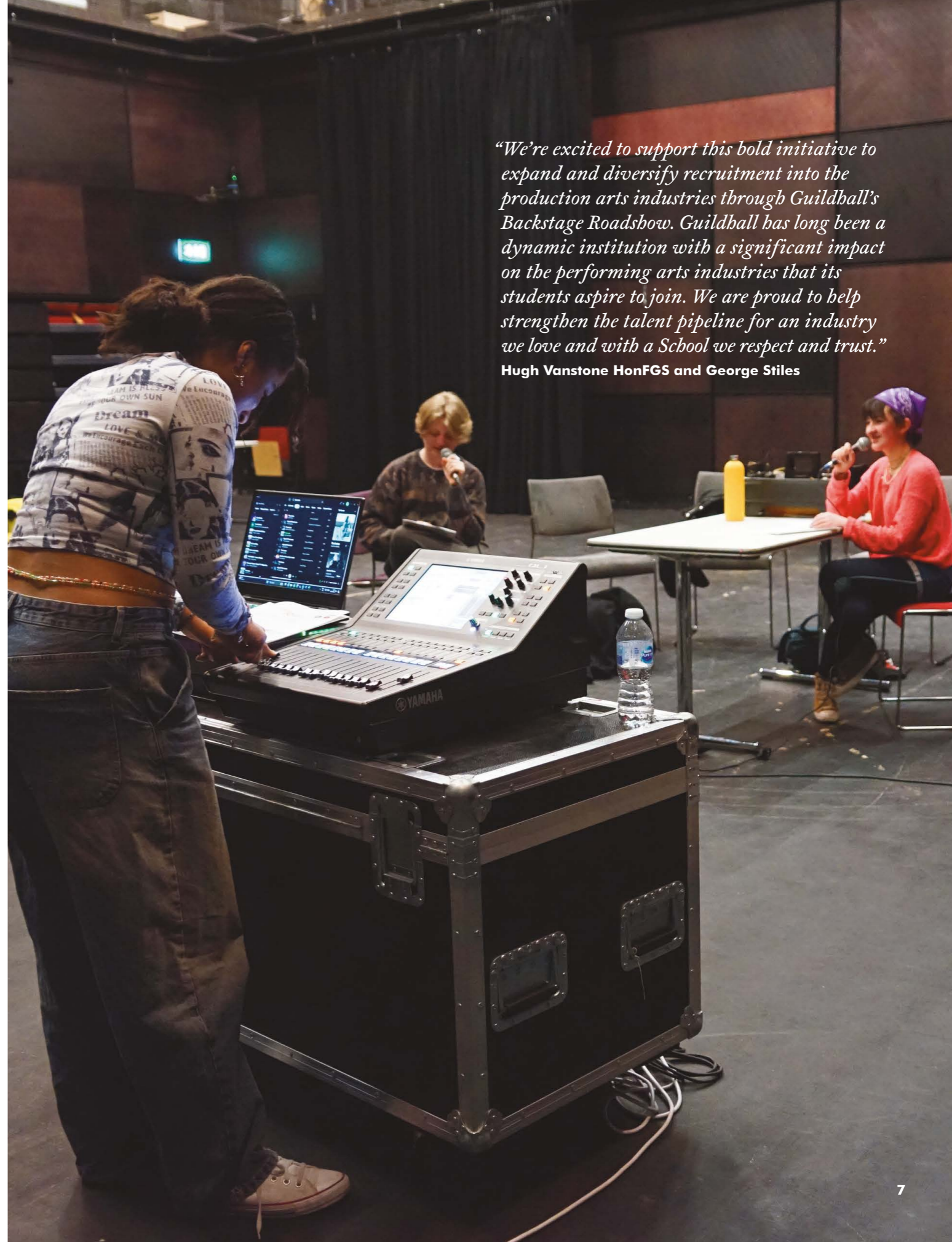
"I have gained a lot of knowledge about the different careers available, and also what it is like to study at Guildhall," said a Get Backstage participant. "I learnt a lot of specific stuff about the different

pathways, which was really useful for me because my family don't do theatre as an activity, and it always felt like a career where you had to know people."

The UK's professional association for Higher Education access, recruitment and outreach staff recognised the programme's success when it awarded the School the prestigious HELOA 2024 national award for Best Practice Access, Outreach and Student Recruitment. Voted on by association members, Get Backstage was acknowledged for the innovative, inspiring, and sector-leading work to ensure all young people have access to creative degrees and careers.

The success and impact of Get Backstage led the School to launch the Backstage Roadshow, run by Production Arts Outreach Manager Jon Hare with financial support from The Garek Trust, The Guildhall School Trust, Hugh Vanstone HonFGS, an award-winning lighting designer, and George Stiles, an internationally renowned composer and producer. With workshops focused on key areas of backstage employment, the Roadshow will take Guildhall School on tour and provide state-educated children with free hands-on tasters of working in a backstage environment.

For more information about Get Backstage or the Backstage Roadshow, or if you are working in a production environment where you could offer a workshop or discounted tickets, please contact access@gsmd.ac.uk or visit gsmd.ac.uk/get-backstage or gsmd.ac.uk/backstage-roadshow



"We're excited to support this bold initiative to expand and diversify recruitment into the production arts industries through Guildhall's Backstage Roadshow. Guildhall has long been a dynamic institution with a significant impact on the performing arts industries that its students aspire to join. We are proud to help strengthen the talent pipeline for an industry we love and with a School we respect and trust."

Hugh Vanstone HonFGS and George Stiles

Players loading

The UK games industry, a £6bn sector that employs 76,000 people, offers enormous opportunities for Guildhall School graduates. **PLAY** caught up with alumni making waves in this dynamic field.

Customise Character



Elyn
Northern Tribe Mage



Dreki
Dragon Clan Warrior

Select Accessory



Enchanted harp



Horn of good fortune

Samantha Béart

(Acting 2009)

Experienced audio drama and games actor Samantha Béart has been playing video games for as long as they can remember. It took several years to realise that all the games they played outside their studies at Guildhall could be combined with what they had learned, to produce an exciting and viable career. “When I started playing video games as a child, the characters weren’t necessarily voiced, you would have to read the dialogue on screen. I remember playing ‘Assassin’s Creed 2’ while training at Guildhall; Ezio was like discovering a new Shakespearean character!”

It was playing *Mass Effect 2* that was the watershed moment for Samantha, who realised: “Oh hang on, I think I can see myself. I was playing a lot of ‘tough chicks in space’ after graduating, and here was Jennifer Hale doing it in a video game, giving a performance that was paradoxically neutral and characterful.”

However, moving into game acting wasn’t an easy process. “I had to start right at the bottom,” Samantha recalls. “In audio I had worked with people like Derek Jacobi, but that didn’t matter; it didn’t get me in the room.” How did they manage it? “There’s a lot of knocking on doors; it was a case of going to developer meetups and socials.”

Samantha’s biggest game role to date came from digitally knocking at the door of the executives of the hugely successful *Baldur’s Gate 3*. “I thought, I’m the only person in the UK not going to be in this game, go shoot your shot, so I slipped into their DMs!” The gamble paid off. Samantha received a BAFTA Games nomination this year for their role as Karlach in the game. “I’m very flattered they had the imagination to see me as Karlach because physically I’m the opposite of the character.”

You can say that again. For anyone not familiar with the game, Karlach is a 7ft barbarian. Samantha inhabited the role so well that many fans don’t realise they did full motion-capture for the part. “People will say, ‘I love your vocal performance.’ And I’ll say, ‘What about the mocap?!’”

In fact, the voice developed last after Samantha had formed the character’s physical movement. “It was about slowing her down a bit. I imagined she bench presses too much, making her a bit stiff in the shoulders.”

Without access to costumes, visuals, or even the wider narrative of games, Samantha compares the experience of game acting



to black box theatre. “You certainly can’t take it home with you and study, so it’s all very much in the mind, and that comes back to my training. It’s serving me very well in that aspect.”

Samantha says the best thing about game acting is that you can play anything, because current technology is so good. “You can get a role that’s very relatable, real and moving. Then you can get something that is absolutely *fantastical* while also being real and moving.”

However, being unrecognisable as your character can be a double-edged sword. Despite being a multiple award winner, Samantha says they’ve had to start from scratch every time a job ends. “No one’s been swooping in to pick me up for the next big thing. It doesn’t work like that.”

That’s why Samantha started *It Takes A Village*, a Twitch and YouTube series celebrating and showcasing the people who make games, and the community and collaboration at the heart of the industry. Not only does it shine a spotlight on the talent behind the scenes, but Samantha has also raised over \$15,000 for organisations such as Mind, Trans Empowerment Project and World Central Kitchen.

The past 18 months have been turbulent in the gaming sector, with many job losses and strikes, plus the threat of AI. Despite being positive that the industry “will pick up. It absolutely will pick up again,” Samantha fears that so much talent has already been lost. “I’ve seen people already who’ve gone into film and TV, which is great for film and TV, but they won’t go back into games.”

What’s Samantha’s advice for other alumni looking to enter the industry? “Just love it. I would say it’s a lot easier if you play video games. If you’re going to go for it, you’ve got to understand on an artistic and industry level how the whole thing works, because you’re on your own. It’s a Wild West, for better or worse. Be interested and love your craft.”

Follow Samantha:

X @SamanthaBeart

YouTube @samantha_beart

Twitch samanthabeart

Max Davidoff-Grey
(Electronic Music 2017)

“Video gaming is a world that keeps flirting with me, and I keep flirting with it,” jokes Max, an LA-based composer who has been working consistently since graduating.

Part of his love for Electronic Music – a course he chose based on a gut feeling that he should do something other than traditional composition – came from a love of video games. “I was a big *Call of Duty* fan as a teenager but the first couple of *Assassin’s Creed* games had a big impact, and eventually *The Witcher*.”

So it’s a dream come true that Max has spent the last two years working flat-out on the score for *The Witcher* TV show, based on one of his favourite games. “It’s incredible to work on a franchise that you genuinely know, respect and care for,” he grins.

The Witcher has been a global smash hit, first as an action role-playing game and subsequently as one of Netflix’s most-watched shows starring Henry Cavill and Guildhall alumna Anya Chalotra (Acting 2017).

Joining the show to work on the score from series two was “a massive learning curve – a trial by fire,” says Max. “On the show, they’ve consciously chosen not to reference the games, which was delicate for me because I loved the game score. I’ve tried to find a middle ground, honouring some of its past, but doing something new.”

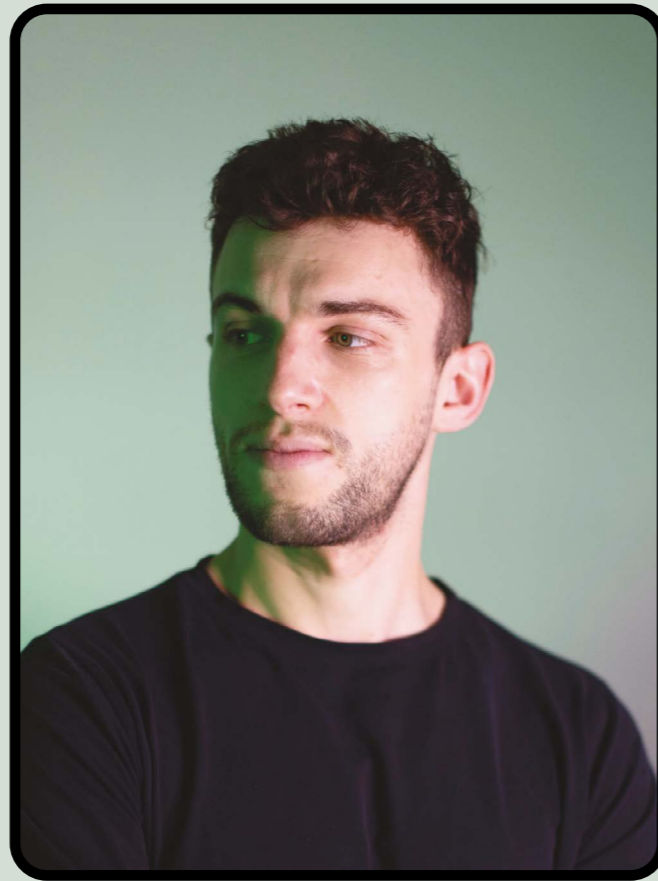
He adds: “Season one’s composers did an amazing job and we’ve been trying to carry that torch. We’ve had to continue using established themes while writing our own. I was grateful to receive a score producer credit for season three, which felt like a meaningful recognition of the work I’ve been able to contribute.”

Max and his team have worked hard to refine their voice. “Initially we had gone in a more orchestral direction, but shifted towards a folky Slavic sound for season three. We worked with the Polish band Percival, which was really fun.”

He says composing for video games presents different challenges to film and TV: “In games, you’re not following the action frame by frame. You’re trying to make the music as dynamic as possible, responding to player input. It’s an ongoing craft, finding better solutions to make in-game music feel immersive and interactive.”

The process also presents exciting technical challenges, he explains. “We think about music branching and layering. As a simple example, you might have strings playing, and when combat starts, you insert drums on top.”

Where does he get his inspiration? “I’m quite a visual person, so I find that seeing something visually impactful elicits



musical ideas. I’m lucky that I rarely struggle to see or feel what I think music should sound like. The deeper inspiration is that every scoring job or piece of music I make is an opportunity to get closer to creating something comparable to the works I’ve loved and admired along the way.”

Max offers some sage advice for music graduates just starting out: “It’s important to experiment and have fun and, in doing so, find your unique voice. There’s now less distinction between a media composer and a record artist. People are hired because they bring something unique to the table.”

He also emphasises the importance of being receptive to feedback. “You need great people skills in this industry. You’ll be met with many people telling you what they like and don’t like about your music, so have a thick skin and don’t get overly attached to what you produce.”

Max also stresses perseverance. “You have to shoot lots to score. You have to be willing to see a lot of ‘no’s before you see a ‘yes’. Even the most established composers don’t get every gig.”

When will we see his first game soundtrack? Max said it was on the horizon, so it was no surprise that, not long after he spoke to PLAY, it was confirmed that Max is co-scoring the upcoming game *Stormforge* alongside Clark Aboud, developed by Roboto Games.

Check out Max’s work at maxdgrey.com or on Instagram and X @maxdgrey

Elisabeth Swedlund
(Soprano 2016)

Elisabeth Swedlund is the founder of Ready Singer One, the UK’s self-declared ‘nerdiest choir’ dedicated to singing tunes from video games, TV series, movies and animé.

“I’d consider myself an introvert, so I’ve always escaped into video games when the real world is a bit much,” explains Elisabeth. “When you listen to music as part of a developing storyline in a game, it makes much more sense. It’s the coming together of music that touches you and storytelling escapism. It had a profound impact on me.

“The same piece of music can both soothe and excite you when it’s put in a specific place in a game, and I think that’s fascinating.”

She says her favourite soundtrack is *Final Fantasy*, which was recorded by a full orchestra and choir. “You can listen to it without playing the game and still find it fantastic. They have recurring themes for each character, similar to an opera.”

Opera and video games are two art forms you might not expect to overlap, but for Elisabeth, her training at Guildhall School remains very relevant. “As vocalists, we learned a lot about acting, working with text and storytelling. Similarly, I work with my choir to find the characters in a piece of music so there’s a lot of crossover in the act of storytelling. The stories we tell in opera have relatable themes but often have historical settings with faraway castles and counts, whereas videogames have real world stories you can relate to.”

Elisabeth started Ready Singer One three years ago while working as a children’s musician. It has already amassed over 130 members across three London locations and she hopes it could become her full-time job by the end of the year. “We find that a lot of people in the group identify as neurodiverse, which I didn’t really think about when I was starting the project,” she reflects. “But it’s great because it’s escapism for people who may not fit in with other groups. Then, all of a sudden, they find their people. As one of our members said when she joined the choir: ‘You get a ready-made social life!’”

Elisabeth says among her proudest moments so far was being invited to Comic-Con and other major conventions such as Hyper Japan. “That made us realise, ‘Wow, this isn’t just a nice friendship group making music; it’s got potential’. Then the BBC found us, and we were on the news last October, so that was definitely a highlight – everyone was super hyped! We got lots of people wanting to join after that.”

As video game music is an emerging choral genre, Elisabeth often creates the arrangements herself. “It’s a lot of work, but I enjoy it,” she smiles. She says the choir frequently requests music from the opening of *Attack on Titan* and the *Skyrim* theme. *Baldur’s Gate 3* (featuring fellow Guildhall alum Samantha Béart, page 9) has also been very popular. In an impressive feat, they’ve even sung in an invented dragon language.

Some familiar faces have joined Elisabeth on this adventure, including Ben Smith (Piano 2020) and Jordan Murray (Percussion 2019) who accompany the rehearsals.

While she has many ambitions for the choir, there’s one that’s top of the leaderboard: “Performing at the Proms one day!”

Learn more about Ready Singer One on their website readysingerone.co.uk





THEN & NOW

“Sometimes, we have to create our own path as musicians. There isn’t a single destination. Some might surprise you, and some might bring you more joy and professional satisfaction than you ever imagined.”

Helen England née Thorpe (Music Therapy 1992) is CEO of The Brandon Trust, an organisation enabling people with learning disabilities and autism to live the life they choose to live.



Helen England

I hadn’t played timpani for 27 years when my son’s music teacher persuaded me to return to performing. That’s how, two years ago, after my extended break, I ended up playing Shostakovich’s *Fifth Symphony* with the Bristol Metropolitan Orchestra and fell back in love with playing live. I’m particularly grateful to Guildhall alumnus Robert Kendall for his encouragement when I doubted my abilities, telling me: “Helen, you are a great player; keep going, it will come back.” To anyone who says it’s like riding a bike – that’s not true! But with every concert, I keep getting better and remember that I am still a musician at heart.

I started playing timpani and percussion in the Wolverhampton Youth Orchestra and subsequently the National Youth Orchestra before reading Music at York University, but it was getting into Guildhall School to study Music Therapy that felt like winning the lottery. I really wanted to study in an environment where I still had the opportunity to perform, and there were a couple of concerts where they needed a large percussion section, so I got to play in the orchestra. I couldn’t believe my luck!



While I always loved performing, I knew I wanted to work in therapy because I was interested in relationships between human beings, just like the relationship between instruments in an orchestra or vocal parts in a choir.

I wanted to support people who found relating to others harder than it is for

many of us. After qualifying, I worked with children and young people with a range of different needs. I then became head of a department and subsequently took on senior and executive roles in the NHS. This confirmed for me that not only am I a musician and a music therapist, but also a leader.

Being a leader is a lot like being a musician, especially a percussionist – you must have the courage of your convictions and come in at the right time. You have to practise being a leader, and you have to understand that you’re not going to get everything right the first time; you have to persist if you want to become really good.

I couldn’t lead my organisation without my music therapy training. The Brandon Trust serves and is staffed by people; music taught me to understand human beings and relationships. Leading is like being an orchestra conductor: you have to make sure that all your teams complement each other and that every single person’s contribution is aligned to create one brilliant sound.

If I could pass on the lessons I’ve learned in my career to my younger self, I’d say that sometimes, we have to create our own path as musicians. There isn’t a single destination. Some might surprise you, and some might bring you more joy and professional satisfaction than you ever imagined, so be prepared to go with the unexpected.

Find out more about The Brandon Trust at brandontrust.org

Orchestrating better connections

A unique leadership programme for musicians and management is transforming the way performers communicate with each other. We meet the women behind the ground-breaking scheme.

Complexity and intensity are two words that don't just apply to music performed by orchestras – they can also be said of the interpersonal dynamics experienced by the musicians too.

That's why Jane Booth and Trudy Wright of Guildhall Ignite, the executive and professional development consultancy from Guildhall School, created a unique programme to help performers on all stages, deal with the pressures of leadership.

For over thirty years, Jane, a Guildhall alumna, was a clarinettist who toured in high-profile orchestras across Europe and North America. Trudy headed up the orchestral touring department at one of Europe's leading music agencies.

The two women wanted to use their considerable experience to help others. They retrained as executive coaches and, in 2019, created *Leaders On and Off Stage*, which was originally designed to help principals and section players actively build and sustain healthy working relationships.

Alyssa Bonic, Business Manager of Guildhall Ignite, says: "In a nutshell, it models excellence in leadership, uniquely informed and inspired by the world of the performing arts. Today, organisations must remain agile and creative – open to multiple perspectives to enable the best outcomes to thrive."

Alfonso Leal del Ojo, CEO and Co-Principal Viola, The English Concert and a recent participant, found the course helped him examine his own leadership style: "I'm more and more aware of the control that I have and the power that I have, how it's perceived, and how I make use of it in an effective way."

Leaders On and Off Stage is a highly interactive and experiential three-day programme, underpinned by neuroscience, positive psychology and coaching principles, Trudy explains. "The work requires people to look at themselves and their sense of leadership first," she says. "Using those insights, they are in a stronger position to consider how their leadership techniques can evolve."

The programme is backed up by research undertaken by the two women before they created the course. Jane, who is Head of Guildhall Ignite, says: "We found that people in orchestras and management teams around them had unspoken assumptions



about principal player roles. Those assumptions could be really different from person to person. We uncovered a long list of expectations around principal player roles that were often overwhelming, especially for string principals with large sections. All those assumptions came on top of their musical responsibilities, including being at the top of their game every night. We also recognised that section players have their own social and psychological needs, but often have very little opportunity to voice them."

Jane adds: "Most importantly, we saw the need for the orchestral world to change, to be more welcoming to a more diverse population and that the leadership skill should be able to better respond to the societal shifts we're seeing."

"We've delivered our *Leaders On And Off Stage* programme to a range of individuals and orchestras now and we learn something new every time. What's so satisfying when we deliver our programme is the new things people say they are doing with the skills – from problem-solving, to supporting colleagues, to changing practices and processes more effectively for their specific context."

It's been extremely popular with musicians who have participated in the course. Guildhall alumna Lisa Obert (Violin 2011) said the programme was "insightful, inspiring and thought-provoking". She adds: "There was a great mixture of information flow, guidance and practice sessions. This programme fills a crucial gap and enables effective communication by strengthening interpersonal skills."

As *Leaders On and Off Stage* has evolved and grown, the ground-breaking programme has been used by high-profile companies such as Royal Ballet and Opera and the Royal Irish Academy of Music. Jane and Trudy are now seeing further interest as it applies more broadly across the creative industries and beyond.

Ursula Paludan Monberg (Horn 2005) uses the skills she learned daily. She says: "I learned through the course that I can be both calm and assertive. There is a path for me to say what I mean and state what I need without feeling like I am being aggressive."

For more information on the course, see ignite.gsmd.ac.uk/our-services/leaders



“I loved my time at Guildhall. There were treasures in myself that I found through connecting with the literature and exercises I was offered that I don’t think I would have come across in any other establishment”

Award-winning actor **Monica Dolan** tells **PLAY** how pivotal her Guildhall School training was and shares the lessons that have stayed with her.



The advice Monica Dolan (Acting 1992) has for anyone wanting to get into acting is simple: "Take your space and have a go!", she says. "That's what Grayson Perry says: just have a go."

Looking back over her career, it feels like this knowledge was innate in her from the moment she decided to be an actor. Growing up in Woking with a "very exciting and innovative youth theatre nearby", Monica's parents were keen for her to attend university but she had other plans. "I did look at a couple of universities, but there was a form at the back of the booklet which you could fill out and withdraw from all of them, so I did that without telling anyone."

Her path lay in acting. Like many people, she didn't get into Guildhall School on the first attempt, but her determination to "have a go" played a key role in her eventual success in winning a place to study here.

"I remember getting to my second year of trying, and I only had a Guildhall recall left to go, so wrote down other possible routes into acting," she recalls. "I knew I wanted to do it, but I thought: 'OK, if it's not happened via drama school by the end of two years, these are my ways in.' I was quite pragmatic about it and made other plans. Oddly enough, that was when I got in, probably because...I felt freer to create at the audition. Maybe that's what got me in."

Now, with a string of prestigious awards to her name and recent roles in highly-acclaimed dramas such as *Sherwood*, *Mr Bates vs The Post Office* and *The Thief, His Wife and The Canoe*, Monica says her time at Guildhall School was foundational to her practice.

"I loved it. It was absolutely incredible. There were treasures in myself that I found through connecting with the literature and exercises I was offered that I don't think I would have come across in any other establishment. It really opened up parts of you that could remain closed all the time."

"It's a proper training; it's very holistic, so it works on your whole body and imagination. If you're just being educated, you're not releasing the emotion from the depths of your body. The training was all about releasing what's available in you."

I also felt very safe. The one thing we weren't allowed to do was to laugh at somebody else if they were trying something. It's all about giving something to other people."

The treasures the BAFTA award-winning actor unlocked in herself at the School led to a milestone in her career. While playing the role of the jailer's daughter in Jacobean tragicomedy *The Two Noble Kinsman* at the School, she was working on a



speech that featured four pivotal aspects. Her teacher's insistence that she situated each of them physically in different parts of the room, then run between them, taught Monica a key lesson. "There's a difference between knowing what you're talking about and understanding what you're saying," she says. "You can read something and understand it, but knowing what you're talking about is different because you're experiencing it."

"The speech went to a place, and I went to a place I didn't anticipate – I let myself go and that's how I got my agent."

Learning to feel comfortable enough to let go fully is an experience that's stayed with Monica. She says: "Everyone has the potential (to be an actor); it just depends how free you are. (Artist) Damien Hirst has talked about this because people think he's somehow different. He says everyone has the imagination and potential, but what stops them from being an artist is inhibition. It's about stripping away what gets in the way. We had a teacher, Ann Mitchell, a very established actor, and her mantra was, 'self-consciousness is the enemy of involvement'."

It wasn't just excellent training that Monica took away from her time at Guildhall School. The bonds she formed with her fellow students are still going strong today. Monica says she has stayed in touch with many people from her course. "Charles Edwards (currently appearing in Amazon's *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*) is an excellent actor. We're great friends and soulmates. We used to meet in the refectory with our lunch tokens and have been friends ever since."

Monica credits another alumna with helping her survive the Covid-19 lockdowns. "Rebecca Shepherd from my year is now a yoga teacher in Cumbria, and I do yoga with her on Zoom. Rebecca got me through the pandemic."

From her hilarious depiction of Tracy Pritchard in *WIA*, to her harrowing portrayal of Rose West in *Appropriate Adult*, and

her formidable stint as Karen Richards in the stage production of *All About Eve* (for which she won an Olivier award), Monica's career has been incredibly broad. Reflecting on finding the balance between comedy and drama, Monica says, "When comedy and drama are good, they're closer than we think. I'd be very reluctant to do a drama that was without humour – otherwise it's not human."

In terms of her most significant role to date, the actor says it's Jo Hamilton, whom she played in the recent ITV drama *Mr Bates vs The Post Office* which won three National Television Awards and the television prize at the inaugural Sky Arts Awards in September. It tells the story of one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in British legal history, where a defective IT system resulted in hundreds of innocent sub-postmasters and postmistresses (one of whom was Hamilton) being accused of theft. Monica says it demonstrates the power of drama to effect social change.

"It impacted the world in real-time," she says, referring to the fact that since it aired, there have been some significant developments, the first being that the government put forward a new law to exonerate and compensate the sub-postmasters. Meanwhile, Paula Vennells, the former Chief Executive of the Post Office, handed back her CBE, and 50 new potential victims have come forward.

While her most challenging role "as a human being" was playing serial killer Rose West, she says sometimes the hardest jobs are those that are the most physically demanding.

Monica's proudest career moment is taking home the BAFTA she won in 2011 for *Appropriate Adult* to her beloved mum and dad. "Each of them held it and I was able to take a photograph of them holding it. It doesn't get much better than that!" she beams.

In terms of what's next, she says she's very much led by her instinct. "An actress that I worked with in my early 20s just said, 'What does your gut say? Always go with your gut.' It really depends on what's in front of you and whether you want to do it or not. I wanted to learn my craft in the theatre. It's there that you can experience the arc of a play and a story. That's very important to have under your belt. If you're doing film and TV, you at least have the notion that there's a whole story that you're part of and where you are in it."

One thing that's always a bonus when taking a job is if she can take her Siberian Husky Velma too. "She's very good at travelling. I was lucky with (James Graham-written BBC TV series) *Sherwood* because as well as it being such a wonderful and professional company, it was also very dog friendly."



Monica as Jo Hamilton in 'Mr Bates vs The Post Office', 2024



“WORKING TOGETHER IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE WORK WE MAKE”

Discover how adaptability, listening and collaboration are at the heart of Guildhall School's Acting Department transformation. The results have seen excellent responses from students and alumni alike.

The past five years have seen Guildhall School's Acting Department undergo a transformative journey. At its heart, the department retains its commitment to craft, which has created some of the finest actors on stage, screen and beyond.

"We want to honour the past, and engage with the present and also herald the future," says award-winning director Professor Orla O'Loughlin, who joined the School as Vice Principal & Director of Drama in 2019. "We're not here to reinvent the wheel, but as the world has moved, so we have to move too. Previously, we were known for classical training, but now we encompass the classical, contemporary and experimental. We seek to hold them all in balance."

In September 2021, the School launched a significantly revised BA Acting course after two years of consulting with alumni, staff, students and industry experts. The consultation element was crucial, says Head of Acting Dr David Linton, who has worked with the Royal Opera House and the BBC, and is a founding member of production company Prussia Lane. "It's all been based on dialogue. It wasn't made in a vacuum; we're connected."

That collaborative ethos also informed a new Reflective Practice module, which was added to encourage students to reflect on their own artistry and wider critical context. "How we work together is just as important as the work we make," says David. "The two operate hand in hand. It's about respecting the craft, but also respecting each other in the room."

"as the world has moved, so we have to move too. Previously, we were known for classical training, but now we are classical and contemporary. We hold the two in balance."



Arnold Patrick Lumu performing in 'Macbeth'

The response to the new programme has been exceptional, with the latest revalidation panel naming it "a beacon of excellence" for the sector, thanks to the work of new team members, alongside existing staff like Annemette Verspeak, Head of Voice, and Dr Eliot Shrimpton, an alumnus of the programme and now Head of Acting Practice.

The School was ranked first in the 2025 Complete University Guide's Arts, Drama & Music League Table, topping the table for the third year in a row. Perhaps most importantly, students are singing the course's praises, with 100% of those who participated in the National Student Survey last year

agreeing that the course pushed them to achieve their best work.

As a result of feedback from alumni, a new emphasis is now placed on self-led work for acting students. "The key difference is that we now train in this work from the first year," says Orla. "Being an actor now means many things, including creating work and having the agency to tell your own story. That takes craft, graft and practice. It doesn't just fall out of the sky, which can be a preconception about self-led work."

Gilly Roche, Guildhall's Head of Interdisciplinary Practice and previously New Work Producer at Leeds Playhouse, is leading this area of work. Gilly set up *undisciplined*, a programme that offers students up to £2000 for new projects that involve collaborating with peers from different disciplines across the School. In 2025, this work is set to evolve and expand to encompass a wider range of artist development opportunities for both students and alumni.

Among the recipients of *undisciplined* support are 2023 Acting graduates Obadiah, Aayan Ibikunle Shoderu, Abdul Sessay, Arnold Patrick Lumu, Ebenezer Gyau, Joseph Clark and Prince Owusu. In November 2023, they formed a company, The Mountains Group, based on a mantra they developed while studying: to be at the pinnacle of their work and

not go home until they reached the top of their 'mountain'.

Abdul says it was a sense that Guildhall School would challenge him that first drew him to study here. "Everyone pushed me more than in my other auditions with other drama schools," he says. "It felt like they cared. They were trying to get me to do something that was better." Joseph agrees: "I felt like they actually wanted you to do well. It was the only school where I felt they weren't just testing me."

For Obadiah, it was Guildhall's outreach work that was compelling. He jokes that he gives the School "a lot of stick, but it was one of the first I saw that was doing a lot for participation and support for working-class and diverse students. They were really trying to lend a hand."

The Mountains Group's first performance was *Camp Drill*, an epic inner-city London play written by Aayan that was supported creatively and financially by *undisciplined*. The group acknowledges that self-led practice at Guildhall enabled them to graduate with a body of work. Obadiah says this training meant the actors had understood who they were before they set up The Mountains Group. "Then we could transfer that into an ethos and a business with economic values and a strong sense of community."

Arnold admits to "feeling low when nothing was dropping into the inbox" after graduating, but knew there was another journey he could take with The

Mountains Group. "It's a beautiful thing when you have a community," he says.

A surprising outcome of the *undisciplined* programme was the development of skills beyond acting, says Aayan. "You have to do the budget yourself, but (the School) was very supportive." Obadiah noted, "I'm doing producer stuff now. I barely passed Maths, but here I am!"

Ebenezer found inspiration in alumni Michaela Coel and Jasmine Lee-Jones. Learning that they both acted and wrote helped him realise "it's possible, and we can do it as well."

So, what's next for the group? Plans for the future include new pieces written by Joseph and Obadiah, and the company plans to use their art to support causes close to their hearts. Long term, Joseph says the group would like to work in schools to promote the arts at a grassroots level and teach empathy through performing.

Alumni are also reaping the rewards of the department's transformation. The introduction of the Acting Alumni Gym in 2024 offered graduates of the programme from 1983 to 2023 the chance to return to their Guildhall training. Hundreds of alumni participated in weekly free workshops, further honing their craft.

"This is an initiative that is heart-warming, meaningful and possibly career-changing for alumni such as myself," says Brett, who graduated in



1985. "That the School gave me that opportunity, just because I was once a Guildhall student, is so supportive."

He added: "It's like an old friend has come around a corner with a smile, belief and encouragement. Meeting the other actors there meant it was like we had the same great mutual friend. Most importantly, even as an actor with 40 years of mixed success and experience, my visit for a screen workshop meant I came away with new ideas and tools, which will change how I approach my next audition, self-tape or job."

Screen work will certainly feature more in the future, as the undergraduate course evolves based on feedback. Orla says this is now a "vital" part of the training. "Otherwise, they can go on to set and not know what people are talking about... it's a different language!"

With screen skills very much in mind, an exciting new initiative for this year saw final-year Acting students star in *The Road Ahead*, a series of eight short films written by professional screenwriters. Filmed in Guildhall School's TV Studio and featuring 120 students from all departments, the films were shown at cultural powerhouse and Guildhall neighbour, the Barbican Cinema.

So where will the department be in five years? For Gilly, there's no one answer. "We don't think there's a singular way of doing things. If we did, we would be able to give a really clear answer! But we don't think that. That's very important."

Orla sums it up: "We're open to wherever the dialogue and roads lead us. It's vital not to have anything that's too fixed or certain, but instead be open and see what we feel is being asked of us, rather than always determining what that is."

Find out more about The Mountains Group on their website themountainsgroup.com and the Acting Programme at gsmd.ac.uk/acting



Acting Alumni Gym

Costume Design Goes Digital

Go behind the scenes of a ground-breaking project exploring a revolutionary new costume design process being pioneered at Guildhall School.

Imagine being able to work on a 3D digital model of a costume, see how it looks from all angles, and then experiment with changes without the need for a needle and thread. Thanks to a cutting-edge new project from Guildhall Production Studio, that's now possible.

ARray uses volumetric capture technology to revolutionise the costume design process by prototyping a digital costume library.

"It all started in lockdown," says Dan Shorten, Creative Director of a new production and research unit based at the School. "We were working on productions remotely, and I thought about the costume department and how limiting it must be without access to the usual hands-on processes."

ARray uses 48 cameras placed in a circle to film from every direction, creating a 3D model of whatever (or whoever) is in the centre of the cameras. Costume designers can then view, manipulate and experiment with costumes in a virtual environment. The aim is to improve the efficiency, cost-effectiveness and creative potential of costume design.

When developing the tech, it was important for Dan and the team that ARray needed a person or object to be physically present. "It's an extension of the art form, rather than a replacement," he says. "If we want to produce an acting performance, we're not building a model from scratch; it's the person, with all of their technique in expression and delivery."

As Vanessa Lingham, Costume Lecturer at the School, says, the rapid advancement of technology can feel intimidating. "There's the fear that you'll be redundant; we won't need sewing machines, mannequins or costume people anymore." When Dan spoke to her about ARray, she wanted to learn more. "Rather than being worried about it, I was excited by it. The project came from a creative place that nurtures new thinking and encourages costume."

It's all about "retaining tradition and quality," says Dr Leslie Deere, a post-doctoral researcher specialising in immersive performance technology, "while at the same time using these innovative techniques because they're here to stay."

As a world-leading conservatoire, "we have a responsibility to engage in risky experimental work, break down barriers and share knowledge," says Dan. "We believe in the craft, technique and artistry of live performance. We want traditional art forms to survive not just artistically, but commercially too."

It's another facet to a very "broad-based costume course that's training people in all parts of costume craft work," adds Vanessa.

The project wasn't all smooth sailing. "Given the current AI boom and concerns about deep fakes and performance and image rights, some people were hesitant about being captured," Dan explains. "We had to reassure people we were in this for the right reasons."

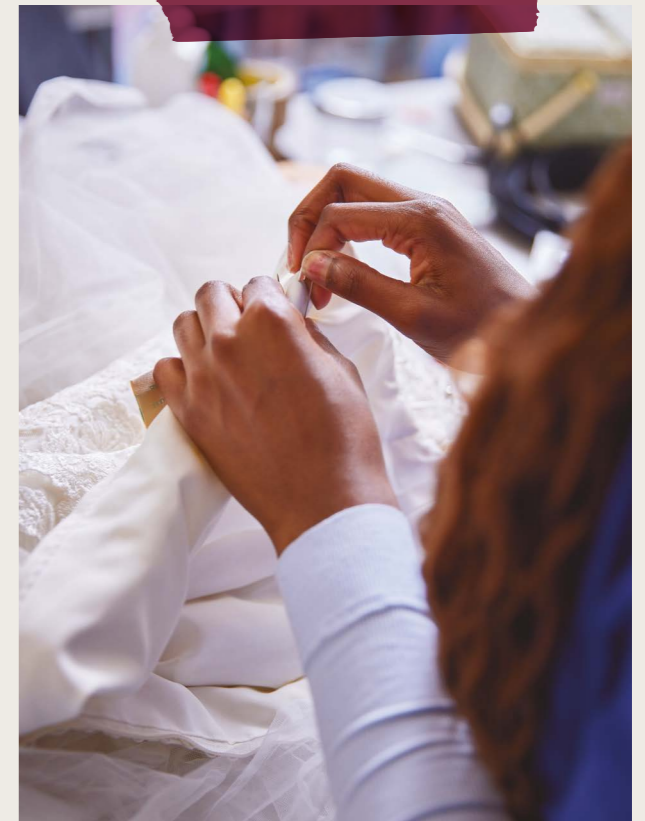
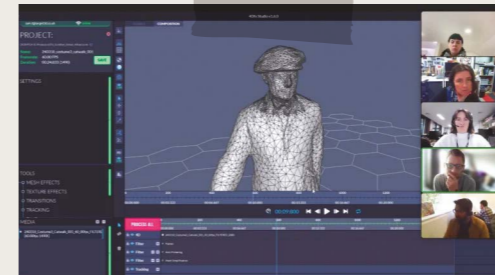
When it comes to technology, for Vanessa, knowledge is power. "You need to educate yourself that tech isn't just a big monster; there are so many different ways you can use it." This understanding can help inform those ethical questions, "but you've got to be at the forefront, not just hanging back".

So what's next? Beth Gillman, a costumer who supported the project, was intrigued by the potential to catalogue garments in hire houses: "If a designer can access a detailed virtual 360 view of how a garment moves on a body, there could be greater scope to source costumes internationally without travel. It could also allow some garments to be stored and better protected between use."

With commercial options in retail and beyond, the ARray project has the power to shape the next generation of costume design.

ARray was created in collaboration with Angels Costumes and supported by virtual production studio Target3D. It was developed thanks to Follow-on Funding for Impact and Engagement from the Arts & Humanities Research Council.

Learn more about Guildhall Production Studio
guildhallproductionstudio.gsmd.ac.uk



Benson Wilson (Opera 2019)

“I’m not an opera singer,” says Benson Wilson. This bold statement is somewhat surprising from the 2019 winner of the renowned Kathleen Ferrier Award, who performs at some of the most prestigious opera venues worldwide. “I’m a creative person,” he continues. “A creative that sings, acts and models.”



Forging a cultural livelihood in today’s post-pandemic landscape means Benson is the CEO of a multifaceted business – and he treats his career very much as such, including sitting in seminars with business coaches in his spare time. Considered “one of the voices of the decade” by *Seen and Heard International*, he recently signed his first modelling contract with a high-street fashion brand, founded his own cultural consultancy and is set to make his screen debut as Marcello in a film adaptation of *La Bohème*, based on OperaUpClose’s Olivier Award-winning production from 2011.

Touching on themes such as the cost-of-living crisis and seeking asylum, “the story of the Bohemians is very relevant today,” says New Zealand-born Samoan baritone Benson. He’s excited to bring the “raw emotion” of opera into people’s living rooms and credits Guildhall for teaching him to act with “true intention, at a level where you are just being rather than playing”.

Branded a rebel at the start of his career “just because I asked questions”, Benson is forging his own path in an industry still recovering from the pandemic. To be successful, “you need to take a creative approach to an operatic career,” he says. “The likes of Pavarotti and Maria Callas don’t exist anymore.” Benson’s approach has been to spread his artistic wings into different industries, winning plaudits whatever he turns his hand to.

He says growing up in a Samoan household meant a love for music came naturally. “When I went to school, I thought everyone could sing! My family all sang and would harmonise with each other.” Benson wants to use his platform to spotlight other Polynesian and Pacific Island artists through his new organisation, the Mana Arts Collective.

“There are so many talented artists that are constrained in a niche market and I want to help push them into the mainstream,” Benson says. Mana will also advise on cultural questions. “People think watching *Moana* is enough to learn about Polynesian culture, but it’s way more vast than that.”

He tells a story of being invited to a gig due to his Polynesian heritage and being handed a text in Tongan when he arrived. “The equivalent is for me to ask for European singers, find an Italian singer and then give them a text in German!”

With such a diverse and demanding portfolio, how does Benson stay on top of it all? “I don’t feel like I work, which is crazy!” He also acknowledges the importance of work-life balance. “You need to decide what kind of life you would like to live and make that the goal.”

Despite his earlier proclamation, music remains Benson’s passion, and he’s looking forward to performing one of his dream choral works, *War Requiem* by Benjamin Britten, for the first time later this year. It’s not simply the genius of Britten’s composition that motivates Benson, “I’m less scholarly about music; I prefer the raw story and emotion. I’ve always been about telling stories.”

Ultimately, Benson says, when people come and see him perform, he wants them “to leave feeling different as a human being and moved in the most primeval way.”

Check out Benson’s website bensonwilson.com and Instagram [@baritonebenson](https://www.instagram.com/baritonebenson)

Learn more about the Mana Arts Collective at mana-arts.co



Guildhall School awarded half a million pounds to transform its Electronic Music studio

In July this year, the School was awarded nearly £500,000 to fund the transformation of its studio and teaching spaces for Electronic & Produced Music (EPM) department. The generous financial support from the Wolfson Foundation, Foyle Foundation, Garfield Weston Foundation and The Guildhall School Trust, enables Guildhall School to provide state-of-the-art studio facilities for over 200 students across its growing EPM programmes and elective modules, including Film Music, Game Audio, Songwriting and Live Electronics.

Work began this summer to transform 120 sqm of the School's Silk Street building into acoustically isolated and controlled spaces for specialist teaching and practice. This will include acoustic refurbishment of existing spaces and the purchase and installation of equipment for the new studios. The School is currently the only major educational institution for EPM training in the conservatoire sector.



Guildhall School Professor receives a Future Leaders Fellowship



Guildhall School is proud to announce that *Dr Toby Young* (left) has been awarded a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship, receiving £1.4 million to fund his “Immersive Opera” research project. This is the largest research grant the School has ever received.

Dr Young will explore immersive performance techniques and technology in opera, collaborating with partners like Punchdrunk Enrichment, Opera North, and the Royal Opera. His research aims to create new digital-era operatic works and develop training resources for the opera industry. A key focus will be on using Guildhall School's cutting-edge

Extended Reality (XR) technology. Dr Young, with Guildhall Production Studio, will experiment with spatial audio, audio-mapping, and visual/haptic XR interfaces to enhance interactive storytelling. The project will also gather data on audience experiences to refine immersive techniques.

A Professor of Composition at Guildhall School, Dr Young has worked on a variety of acclaimed projects, including music for BAFTA-nominated productions. He is also Music Supervisor for Punchdrunk and was a key figure in the Philharmonia Orchestra's “Audience of the Future” project.

1. Gareth Owen 2. Alexandra Dariescu
3. Bretton Brown 4. Alexander Soares
5. Sarah Tynan



New additions to our Music Faculty

Following the retirement of *Pamela Lidiard* over the summer, *Gareth Owen* succeeded her as Deputy Head of Keyboard. Gareth has performed as a soloist throughout the UK, Europe, North America and Australia, and was Head of Piano at Eton College as well as a piano professor at Junior Guildhall.

Dr Bretton Brown also joined the department as Senior Professor of Collaborative Piano. An accomplished recitalist, he made his UK debut with Renée Fleming at Wigmore Hall and has performed at venues such as Carnegie Hall and the Barbican. The School also welcomed back alumni *Alexandra Dariescu* and *Dr Alexander Soares* as piano professors, both internationally acclaimed soloists with multiple recordings and performances at top venues worldwide.

In September, *Sarah Tynan* joined the School as Head of Vocal Arts, a new position bringing together Vocal and Opera Studies. Included in the Evening Standard's list of the UK's most influential artists, Sarah has worked regularly with many of the leading orchestras, opera companies and ensembles around the world.

Bravo to the 2024 Gold Medal Winners

This year's Music Gold Medal final was a first for Guildhall School, as *Strahinja Mitrović* became the only double bassist to have won the prestigious award, which has been given to an outstanding musician studying at the School every year since 1915.



The finalists each performed a concerto with Guildhall Symphony Orchestra, conducted by School alumnus *Jonathan Bloxham*. Strahinja's winning performance of Nino Rota's *Divertimento Concertante for Double Bass* impressed the audience as well as the judges. Finalists harpist *Heather Brooks* and clarinettist *Kosuke Shirai* gave brilliant performances of works by Ginastera and Copland, respectively. Strahinja completed their undergraduate studies this summer and remains with the School on the Guildhall Artist Masters programme.



This year's Acting Gold Medal was awarded to *Romaya Weaver*, who finished her studies this summer playing the role of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. In Production Arts, the award went to *Katie Ranson*. Katie completed the BA in Production Arts (Design Realisation Pathway) this summer and in her final year was Scenic Carpenter for the Autumn Double Bill of Respighi operas *Maria egiziaca* and *La bella dormente nel bosco*.



Triumph for Guildhall quartet at major international competition

The Fibonacci Quartet, featuring current students and an alumnus, are the only ensemble to ever win both First and Audience prizes at the Premio Paolo Borciani International String Quartet Competition in Italy. *Kryštof Kohout* (Art Dip Violin), *Luna De Mol* (MPerf Violin) and *Elliot Kempton* (Viola 2024) performed five times over the course of the seven-day competition to earn top spot, finishing with Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden'.

The Quartet were also selected to join the Young Classical Artist Trust roster following public finals at Wigmore Hall and are now

a Resident Ensemble at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama in Cardiff.

Formed at Guildhall five years ago, the Quartet has become a beacon of excellence for chamber music at the School alongside recent graduates also making their mark. The Barbican Quartet, winners of the ARD International String Quartet Competition 2022, and the Mithras Trio, BBC New Generation artists, have both released critically-acclaimed debut albums since the last edition of PLAY.

Visit the School to enjoy one of our many free chamber music performances throughout the year [gsmd.ac.uk/whats-on](https://www.gsmd.ac.uk/whats-on)



Guildhall School launches new BA in performance design

Guildhall School is launching a new BA in performance design in September 2025. This three-year, full-time programme will equip students with the practical and imaginative skills needed to design for stage performances and live events. Led by stage designer Dr Susannah Henry, the course is the latest addition to Guildhall's renowned Production Arts department.

The programme combines studio-based design projects with hands-on experience, allowing students to collaborate on performances using state-of-the-art facilities. It covers key areas such as costume, video, and lighting, while exploring the history of art, design and theatre. Students will also gain valuable insights through self-led research, shaping their identities as emerging performance designers.

The course offers opportunities to work closely with other Production Arts programmes, building both technical skills and industry connections. Graduates

will be prepared for careers in set and costume design, creative direction, lighting and visual design.

Applications are now open gsmd.ac.uk/study-with-guildhall/ba-performance-design



Monday 2 June 2025
Drapers' Hall

Guildhall School Annual Gala

Enjoy a wonderful evening of dining and performances at our Annual Gala in the magnificent Drapers' Hall and help raise vital funds for world-class training at Guildhall School.

This evening will include a champagne reception, three-course gala dinner with performances from the School's talented students, alumni and a unique arts-themed auction.

Tickets are available from £125 for alumni; £250 for other guests and £2,500 for a table at gsmd.ac.uk/support alternatively please email development@gsmd.ac.uk

GUILDHALL
SCHOOL



Guildhall School ranked first in the Complete University Guide's Arts, Drama & Music League Table 2025, topping the table for a third year in a row in the specialist colleges and conservatoires category.

The Complete University Guide League Table is based on data from the National Student Survey (NSS), Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), with the Arts, Drama & Music League Table ranking specialist colleges and conservatoires.

The news from earlier in the year was the latest league table success for Guildhall School, which is consistently recognised for its world-class professional training. The School also ranked fourth in the world for Music and rose to fifth in the world for Performing Arts in the QS World University Rankings 2024.



Looking to ignite your performance?

Guildhall School recently launched Guildhall Ignite, our executive and professional training consultancy coaching in and through the performing arts. The only initiative of its kind, Guildhall Ignite offers a suite of programmes enabling leaders from a broad range of industries including the arts, education and business to respond to the contemporary challenges of today.

This includes one-to-one Executive coaching, bespoke partnerships and leadership courses accredited by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council.

Upcoming Courses*

- Executive Coaching – Foundation Level from 17 March 2025
- Core Skills in Coaching & Mentoring for Leaders and Managers from May 2025

Find out more at ignite.gsmd.ac.uk or connect with us at ignite@gsmd.ac.uk – what will you spark?

*Discounted places are available for those working in the arts, education and charity sectors.



Guildhall's Big Give Christmas Challenge 2024

All online gifts between
3–10 December will be doubled!

**GUILD
HALL**
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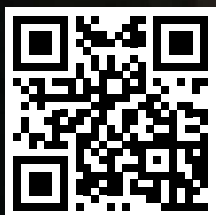
"A career within the music industry felt like a far-off dream and simply an aspiration but now, thanks to my scholarship donors, I know I am much closer to making this dream a reality."

Lowri, Soprano

At Guildhall School we are committed to ensuring every student can immerse themselves in their training without constraints, allowing them to make their mark on our cultural landscape.

Enhancing our scholarships provision is crucial to this, turning dreams into reality and empowering talented applicants to join one of the world's top conservatoires.

By donating to our Big Give Christmas Challenge, you can help us achieve that goal – and if you give between 3–10 December, your gift will be doubled!



Every £1 donated online via the QR code between midday on 3 December and midday on 10 December* makes twice the difference to our students.

Contact Hannah, Becca or Meg at development@gsmd.ac.uk / 020 4582 2415 if you experience any issues donating online.

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

Christmas
Challenge

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