



Amongst the most joyful moments at the RPS Awards was when an army of young people leapt to the stage, as **Orchestras for All** was announced as the RPS Impact Award winner. Lots of organisations talk about putting young people first, but this one truly does it. We asked some of the young people involved to tell us more about the award-winning venture.

Utterly unfazed making a speech to the 850-strong RPS audience, OFA Ambassador Isabella Nevin tells us, 'Being part of OFA has been the most special experience of my life. It's given me a community of people as passionate about music as I am. I've found lifelong friends, and it's given me a unique perspective about the world and the power of music as a tool of change. Seeing the way the young people lift each other up gives me hope for a kinder, more inclusive future.'

Isabella is one of thousands of young people the charity has empowered since it sprang to life 15 years ago. It gives young people the opportunity to make music together who wouldn't otherwise have the chance, owing to circumstances such as financial constraint, mental health or disability. At its heart is the National Orchestra for All which young people with a musical passion can join regardless of their musical standard. The result – as anyone who's seen it first-hand will vouch – is a big, bright sonic boom that says anything is possible. OFA also runs a range of courses with schools, and coaches hundreds of teachers so the positive impact radiates further. 100% of young participants face some form of barriers to participation, with 69% living in income-deprived situations. Duly there's no cost to get involved, and travel and subsistence are covered. With such impediments removed, young participants get to flourish.

Cameron Jacobs says 'OFA took me on as a trumpet player when I was out of school and didn't have access to music. It became my second family. I don't think I would be as talented musically, or have learned so many valuable life skills, if it wasn't for OFA.' Tashan Jones agrees: 'When I first joined, I was very reserved on the journey there. After only four days, everyone taking the journey back was so joyful and lively. Before, I would be more concerned or hesitant because I wouldn't know what to expect. Now, I'm more confident in trying new things, and I'm honoured to have promoted OFA, hosting events and delivering speeches.'

When OFA was first shortlisted for the RPS Impact Award in 2021, the charity was exploring how its young participants could have a more organisational role, being part of its Board of Trustees, and establishing a Youth Board in its own right. How this has accelerated since is an example to us all, with young people's views and voices now rooted in every facet of the mission.

Shannon Cockle, both an OFA Trustee and Co-Chair of its Youth Board, tells us 'OFA not only encourages young people to understand each other and work together as ensembles, they support young people to develop their own voices too. What young people experience through OFA is directly shaped by their reflections, and we have members returning year after year, even moving up to staff roles like me.' Isabella adds 'The experience it's given me as an Ambassador was a gateway to getting into a fantastic university, and the chance to build my career.'



How did it feel to be among the RPS Awards winners? Tashan says 'It was surreal, but an honour to be surrounded by so many talented artists. It was an occasion where people from all walks of life came together through their love of music. I didn't think we'd end up on stage. Nick (from the OFA team) was adamant in getting everyone up there. It was truly amazing, like we all played a small part in this victory.' Shannon concurs: 'It's incredible to be recognised with the RPS Impact Award. With this, so many people got to see what we've known for years: access is the way forward.'