

'A Whole New World'

A few months ago, 'Gangnam Style' took the world by storm. This South Korean pop single from artist PSY went viral on YouTube, and within just two months of release it had an average of over nine million views per day. At the time of writing, the music video has well over 700 million hits, and it has established itself as YouTube's second most watched video of all time. It is a remarkable phenomenon – and one which exemplifies the nature of music in the 21st century.

The majority of today's teenagers prefer to listen to music on YouTube – and they have a whole new world of music at their fingertips. Today's artists, from classical to pop, are being inspired and influenced by musical idioms from other sides of the world. At the same time, Western classical music has found keen new audiences – particularly in India and the Far East. In some areas, 'identical twin' schools have been set up which mirror all the cultural and educational aspects of their counterparts – to name but a few, a Harrow School in Shanghai, a North London Collegiate School in South Korea, and a network of Dulwich Colleges over Asia and the Middle East.

Traditionally, student orchestras and choirs in the UK have opted for tours to European destinations – perhaps Central America for the more adventurous – safe in the knowledge that the culture will be fairly familiar, audiences receptive, and costs relatively low. But in an age where culture is crossing all borders, perhaps our students should be doing the same?

To tour, or not to tour?

Inevitably, there are more challenges to be faced when organising a long-haul music tour. The biggest obstacle for many is coming up with the funds. In the current climate of recession, it is all but impossible to get funding from local or national authorities – especially for tours which focus on musical rather than general education. It is up to each school to come up with the necessary funds, and many are successful: between music bursaries, collections at school concerts or carol services, and their own initiatives such as bake sales and sponsored events, the students themselves can get involved in raising the money they need. Fund-raising is a useful skill, and much fun can be had along the way.

Nevertheless, for some schools – particularly those in the state sector – long-haul music tours are simply not an option. Lucy Welsman, from Queen Elizabeth's Academy, took the school jazz band on a tour to Italy last summer. From her point of view, the most important factor when planning the tour was that it should be inclusive. 'We have pupils from all backgrounds, several of whom have never been abroad before,' she said. 'Some had help from the school to pay the £500 needed to go to Italy for a week. Considering anywhere further afield would mean some students not being able to come, and the biggest priority is that we are together as a team.' Needless to say, they had a wonderful time – but for Lucy, the educational value of the trip was less about experiencing new cultures, and more about performing to unfamiliar audiences in a professional manner. 'We could have gone to Cornwall and had a great experience', she admitted candidly. But then again, perhaps the weather wouldn't have been as good!

Other setbacks to planning long-haul tours to more exotic destinations are mostly logistical – organising visas, inoculations, transport, audiences and venues – but these concerns should be safely addressed by your tour company. Once you've discussed your ideas and plans with the company,

you should be free to sit back and enjoy the trip without worrying about any of the logistics. If you want to get involved and organise certain aspects of the tour, that can help reduce costs – but make sure you have contacts in the country you are visiting who can provide first-hand local knowledge.

Choosing a tour company:

This is without a doubt the most important decision you will make with regard to your music tour, and one which could ‘make or break’ your experience. The first thing to bear in mind is that you should choose the company you want over the destination you want. It’s all very well to have your heart set on a trip to deepest darkest Peru – but if the most highly recommended companies don’t go there, perhaps you shouldn’t either! Find reliable references from groups who’ve used them in the past, and speak to them about their experiences.

The second thing to be aware of is the need to look at details behind a given price. Low prices are attractive but they may entail outdoor or informal concert venues (which is fine if that’s what you’re looking for), low-grade accommodation and meals, and potentially poor organisation. When you are venturing further afield, it is vital that your tour company has representatives in the country whilst you are there, who can speak the language and take care of any problems as they arise. Make sure that you check out the health and safety programmes of the tour company before you make your choice, and have a look at their risk assessments. Small print can be frustrating, but peace of mind is paramount. For long-haul destinations like India and Africa it’s vital to know that the company has everything covered.

Two companies which have a wealth of experience organising music tours are ACFEA and Club Europe. ACFEA organises travel for all the professional orchestras in the country, so they are experts in transporting instruments and equipment safely. They have offices all over the world, and are particularly keen on promoting tours to locations outside of Europe and America. Their array of destinations includes Taiwan, South America, South Africa, Malaysia, Russia, India and China – with more on the horizon to tempt the most adventurous amongst you! Tony Hastings, ACFEA’s Projects Manager, says that experiencing a totally different culture can have a huge impact on a child’s world view. ‘Participants on our tours are there to engage with the local culture, not just visit as tourists,’ he says. ‘We do take tour groups to see important local icons, but English school groups can enjoy collaborating with local children, even attempting to sing in each other’s languages – whether they are in South Africa, Mumbai or Tianjin!’

Club Europe specialises in youth travel, and their destinations cover most parts of Europe as well as China and Australia. As with ACFEA, all of their music tour staff are themselves musicians, so they understand perfectly the needs of an orchestra or band on tour. Both companies like to meet school tour leaders in person where possible, and tours are tailor-made according to the ideas and budget of each institution.

A taste of something completely different...

For those who are interested in broadening their horizons further still, there are opportunities beyond the traditional orchestra or choir tour that can provide powerful cultural education for young people. Ecco International and Ecco Gambia have been working in West Africa for 15 years, organising courses for visiting groups which aim to empower children of the Gambia, who comprise

60% of this region's population. Students on the Creative Learning Masters at Guildhall School of Music and Drama, in London, have the opportunity to visit the Gambia every two years. Drummer Dave Smith, who has been to the Gambia with Guildhall and Ecco on a number of occasions, says that the culture shock can be very overwhelming. 'You stay in a comfortable campsite, with great food, and the creative collaboration with local people is amazing. But it's very difficult not to get side-tracked by the poverty of the region'. As a cultural experience it couldn't be further from normative life in the West. Music in the Gambia is part of everyday vocabulary, integrated into all aspects of life – from drum calls to celebration songs. The course is a great introduction to West African cultures - participants immerse themselves in local songs and dances, go on a boat trip to see a former slave island, and work with local people to create new music. Trips are flexible, depending on the age and experience of the visiting groups – children and youth take part in the 'Culture Kids' programme, students come for 2-4 week residencies, and professional performing artists (mostly musicians and dancers) have their own tailor-made courses as well.

Groups who have had the privilege of going on long-haul music tours have never looked back. Jeremy Walker is Director of Music at Westminster Under School, and of Westminster Boys' Choir. The choir tours abroad every other year, and they always go for more 'exotic' destinations. The richness and diversity of their experiences never fails to have a deep impact on those who participate. Over the years Jeremy has observed how students return from these tours wiser and humbler – 'after being thrashed by the barefoot football team of a South African township school, after witnessing the poverty of the favelas in Rio, or after experiencing the teary-eyed ovation of 1600 people who danced and hummed along to their performance of a Chinese folksong in the Forbidden City Concert Hall'. Knowledge from lessons and books is important – but the opportunity to be enriched first-hand by the sights and sounds of diverse cultures is surely of inestimable value.

Whenever we depart from our comfort zone, we start asking ourselves questions. Our own identities are strengthened, we become ambassadors for our way of life, and we stop taking for granted the things that we have every day. Eyes, minds and hearts are opened to whole new worlds. The opportunity to take a group of young people on a long-haul cultural education tour is a real privilege, and one which – wherever possible – should be grasped with both hands.