

THIS IS CROYDON

OUR STORIES

Photo: Chris O'Donovan for Croydon Council.



THERESA WARD, SALEEL TAMBE & SOPHIE BRANSCOMBE

ORATORIO OF HOPE

This is Croydon's opening event, **Oratorio of Hope**, saw the borough's resident orchestra, London Mozart Players, bring together almost 400 local professional and amateur performers to celebrate the breadth and depth of Croydon's musical talent. Created with local schools, multicultural groups, artists and dance companies, it culminated in a joyous, weekend showcase of music, dance, film and spoken word that attracted the largest audience Fairfield Halls had seen for a classical concert since it reopened in 2019.

IN NUMBERS

Oratorio of Hope

London Mozart Players
1-2 April 2023, Fairfield Halls

30 local music and dance groups

8 volunteer shifts

578 participants

1,813 audience members

We spoke with Event Producer **Sophie Branscombe** and representatives of two of the organisations involved - **Theresa Ward** from Riddlesdown Collegiate and **Saleel Tambe** from Subrang Arts.

They reflect on London Borough of Culture, its lasting impact and on boosting pride in Croydon.

Oratorio of Hope was a huge project – can you give us an overview?

SOPHIE: We commissioned poetry, dance and eight new pieces of music, developed through collaborative workshops. There was a rehearsal process with young musicians from Croydon Music and Arts and school choirs across the borough, then everyone came together on the opening weekend to perform. We also commissioned films and held an

afternoon showcase in the foyers and terraces of Fairfield Halls, featuring local music and dance groups.

We wanted to incorporate almost every art form - poetry, film, dance, different music genres and visual arts. So, you got to see them all interacting, complementing each other. It really was a multi-sensory experience, both in its creation and reception.



How did the project evolve?

SOPHIE: When I joined in December 2022, the concept had been agreed and the Croydon-born, Grammy Award-nominated composer, Tarik O'Regan, had already written the first movement. This provided musical motifs which were then woven into the other pieces, developed in collaboration with all sorts of artistic groups across Croydon. Every composer created different pieces, each with their own distinct flavour and culture.

What was the motivation behind the event?

SOPHIE: To celebrate Croydon's communities - its diverse people, cultures and heritage. We worked with young people from across Croydon. We worked with Subrang Arts and South Asian artists; Afrobeats performer, Silvestone; poet Shaniqua Benjamin, and with Crisis Skylight Croydon Singers - former homeless people who take part in a singing-for-wellbeing group. It was about providing a platform for different communities to show their creativity.

Saleel and Theresa, what were your involvements?

SALEEL: I had two roles. One was performing the Tabla as an instrument in the concerts. The second was helping with conceptualisation, because we had to combine the Indian style of music with the Western style of the orchestra. I was the joining hand between the two.

THERESA: London Mozart Players approached us to work with composer, Sarah Freestone, on one of the movements. I came up with the

idea of it being an art and music collaboration with GCSE and A-level students and facilitated things, with Sarah running the sessions. We also took part in the last movement with our choir.

What did you most enjoy about the collaboration?

THERESA: I think it was great for other people to understand each other's art forms. Going through that creative process, you begin to understand the similarities and differences. When we started composing with our Year 10 students, we got them to think about a moodboard, to use images to help tell that story. What's so wonderful about collaborative working is understanding each other.

SOPHIE: For all our players, it was one of the most exceptional events they had ever taken part in. There were so many elements, and a real feeling of excitement and inspiration.

Did you face any challenges?

SOPHIE: The timeframe to develop partnerships, set up workshops and deliver the collaborations was tight. But every single person involved gave it their all, so it just shows what you can achieve when you capture people's enthusiasm with a creative vision.

THERESA: I think it helped that you didn't come to us with a set agenda of 'this is what we want to do'. It was a creative process right from the get-go. When you start things like that, you're going to get buy-in from people.



Were there any standout moments?

THERESA: For me, it was the first time I heard the movement we were involved in. I felt so proud. Seeing those young people hear their ideas come to life - that was special. Not many young people get to hear their musical ideas being played by a professional orchestra.

SOPHIE: A striking moment for me was in the second half of the concert. We had 150-200 students sitting in the choir stalls, right in front of the orchestra, looking out. They could see the audience's reaction and, during Silvestone's Afrobeats piece, everybody had their arms in the air. These kids were just blown away to be so up close to what was being performed. So, when they were given the signal by the conductor, their performance ramped up to a completely different level to rehearsal. They absolutely went for it.

THERESA: Also – the movement with Crisis was very moving. It was beautifully performed. It was poignant. You could really feel how much it meant to the people who had written it and were singing it. It was so special for our young people to witness that as well.

How did you find the audience response?

SOPHIE: The feedback was amazing. Audiences were gobsmacked at how creative Croydon is. We had a national music critic from The Times come to the concert. He wrote the most phenomenal review about new hope for Croydon and the incredible quality of the work being produced. It was inspirational.

SALEEL: It brought a different reputation to our town. A couple of my friends came, and their feedback was that they often see Croydon in the news for negative reasons. This was the first time that they had such a positive way to know about Croydon.

THERESA: That's the power of the arts, isn't it? Our young people at Riddlesdown, when asked where they come from, often say Surrey, or the South East. But, in that moment, they felt proud to be from Croydon. I felt proud to have been born in Croydon. The arts can play a powerful role in retelling that narrative about an area. It just needs investment.

SOPHIE: It's not a 'nice to have'. It is absolutely crucial. Being given a voice through cultural engagement is so important, so powerful.

On the power of the arts, what is the community impact?

THERESA: It was evident, being in the audience



and listening to the other movements, how different styles were able to fuse together. Music is a common language and that really came across - that we are better because of our differences.

SALEEL: The event created awareness amongst a wider cross-section of people. I think that sense of involvement and inclusion, of being a part of something bigger - of what's happening around us, is the biggest thing that comes out of this.

What's next?

THERESA: We've learnt that we must do more things like this. As a school, how can we advocate for how important things like this are? How can we engage our community more?

I have a culture week coming up, where hopefully every Key Stage Three student will be off timetable: taking part in cultural activities, celebrating their own culture, learning a new skill. For me, that is the start of our festival of celebrating culture, and I did get some of the ideas from Oratorio of Hope.

SOPHIE: As Croydon's resident orchestra, our desire is to make more connections within the community, with people who might not normally engage with classical music. We're inviting people to sign up to become an LMP champion, so they can tell us what they want to see and hear from their orchestra, and how we can work in new ways within Croydon. It's about investing in dialogue and relationships.

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