



TRUSTING
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Gift

A MUSIC EDUCATION IN BRITAIN

By Jeannie Mellinger • Photographs by Alan Schueler



*How talented young musicians
learn to practice, perform,
live in the world & play like superstars*



1971, Tenby, Wales: In an unprecedented household event, 11-year-old Grant Llewellyn, pajama-clad and tucked in bed, is gently shaken awake by his mother, who invites him downstairs to watch a documentary on the BBC. It seems to be about some children who are more or less his age, playing musical instruments impressively. When the program is over, Grant's mum asks, "What do you think? Would you take an audition to this school?" Without thinking too much about it, Grant's answer is "yes."



Chetham's School of Music, the subject of Grant's late night television adventure, is just across the road from Victoria Station and twenty or so yards from the Cathedral in the heart of busy, industrial downtown Manchester. Surrounding the school is a mélange of dark old pubs in Victorian buildings and stream-lined franchises like Starbucks, Hard Rock Café and Chiquitos. Across the street from Chetham's is a crooked little building that served as the first Jewish school in the city, and by the looks of it, many other things before that. Nearby, just beyond a broad lawn dressed up with fountains is Urbis, a city center and exhibition space so über-modern, curvy and sleek it could be an interplanetary space station.

Manchester, you could say, is a solid

old dowager in a dress like a wedding cake, sitting in a park. The only trouble is, the dress is soiled, her hat is bent, she might be a bit drunk and she's just about to be pushed off her bench by an upstart in stilettos and a Gucci bag. It's hard to imagine a more unlikely setting for one of Europe's most prestigious specialist music schools. And yet, there it is, right in the middle of the city, just at the confluence of the rivers Irwell and Irk.

You enter Chetham's at the Dean's Gate, solid, grand and forbidding even in Grant's day, but more so now, what with the glassed-in security lodge, the stern black and white barrier arm, the electronic card swipe entry. Can't be too careful, because inside these gates are some of the most talented young musicians in Britain and the world.



"So, my dad and I went off to Manchester and stayed in a hotel, which was pretty exciting. But I hadn't thought it through, really. I hadn't thought that I'd be gone away from my mates and my brothers, who were thirteen, nine and six when I left. I didn't think about missing out on sports and family life. And I was going into an environment I didn't know anything about – you're not sure where you stand. I was a good cello player in Tenby, but whom would I be up against?"

I soon learned that no matter how big you were back home, at Chets there will always be someone better than you – some little jerk of a nine-year-old right behind you, breathing down your neck.



Once on the short list for possible interior shots in the *Harry Potter* films, Chetham's does have a certain Hogwarts ambience. Students dressed in crested navy blazers spend their days on a campus that dates back to the 15th century when it was founded as a college for priests. As a Chets student, Grant lived and slept in an ancient refectory – the oldest dormitory in Europe, outfitted with heated pipes that were white hot in winter. "Probably illegal now," he notes.

In Grant's day, students ate in the imposing Baronial Hall, a space that seems well-suited for relaxing after battle, thumping down flagons of ale and throwing bones to the dogs under the table. This room is now used as a recital hall and Chets students enjoy their meals in a large, sunny cafeteria in a newer building that clashes somewhat unfortunately with the Tudor towers, heavy stone archways and leaded glass windows.



"It was all somewhat weird. Fortunately, I was easy-going as an 11-year-old. I could do the work without too much angst. I



“Our wonderful medieval library is of enormous historical importance. In fact, Karl Marx wrote there. There are so many other reasons we want to stay here. It’s steeped in history.”



*left: the library
above: Stephen Threlfall,
Chet's Director of Music*

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was socially relaxed and pretty good at sports. I held my own. I was one of the better cellists and a capable pianist. In other subjects I was a quick study. But it was lonely sometimes. And because only about half the students were boarders like me, I found myself kicking a ball around the schoolyard a lot of the time. There weren't that many at Chets interested in sports. They were a nerdy bunch after all – specialist musicians!

On a bright and breezy spring day, the courtyard is full of students – laughing, talking in small groups, hurrying somewhere with an instrument case. There is adolescent horseplay as well, teasing and mild flirtation. Shirrtails are out, ties are loosened, girls are fiddling with their hair. A fenced cement court is the site of an impromptu cricket match with the usual shouting and fist pumping. In short, they seem like normal young people – that is, until you overhear a conversation between two eight-year-olds: “Well, I hear he is playing the A-minor concerto,” says the first. “That’s impressive, of course,” says the second, “but really, what you want to know is: how well does he play it?”

“We were adolescents in an enclosed space so it was always a challenge to escape,

which we did regularly, mostly at night. It was easier to get out on the weekends when security was less tight, so off we’d go to rampage on the streets of Manchester.

“Within the boys’ boarding house, the biggest event was International Bollard Day. We collected traffic cones in the dead of night for months, grabbing as many as 300, and then thoroughly decorated the school. These were medieval buildings with all sorts of spires and crenellations and we put a bollard on every one of them. Manholes and potholes were left unmarked all over Manchester. But then the CID [Criminal Investigation Department] came and got four or five of us ringleaders and seriously tore us apart, threatened us with jail sentences and played on our guilt and shame of what could happen if a bus fell into an open manhole.”

Is there still an International Bollard Day? Max Ritchie, a long-time Chetham’s accompanist who worked with young Grant, says, “I think the students are more cautious than they used to be, it’s a different world – a bit less free.” A professor overhearing the question adds, “There would never be anything like International Bollard Day now. Life is much too serious and we must always be ‘safe.’ Too bad – you need to have some fun.” He then relates a funny story from his youth about taking a teacher’s car apart and reassembling it on the roof of the school. Ah, the good old days.

“We wore a Tudor uniform that consisted of a heavy wool black coat pleated into a sort of skirt, yellow stockings and buckled shoes. There was also a little prelate’s collar with two white tabs. The brass buckle on the coat’s belt had to rest just between the two lower buttons. And because the belt was always too long, you had to curl the rest out front of you in a sort of loop. The cuffs of the coat had brass buttons and when I played the cello, the buttons clattered across the strings and great chunks of wood flew off the instrument.

“We had to parade down to the Town Hall in these outfits on Speech Day – the prize day at the end of the year. And I still remember my most embarrassing moment at Chets: accompanying the Deputy Headmaster to Piccadilly Station to meet some dignitary. Of course the

only way for the person to recognize the Chets people was by spotting this idiot of a schoolboy, aged 14, standing there in his coat and yellow stockings.”

The uniform dates back to Chetham’s founding in 1653 by local textile merchant Humphrey Chetham as a Blue Coat school. Blue Coat schools were set up for poor boys and orphans. It was Mr. Chetham’s intention that students be raised and educated “under good government” in a caring environment. In 1952, Chetham’s became a grammar school and in 1969, two years before Grant entered, the school was re-founded as an independent, co-educational specialist music school. From its beginnings, it has been recognized as a center of excellence in the U.K.

Today, though, the Tudor coats are gone. Gone is the half-hour compulsory practice before breakfast, which Grant remembers the way your grandfather remembers his walk to school that was absolutely 10 miles uphill each way. In his mind’s eye, it was always mid-winter as he crossed the deserted courtyard alone to the practice rooms, desperately hungry, wind whipping his clothes and snow falling down his collar. Gone too, it is hoped, are the lonely weekends for boarders. Now, Saturday mornings are dedicated to music and the rest of the weekend to excursions in Manchester or activities such as cooking classes or treasure hunts. The school shuts down completely every third weekend. Everyone goes home to parents, friends or local guardians.

“We had a fantastic French teacher, Michael Asquith. He was the best kind of academic teacher. He supported the music, he was sympathetic and came to recitals, and he was inspiring in the classroom. Clearly the school attracted (and still does) curious, motivated and intellectual teachers who know that while their subject might have lower priority, they will have bright kids to work with. Music always came first, with many opportunities for performance, but the academic courses were superb. I had a thorough, comprehensive education. The idea that I could consider Cambridge would have been a stretch without this experience.”

None of this has changed. Today’s 290 Chets students, aged 8 to 18, come to

Manchester from all corners of Britain and from as far away as China, Malaysia, Germany, Holland, Japan, Estonia and Korea. Over 100 events are programmed every year, offering exciting and stimulating musical experiences and a variety of performance opportunities. The school participates regularly in collaborations on a range of projects and boasts some of Europe's finest instrumental teachers with a student-instructor ratio of 3:1. Academics are superlative, with the majority of students achieving A and B-Level results and two-thirds continuing their music studies at a conservatory. About twenty-five percent go to university (including Oxford and Cambridge), most to study music, but also other subjects such as law, medicine, English literature, foreign languages and engineering.

Says Stephen Threlfall, Chet's Director of Music, "What sets us apart is that we try to think cross-departmentally. Obviously we want our students to grow into fine musicians, but also become caring, receptive and considerate young adults, with the power to enrich other people's lives through their music-making and understanding. To achieve this, we want them to be in the world, to experience and care about life outside the practice room."

To that end, Threlfall creates themed projects of considerable depth. "We did a whole project on Antarctica," he says. "It was based on Vaughan Williams's *Sinfonia Antarctica*. It was one of the things I had been dying to do for years and I suppose this was the place I really felt I could do it. We built a comprehensive education and arts project. A British survey group got involved and provided images, presentations, lectures on climate change and what have you. Sir Peter Maxwell Davies wrote a companion piece, a sequel called "Slopes of Terror," to his Antarctic Symphony and our orchestra did the world premiere of it. Terror is one of the two volcanic mountains in Antarctica and the piece was extremely challenging. We did very well with it, very well."

A *Child of Our Time*, an oratorio by Michael Tippett, gave Chets students the opportunity to examine African-American spirituals and gospel music. The project inspired a songwriting competition for primary and secondary children in the northwest of England based on their personal life experiences. Other recent projects include *Brundibar*, the Czech opera originally performed by children

in the Nazi death camp Theresienstadt, which led to a school-wide study of the Holocaust, and a production of *Peer Gynt*, the set piece for a six-month Spirit of Norway project featuring, Threlfall says, "a heck of lot of events – almost too many for the school to cope with, but exhilarating and enduringly rewarding!"

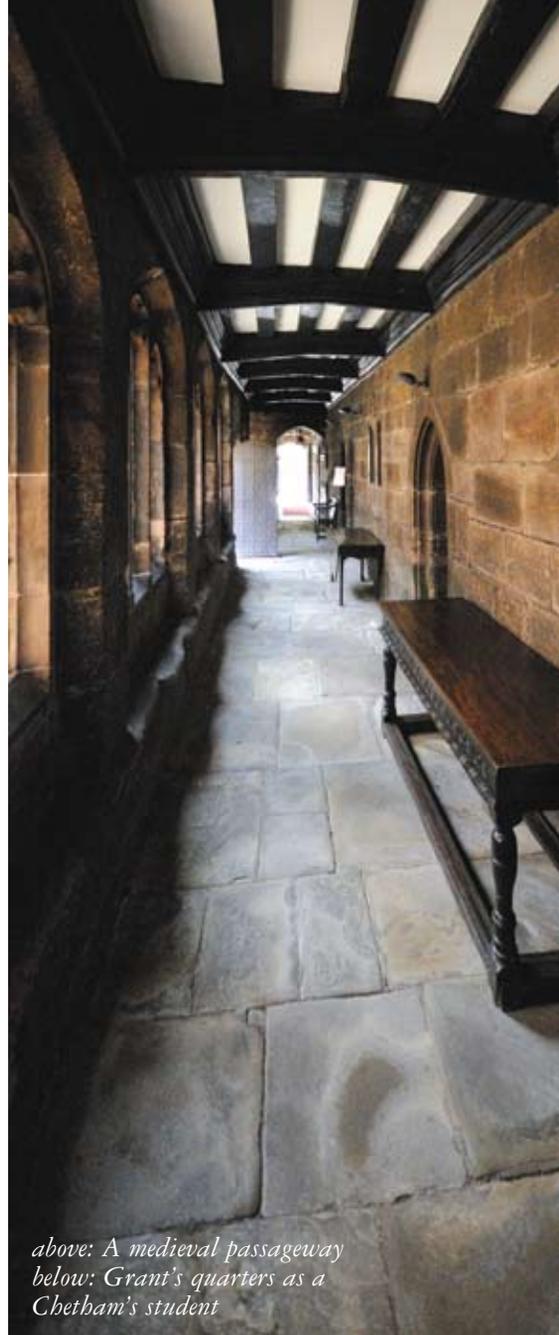
In addition to these massive themed projects, there are, as in Grant's time, constant salvos of musical opportunity. Threlfall notes, "Grant would probably find the program fuller now than then. We plan more carefully. We try to get a supportive balance." Max Ritchie says, "I think student performances are a bit more intense – more focused and directed. There's less of the old 'doing things your own way' now."

In addition to daily recitals, concerts and chamber music, Chets students have broadcast for BBC Radio 3, performed at BBC Proms in the Park, composed music and performed as part of an exhibition at Manchester Museum. Chetham's jazz students perform at leading venues and the school's two Big Bands are regularly winners of national prizes. The Chamber Choir has performed at the Barbican Centre in London and recorded for Deutsche Grammophon. Orchestra students have had the opportunity to sit in with both the BBC and the London Philharmonic.

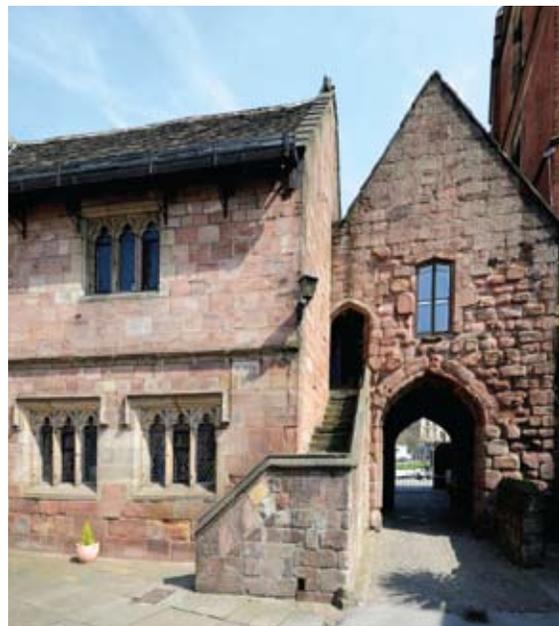
Threlfall waves away any notion that all this activity is due solely to him. "I'm blessed with a very good team. The connections just keep coming. In a way, we ought to keep a lid on and say, 'Guys, we've done everything in the book.' But you know, you've got to catch the monkey."

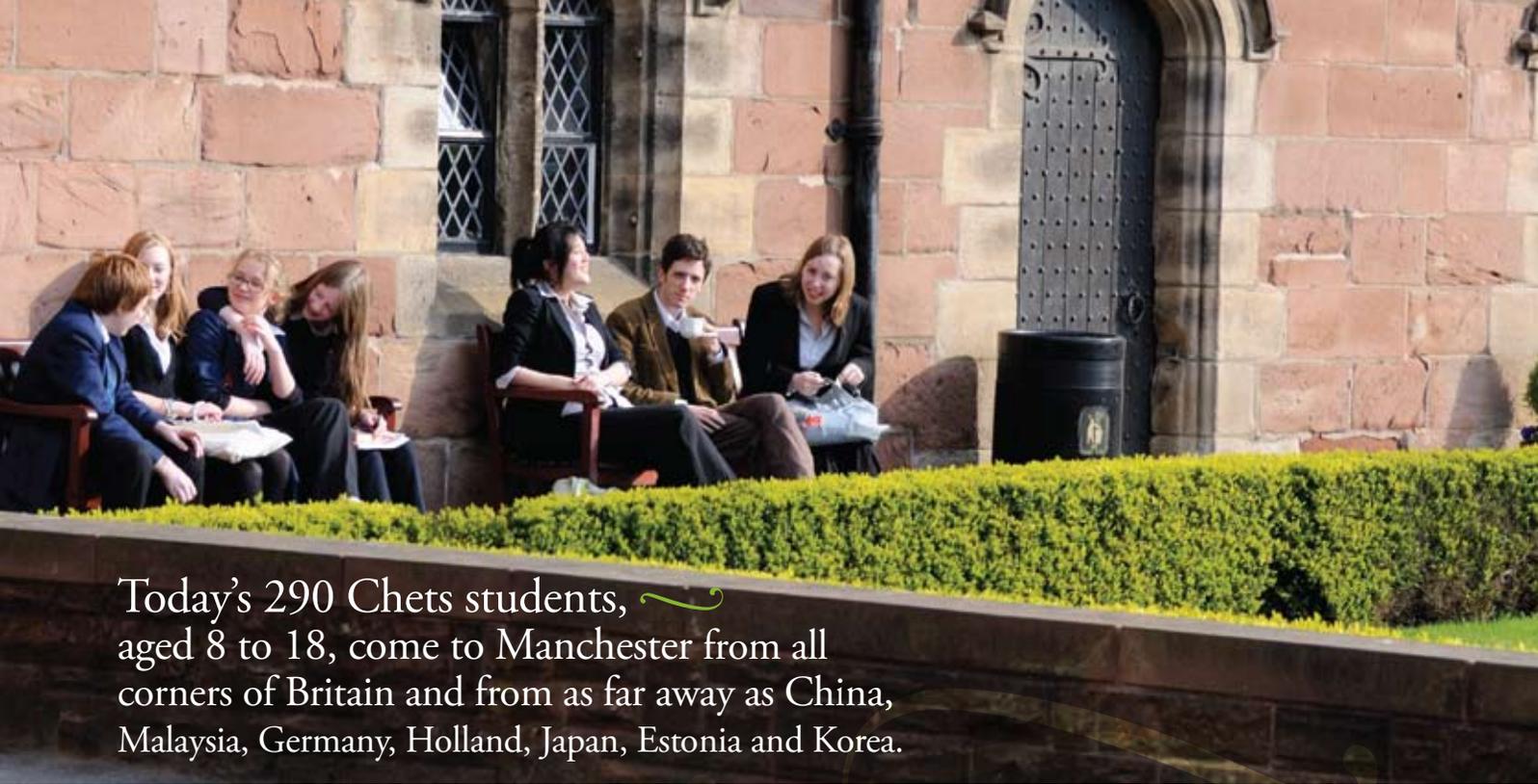
For Threlfall, catching the monkey is a complex process. As he makes clear, it's not simply about growing future soloists and first chairs, it's about developing an understanding about the broader world. "I devised these Sensory Days," Threlfall says, "which are for our young people to work with visually impaired, orally impaired and the disabled. We've had workshops here and also at their institutions. We're trying to develop the awareness of our musicians. This open access is what we've been striving to build over the last few years."

Experiences like these have opened Chetham's young eyes to other careers. "In the last three years," Threlfall says, "we've had maybe two dozen older students working with local people in



above: A medieval passageway
below: Grant's quarters as a Chetham's student





Today's 290 Chets students, aged 8 to 18, come to Manchester from all corners of Britain and from as far away as China, Malaysia, Germany, Holland, Japan, Estonia and Korea.

Relaxing in the courtyard between classes

hospitals. They're developing new skills. Life offers all kinds of possibilities."

Grant agrees. "These kinds of activities give the students perspective on life and their own talent and ability," he says. "Not to deprive them of their talents and ambitions, but the real world challenges you in so many profound ways. If you encourage these young musicians to embrace holistic, global issues, you're teaching them not just about being part of an orchestra, but so much more."

Inside Chets

8:40 AM, Young Strings Ensemble: Fourteen of the school's youngest string players, ages 8-12, are meeting in an ancient room, formerly a medieval kitchen. Everything in this high-ceilinged, timber-beamed space is outsized – the fireplace is colossal, big enough to store dozens of music stands and a harpsichord. An enormous iron frame overhead holds Brodningnagian-sized fireplace tools, including iron roasting spits that appear designed for skewering beasts of mammoth heft.

Teacher Cathy Perkins grins at the idea that these little ones, setting up their stands and humming snatches of Brahms or Mozart, might be considered adorable. "They're little terrors," she says, with a smile that says she's quite fond of

them. "It's always interesting when we take them out to do concerts and they've just performed beautifully and the next minute you look around and they're up on climbing frames or hitting each other over the head." Just like regular children? "Exactly."

They're working today on a piece called "The Owl and the Cuckoo." The first note sounds. Perkins stops. "Could we have a D please, instead of G?" The kids giggle.

"Remember your Easter eggs here," she says. "Tiny, tiny bows." Her manner says, "we've got work to do but we're going to enjoy this."

Her corrections are gentle: "I don't want you on the wrong bar again, Calem," she says, but with a wink and smile that tells the child that she knows he can do better. He smiles back. The students are intent, and clearly working hard to do what Perkins asks. When she demonstrates the kind of vibrato she is looking for, their eyes are fixed on her hands like lasers.

After class, she says, "As you can see, I have a range of abilities in this class – a very experienced cellist in the back, some less experienced. I'm getting them ready for orchestra. I want them to learn to follow a conductor and to get used to playing in a section."

They return their stands to the fireplace, tuck away their music, collect their

instruments and off they go, resembling versions of Hermione, Ron, and Harry himself, Book One.

9:40 AM, Academic Music Lesson: Five girls and two boys in their early teens sit in one long row in front of their teacher, John Le Grove, looking like hopefuls at a Hollywood casting call for a movie about English boarding schools. They are working on tempo and rhythm, clapping out intricate patterns, taking musical dictation and doing some solfège work – sight-singing in which each note of the score is sung to a special syllable: do re mi fa so la ti. Like the string students, they are intent on the instruction and seem to operate at a high level of skill. Answers to Le Grove's rapid-fire questions are swift and accurate.

Most impressive is their ability to quickly sing and write out all four parts of a church hymn Le Grove plays for them on a piano. One would expect their easy success with the soprano melody, but working out the bass part, for example, seems like more of a challenge. Not for this group, however. They do it with ease, even the boys who are, Le Grove points out, at a difficult age for singing. Also impressive is how engaged all the students are in the lessons, which surely can't be quite as much fun as actually playing the instrument. They clap and sing the rhythms with no hesitation or

self-consciousness and a poise you'd be unlikely to see in an American high school.

11:00 AM, Woodwinds Performance Class: Whiteley Hall, a small auditorium with a stage. Individual students playing oboe, recorder and clarinet perform a piece with their accompanist followed by comments and suggestions from teacher Robert Roscoe as well as fellow students.

What is striking is the gentleness and thoughtfulness of both. Nerves are showing in several of the musicians, since they are getting ready for their finals. Roscoe talks a bit about performance anxiety. "Think of yourself as an actor," he says to a young clarinet player. "You assume the personality of someone else. Believe in yourself and know that you can do it." He wants her a bit looser, to be more dramatic and less closed up. She looks a bit bereft at this coaxing. "I can do that only when no one is watching," she says, chewing her bottom lip. Every person in the room who has ever had a shy moment in life knows just how she feels. "I know," he responds kindly. "But let the audience

really see you. It's great playing, make it as if you believe it is great. This is live performance, so you must be alive."

The other students are completely attentive. Their comments are supportive (That was fantastic playing!) and they ask good questions (What is this piece about? What are you trying to express?). It is, as one student says, "like you're part of a big family and they want you to succeed."

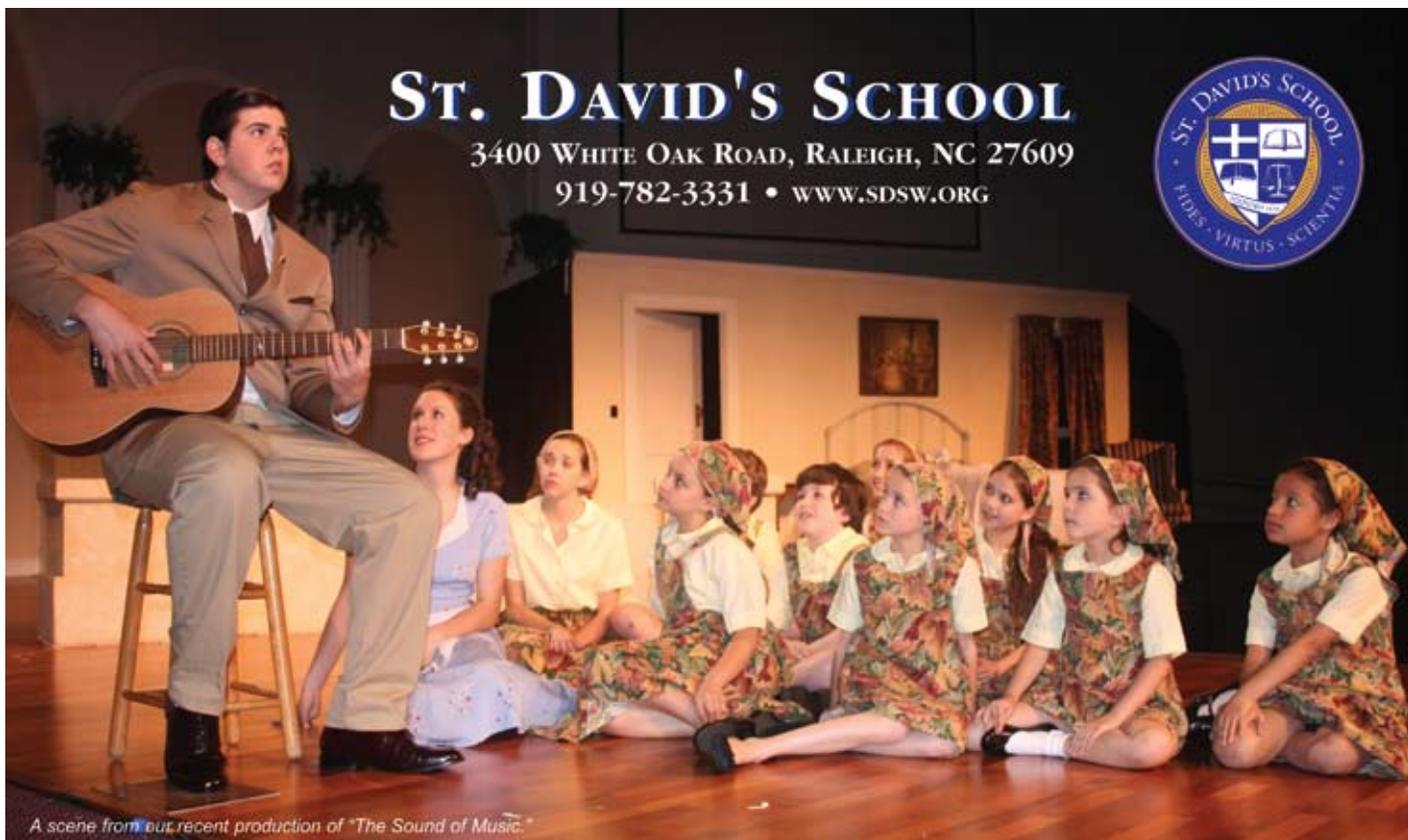
1:35 PM, Chamber Music Concert: It's just after lunchtime in the Baronial Hall and now we see what Chets is all about. Folding chairs are arranged in neat rows. The gray stone walls are festooned with medieval-looking tapestries and implements of destruction – axes, swords and so on. In front of yet another truly gigantic fireplace are four chairs. The audience seems to be made up of mostly townspeople, who often attend Chetham's events – probably 25 audience members all told.

Four young women come out on stage, including a couple from the academic music class. Their stage manner is

professional and serious. And. Can. They. Ever. Play. This is the Mendelssohn String Quartet in A minor, Op. 13. Whether it has ever been performed better is a matter of opinion, but there's little doubt that Felix himself would have been pleased. The quartet plays with a passion and virtuosity that would be the envy of fill-in-the-blank string quartet and with glossy technique that is just ridiculous for musicians so young. If they were scientists, they'd be on the verge of discovering a cure for cancer.

3:00 PM, Brass: As in the woodwinds class, these students are preparing for their finals. David Chatterton, Head of Brass and Woodwinds, asks his students good questions: "Which of the two pieces do you think showed you off the best?" "In which piece did we hear your best sound?" And then, "I think you really came alive in the second piece, you were really musical and you looked as if you were having fun."

This group is having fun – we have a definite sense of performance and occasion, with great flourishing finishes,



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Young strings class

concert bows and eye contact with the class. A curly-haired tuba player performs with admirable panache and a winning confidence. “Lovely, lovely sound,” Chatterton says to a trombone player. “Really nice work. But that last note... try to produce it with 98% air and 2% tongue. You need to trust in the air, you understand what I mean?” He smiles. “Trust in the air.”

With talented young people, superb teachers and innovative programming, there is very little to complain about at Chets. The school’s future is certainly assured, but there is one burning issue.

“About three or four years ago, we had a sit-down decision about what we

should do with this school,” Stephen Threlfall says. “These buildings are old. They are decrepit – the piano department downstairs, for example. The heating system is what we know as the old pipe [ed. note: remember Grant’s comment about the white-hot pipes in his dorm]. It will go hot and then suddenly it will go cold. This is not good for pianos.” Or any instruments, for that matter. “We have constant repairs and it’s money down the toilet, as we say.

“So the next decision is where do you go? Do you do brown field side or green field side? Do you go a couple miles out of the city? And we all felt very strongly that we should stay right where we are. Students will tell you, “We like the city. We like being nearby.”

If the school were to move to a new green field site in the country somewhere, much would be lost. Townspeople would not be able to easily attend the lunchtime concerts.

Student choristers at Manchester Cathedral would have difficulty attending Chetham’s, as they do now. And what would happen to the innovative work in the community, projects with local schools, the collection boxes for local hospices and that immersion in the real world Chetham’s so avidly embraces? Chets would be an isolated archipelago of single-minded endeavor, alone in a sea that separates it from life on the shore.

So brown side it is. “We’re in a strong position where we are,” says Threlfall. “We’re in these wonderful medieval



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and provide the city with another world-class performance space.”

In 1853, a statue of Humphrey Chetham was installed in Manchester Cathedral. He is depicted in 17th-century dress, seated, holding a scroll in his right hand. A student of Chetham's is seated beneath him, holding in his right hand a Bible opened to Psalm 112, verse 9: “He hath dispersed abroad and given to the poor and this righteousness remaineth forever.” Chetham and his student remained undisturbed until the blitz of Manchester in 1940. During the bombing, much of the cathedral's old stained glass was blown out by the force of the blasts and walls near the sculpture fell down. But Chetham and his little protégé miraculously survived with just a few scars and survived again in 1996 when one of the biggest IRA bombs in history shook downtown Manchester. This seems nicely symbolic.

Though Chetham himself could not have imagined what his Blue Coat school would become, the “good government” and “caring environment” that he wished for has given Chetham's a living place in history. Tudor coats and International Bollard Day may have disappeared, but the nurturing of young musicians is as vibrant as ever, whether they are gathered in the Baronial Hall for a recital, taking strings class before an enormous 600-year-old hearth, wandering the medieval corridors where priests once trod, or working alone in a practice room on a dark winter's morning.



“My mum couldn't have known whether I had the musical ability to justify such a wrench. I won an audition, I guess that said something. But still. I've thought about what regrets must be there, even if time has subdued them. I missed lots and

lots of time with my family, sports and so on.

“But what was wonderful about Chetham's was the richness of experience, the sheer breadth of music-making. There was something every day – chamber choir, madrigals, recitals, chamber music and concerts. I was provided the opportunity and incentive to conduct and encouraged to put on concerts of my own at age 13 and 14. Stephen Hough was my recital partner. I played with Wayne Marshall. I learned the things I needed to know properly and in incredible depth. I learned so much music in great detail. There was endless exposure and through this endless exposure, all nervousness and attendant anxieties were lessened.”



Was it worth it then? Let Ian McEwen, author of *Saturday*, answer with this favorite quote of Grant's: “There are these rare moments when musicians together touch something sweeter than they've ever found before in rehearsals or performance, beyond the merely collaborative or technically proficient, when their expression becomes as easy and graceful as friendship or love. This is when they give us a glimpse of that we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have for others, but lose nothing of yourself...only in music, and only on rare occasions, does the curtain actually lift on this dream of community and it's tantalizingly conjured, before fading away with the last notes.

.... He can go for miles, he feels lifted up, right high across the counter. He doesn't want the song to end.”

For more photos and audio samples from Chetham's, go to ncsymphony.org and click on “Image Gallery”.



buildings. Our library is of enormous historical importance. In fact, Karl Marx wrote there. There are so many other reasons we want to stay here. It's steeped in history.”

In April of this year, Britain's Northwest Regional Development Agency announced it would invest 4.6 million pounds (about \$10 million) for a new multi-purpose school and a state-of-the-art venue. Speaking for the agency, James Berresford acknowledged Chetham's importance to Manchester: “As well as providing a state-of-the-art teaching facility for the musicians of the future, this exciting development will open up some fantastic historic buildings to the public, including the oldest library in the English-speaking world,