

CHELTENHAM
Festivals

Across The Sky



Across the Sky – a brief overview

A specially-commissioned community opera, Across the Sky was the third and final phase of a four-year inter-generational outreach programme in West Cheltenham which included Going for a Song in 2015 and A Way with Words in 2017.

From page to stage Across the Sky was co-created by more than 150 people aged from 4 to 84 in local schools and neighbourhoods, under the expert guidance of an inspirational creative team comprising professional writer Miranda Walker, composer and musical director Michael Betteridge, choir leader Gina Baker, and director Bryn Holding.

Highlights of this collaborative process included:

18 creative writing workshops in schools

24 singing and music-making workshops in schools

13 staging rehearsals in schools

30 sessions with newly-established community choir Local Vocals

15 rehearsals with soloists, musicians and chorus

We were delighted to work with Gloucestershire Youth Chamber Ensemble #Inspire who, together with leader of the orchestra Matthew Denton, percussionist Miriam Kitchener, and pianist James Quinn, brought Michael's score to life, expertly conducted by Glyn Oxley.

Everyone's hard work and commitment came together in two wonderful performances, at 2pm and 5pm, which formed the musical finale to the 75th Cheltenham Music Festival. 569 tickets were available for each performance (including 10-12 holds for press etc).

2pm performance: 558 tickets sold

5pm performance: 556 tickets sold

Legacy

- Local Vocals
On 23rd July Local Vocals, Gina, and Pip and Shirley gathered for a Bring and Sing to reflect on and celebrate Across the Sky. All choir members present stated a desire to continue; happily, Gina Baker is equally committed to continuing to lead them. In addition to a joyful evening together, they established a steering committee that will meet in August to plan next steps and a schedule for rehearsals.
- St Thomas More Primary School
Cheltenham Festivals plans to continue working with the year 3 class that took part in Across the Sky for a further three years through a series of long-term cross-arts participation projects which would culminate in performances at at least one Festival each year. The project will be developed in consultation with the school and parents with the aim of transforming attitudes and behaviours towards culture; and the outcomes will be of interest to the cultural sector which is trying to find ways to change the social demographic of audiences.



Some feedback

- Soloists and choir

It's been wonderful to be part of a project which was both satisfying musically and also had a sense of contributing something worthwhile to society. Sometimes it feels like I have to make a choice between the two, or at least one takes priority in some projects over the other. In this project there was a real sweet spot between the two. Suzie Purkis, Soloist

All adults and children involved in the project had an incredible time from start to finish. We waited with anticipation for our workshops, and miss them immensely already. Thank you for a wonderful year. Miss Copson, Class teacher

For me the most significant impact of being part of the project has been being part of a local choir that has grown together as we practised, with steady improvement in our singing. I was amazed that we were able to learn and perform a totally new opera. Singer, Local Vocals

Being a Local Vocalist has drawn me closer to people I wouldn't have met, which has resulted in a feeling of being part of something worthwhile. Singer, Local Vocals

- **Creative team**

The greatest journey in terms of musical journey was that of Local Vocals who went from a choir of people – many of whom had never sung in a choir to perform – to singing in three parts, often challenging music, exceptionally well. Gina and I were able to go beyond the basics of 'sing this note here' to exploring timbre and blend. They also engaged wholeheartedly and gave the project a lot of energy in their own time practising at home with the learning tracks. This was a staggering development for a newly formed choir, especially a choir of adults who have busy lives and additional needs such as mobility issues.

The musical ability of both primaries, especially in relation to their singing, was tremendous and this project helped them find certain aspects of their voice (for example accessing the upper register, or 'head voice' in St Thomas More). From a social perspective it was great to see these young people becoming increasingly more focused and engaged over the period of the project.

For All Saints' Academy it was brilliant also to see a similar musical journey, but I think, from where I was, the most impactful work was opening them up to a different sort of music. In one composition workshop a young person said music could not have seven beats in a bar, for example. It was great to move them from their musical comfort zone and expand their minds further with a range of musical styles, as well as allowing them to work alongside professional opera singers.

Michael Betteridge

- **Audience**

I was expecting a wonderful show, but it exceeded all expectations. The children were brilliant & the orchestra magnificent. Well done.

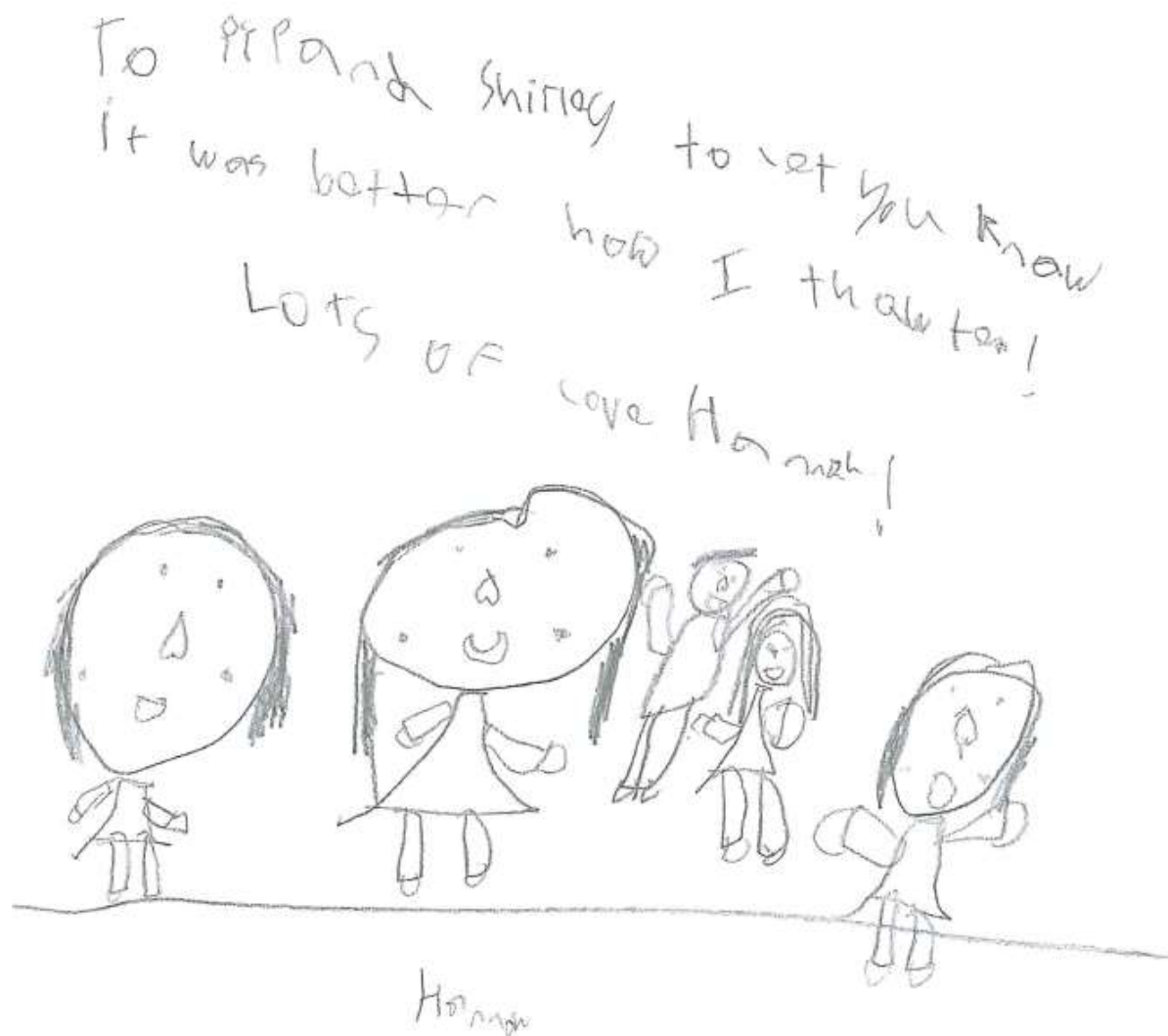
A most enjoyable afternoon. Clever idea to move the youngest children from stage to balcony & back to stage - keeping them active in a long production. Some of the vocals were indistinct & sometimes drowned out by the wonderful orchestra, but the general storyline was understandable. Very good!

This is what community should be. People working together with a common purpose in joy.

Excellent! Wasn't sure what to expect but it was fantastic. Community involvement was brill! Wish it had been longer.

Music was excellent. Range of ages and community groups was lovely. Theme was interesting and got better as it developed. Hard to hear some of the singing above the music but they all sang really beautifully and the musical score was so unique and really clear to express the story.

- And the children of St Thomas More Primary School



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 ever done that special job, thank you for saying it was amazing
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(Dear Pip and Shirley, it was amazing having the extra job on stage, now I know why we ever done that special job. Thank you for saying it was amazing, I really enjoyed it as well, it was a pleasure doing it with you, All Saints' Academy and Hesters Way Primary School. When we started it I was speechless. It was my first ever community opera, thanks to you, Shirley, Michael, Bryn, Glin, Jeena and Suzie. I never expected a thing, it was fabulous, you two really helped me and the others. I just can't say anything right now.)

Dear Shirley and PIP I really enjoyed
our opera I really liked doing the singing
with michal and the writing with marda.
I enjoyed sing new Phases Phases and
new faces in our opera.



A huge thank you to the Foyle Foundation, the Big Lottery, Make Music Gloucestershire and Cheltenham Borough Council for supporting the project.

Wordcloud from audience feedback

