

Spreading Joy through Music

A recipient of a Classic BRIT Award, Jess Gillam was the first-ever saxophonist to reach the final of BBC Young Musician and performed live at the BAFTAs. Her triumphal performance in The Last Night of the Proms in 2018 was defined with BBC News as "the indisputable highlight" of the event.

At ease with both musical performance and presenting, Jess Gillam became the youngest ever presenter for BBC Radio 3 – where she hosts her own weekly show "This Classical Life" – and she is also the first saxophonist ever to be signed to Decca Classics recording label. You can tell that the most recurring words in her biography are "the youngest ever" or "the first saxophonist", capturing the essence of her youth as well as her musical mission of setting new paths in uncharted territory.

As a prime example of a creative musician, what does it take to be a creative musician today?

For me, a creative musician is one who is prepared to question the role of music and to prove its relevance in society demonstrating why music is integral to our lives and to our education.

I think creative musicians look at ways to involve those who may have not had the chance of being involved in music, but will love it and will learn from it.

There are so many ways to be creative in music! Composing, performing and listening all have their own creative processes within them – as listeners, we may be thinking what is the composer trying to say? What kind of scene does this conjure in my mind? How do I feel in response to this sound and how can I act on it?

As performers of written music, we're constantly looking for that balance of telling a composer's story and finding creative interpretations.

Speaking of audiences then, what is the best way to engage with them, especially younger ones?

I think engaging younger audiences means exposing them to music. This is

Jess Gillam

23 years old, she joins the EUYO 2021 Summer Tour as a soloist to perform Michael Nyman's Where the Bee Dances and Aleksander Glazunov's Alto Saxophone Concerto.



the most important point. Exposure to high-quality music means also to be able to see, to experience what it feels like to be in a band, in an orchestra, in a choir, to be a singer, to feel the exchange of ideas between performers and the audience.

If we were able to get music to children when they were younger, before they form those preconceptions, if we were able to present music as music of all kinds, I think they would maybe have a greater emotional connection to it.

It makes me so sad when I hear people say that they feel classical music or orchestral music is not for them – there isn't a right or wrong way to listen or respond to it.

Access to music is also a challenge we face in the light of the Diversity, Equality & Inclusion movement. What is your stance on this?

Everybody has the basic human right to access the arts. Everybody should have equal opportunities to experience the magic of music and I think that this should apply to every person on the planet.

As a young musician, when I was growing up as a saxophonist, there were not many female role models to look at – there is Lisa Simpson's cartoon character, of course! – There is Barbara Thompson, and she's a great, amazing jazz saxophonist, but there weren't many female saxophonists in the world of classical music that I wanted to go to. I feel it's important for me to try to be a source of inspiration for younger players.

What is your approach to musical competitions?

I think it is important to remember that music is not a sport – that is, preparing for a competition is not training like an athlete, as a

competitor that crosses the finish line first to claim victory.

Of course, we have to work on fundamentals and technicalities, but we have to keep the focus on musical expression. Music is so subjective and carries within it so many different pockets of expertise and expression: there is a wider story to tell, a message we try to convey.

How did you build your career and public persona?

I think that we live in a world that needs authenticity more than ever - technology and social media make it possible to create a different, perhaps more polished, version of one's self so I think it's important to try and maintain as much integrity as possible in what I believe in and am passionate about.

What attracted you to work with EUYO?

I am always so keen to work with youth orchestras and young players or players of a similar age to me because I think there is a real exuberance and vitality that sparkles in the performance and in the playing.

I also know some people who have been in the EUYO in the past and told me how great it is to be there!

What are your plans for your future?

I would really like to spread as much joy as I can through music. It is my main mission. And whether that be through presenting or broadcasting, performing or playing, giving workshops with children, that's it.

One of the magical things about music is how it can change a person. I want just to help spread some happiness around because we need it in the world!

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