



Worldwide Appreciation of Music

Olivia Houghton talks to York student Esme Anderson, head of the WAM foundation

When I think of time spent at university, I think of lectures and seminars, essays and exams, social life and societies. I certainly don't envisage founding a charity and making business trips to India. But for Esme Anderson, a 19 year old English student in her first year, this is a reality.

Along with her business partner and long term friend Duncan Ward (also 19), Esme is beginning to realise her vision. The WAM Foundation (Worldwide Appreciation of Music), now officially a charitable trust, plans to fund and facilitate the travel of British pianists aged 18-25 to music schools in India, where they will instruct both children and teachers for 2-3 months. On returning from their own piano teaching trip to India, Esme and Duncan realised that they wanted to make more of the experience by giving others the same opportunity, but didn't know how to go about it. Luckily, Duncan then met Michael Maslinski, a banker and management consultant through the National Youth Orchestra, who "made this possible, encouraged and helped us and became our mentor for the project."

I asked Esme what the first steps were in making WAM a reality. "We wanted a charity that would pay for volunteers to travel to India so that the opportunity is open to everyone. We started by meeting and contacting as many musicians and contacts within the classical music world as we could in order to sell the idea to them. This involved meeting with important people such as the Trinity College of Music executives, Indian politicians, and the

British High Commissioner at the British Embassy in New Delhi. Duncan's achievements as a young composer means he has a good network of people to draw on, while Michael has helped us with the business and charity side of things. He also arranged our meeting with Coutts (a private and business banking company) with whom we have now formed a lasting relationship."

With all these high flying people involved, I wonder what the experience has been like. "Boardroom meetings are quite a scary experience, especially when you are meeting with the heads of

"In India, parents want their daughters to learn piano as it makes them more desirable for marriage when they're older."

Trinity where everything is very serious and you're not meant to grin at good news." Grins or not, WAM seems to have impressed the executives of the music college who, Esme tells me, are keen to have their name behind the project. She describes the scene at the meeting with the British High Commissioner and other diplomats in India as welcoming and unstuffy. Pet monkeys scamper about in the grandiose house and grounds of the High Commissioner - Duncan gives a recital to the crowd. "Your mouth opens and you speak about what you're doing but it's not until after you've left that you realise the significance of who

you've just been talking to." Surely then, it must be a come-down to return to York and realise you have a degree to work for? "No," Esme assures me, "I've had to learn to compartmentalise; the work I do for WAM is so separate from my life at university. I'm able to balance the two workloads because I'm passionate about making our charity work and making a musical difference in India"

Most of the music schools in India that WAM has approached are just as eager to engage in the project: teachers and parents of Indian students have expressed their gratitude towards Esme and Duncan, who, in their time as volunteers, put on concerts in which the children played to parents and friends, something unheard of previously.

"Music students are usually taught in a very mechanical way that is geared towards playing the notes and passing the exams. In a rather Jane Austen fashion parents want their daughters to learn piano, because it can make them more desirable for marriage when they are older. Most children can't read music and they learn by copying the movements of the teachers who often can't read music themselves and make lots of mistakes. When we were in India the children we taught began to see that learning an instrument isn't a chore, it can and should be fun."

I express concern that WAM will receive criticism for working with privileged children who are able to attend music school when there are areas and people far more worthy of their efforts. "I see WAM as more of a cultural exchange," Esme argues. "There are so many organisations that aim to help disadvantaged people and although I

sometimes feel guilty that WAM isn't more orientated in this way, at the moment we have to work where resources and facilities are available. The children will gain from learning in a more creative way, and I also see the benefits of WAM in helping young British people who can't afford the expensive gap year programs that are so popular. It's about equal opportunities. Teaching others often helps you realise your skills and weaknesses and is very important to your learning process."

Esme and Duncan would ultimately like to see WAM extended into other countries and involved in teaching other instruments. With enough money they hope to fund the resources and broaden their teaching into more disadvantaged areas and schools that aren't musically aware. For the moment though, WAM is £5k richer by a kind donation from Coutts and is on its way to their target of £20k for start up costs.

I marvel at the enormity of the WAM project, but Esme tells me that all you need is confidence to make something like this happen. "You have to learn not to see it as a big and daunting thing and not be ashamed to promote yourself in order to make new connections. Show a passion and contact everyone you can think of to see if they're interested in supporting you in some way." When I ask her how she feels having come this far Esme's eyes light up. She isn't afraid to admit that the future and size of the project seem scary, but she's excited by the prospects and benefits of WAM for the future. Anyone can see she will go far.

To get involved with WAM email: thewamfoundation@gmail.com. ●