

Children have not found it easy to express their feelings during a year often spent in lockdown with adults under pressure. Six primary schools in Norwich collaborated with an arts charity, a poet and a composer in a project giving a voice to young people's hopes and fears / **By ABIGAIL FRYMANN ROUCH**

# Sing a song of freedom

**ONE BY ONE**, children in school uniform rush towards the video camera holding up placards with colourful words: "love", "joy", "hope". Some are smiling proudly, others are singing through enormous gaps of lost teeth: "I choose love and joy and hope and share it round the world ... I'm hoping for a world that wants to work together, I'm hoping for a cure to help the world recover, I'm hoping for a future that I'm yet to discover."

This anthem, with its glorious, altruistic note of defiance, is the finale of a collection of songs that explores children's experiences of the first lockdown. Charities and academics have warned that the disruption caused to

children by the Covid pandemic – lockdowns, school closures, loss of routine, missing friends, strained relationships at home – may be creating a mental health time bomb. Early on in the first lockdown, Genevieve Raghu, artistic director and chief executive of the arts and education charity Into Opera, noticed that in all the early pandemic news coverage, the experiences of children were missing. "What is it like for them at the moment?" she wondered. When Raghu rang to ask one little girl and her family, there followed "a two-and-a-half-hour phone call, because she had someone who wanted to listen".

From there, Raghu had the idea for a project – a song cycle involving primary school pupils,

a poet and a composer, that would allow children to share their perspective. Six schools signed up, including two Catholic and one Church of England. All were in Norwich, with one of the lowest rates of social mobility in the country. Raghu and a performance poet, Adisa the Verbalizer, devised activity packs to get pupils thinking about the way their lives had changed and how they felt about those changes. What would they put in a scrapbook for historians to study? Or in an ode to their school? If Covid were trying to steal from them, what was it trying to steal?

Felicity Hope, head teacher of St Francis of Assisi Catholic Primary School, thought the project would be a good match for her school, but anticipated parents and teachers might be nervous talking about the pandemic. After all, it had struck close to home. Some children had lost grandparents, some had parents who were nurses or doctors, or who had themselves been hospitalised. "A lot of our parents are critical workers, mainly in care," she adds. Many of the families are from southern India or the Philippines. "We knew ... those children would have their own worries about their parents working in these high-risk areas."

**MANY TOOK** part in the online workshops Raghu and Adisa held; all were invited to draw and write, to create material from which lyrics could be crafted. What emerged was the extent of children's worries. Sarah Claffin, deputy head teacher at St Michael's VA, Junior School, says the impact of headlines like "Don't Kill Granny" had been "heartbreaking". The children "were saying things like ... I'm going to be responsible for someone's death". Many had family members who were vulnerable.

"They were clearly carrying a weight," says Adisa. "They didn't know what to do with it, there was no outlet ... no one was asking their opinion." Raghu and Adisa were sent the completed poems, pictures and so on, and spent several days sifting through around 10,000 offerings from nearly 2,000 children. Some of the results were disturbing. Raghu recalls a five-year-old who, invited to draw Covid as an animal, "drew a Tyrannosaurus rex plundering the street, with lots of dead bodies on the path. In the sky the sun was fighting with the moon and the stars, and in the bottom-right-hand corner was a hangman's noose."

Versatile composer Will Todd, best-known for his *Mass in Blue*, set about crafting the music. Because the workshops were online and ideas were written down, there was more time for the children's words to "gestate", he says. Unlike a classroom workshop, where a musician might write a song with the children in an hour, "we had longer to absorb what they were really saying". The menacing first song – "Thief!" – uses no melody, only spoken, whispered and shouted phrases over a sparse accompaniment: "Thief! Thief! Wolf,

monster! Thief, Thief, stealing my freedom ... stealing my time, stealing my life, stealing my friends, stealing my smile, stealing my childhood." The second, "My Emotional Rollercoaster", juxtaposes the joy of being off school with the fear of Covid, and boredom and anger at not being able to go out. "Heroes" links the weekly Clap for Carers to the parents and carers who kept the children's lives on a level. The ballad-like "Little Things" celebrates the gems the children would have ordinarily been too busy to notice. "Dear School" expresses how much the children missed school; and the title track, "2020: You Won't Hold Me Back" – the anthem quoted in the opening paragraph – ends the cycle with a Gospel-style declaration of hope for a better future.

**WHEN SCHOOLS** reopened last autumn, the children learned the songs, teachers recorded and filmed them, and parents sent in summer lockdown photos – children riding bikes, making pizza, cartwheeling in the garden – for use in the video that would accompany the recording. When the children returned to school in September, they settled back in more easily "because they'd already worked through some of those feelings", says Claffin. Aware of how the children had felt, the school helped pupils readjust to being around their friends and back in the classroom. "Hearing it from people I know in other schools, our children settled a lot quicker," she says.

The finished product, a 20-minute video, received a "virtual premiere" on Zoom, livestreamed on YouTube and Facebook, shortly before Christmas. Claffin believes that watching the professionally made video boosted children's confidence, perseverance and aspiration; she says they are also more able to receive constructive criticism. One boy commented to her after watching the video: "I just can't believe that we did this. I can do anything!"

Claire Furness, deputy head of St Francis of Assisi, said pupils "value and respect the job that teachers do a little bit more". She believes they've become more self-aware and aware of others, and more appreciative of how much key workers do, which has made them "full of gratitude". She still hears the songs being sung by those in her Year 5 class



Will Todd, top left, and Genevieve Raghu in a virtual workshop with pupils at St Michael's VA, Junior School in Norwich

who are coming to school this term, which is helping them through the current lockdown. The project has had a creative ripple effect. Year 2 pupils at St Francis have devised a playground game called "Wolf, Thief, Monster", based on the first song. Rachel Swindell, head of St Augustine's Catholic Primary School, said some children have continued writing poetry; others have made and sent her dance videos; one sent her a video set in an imaginary science lab. At St Michael's, the project revealed that several teachers were gifted singers, pianists or producers. Into Opera has just begun a two-year residency at three of the six schools, supported by the University of Durham and the University of East Anglia, exploring the value of creativity and the arts in primary schools.

Some teachers felt the empathy and reflection encouraged by the project resonated

with their schools' faith ethos. Felicity Hope believes that at St Francis, "the levels of reflection and prayer have become deeper". She also believes the conversations it opened up between parents and children "will pay dividends going forward".

Although the inclusion of "2020" in the title of the song cycle may now look like the triumph of hope over reality, Swindell said they will be using the songs again with pupils to mark the anniversary of the start of the first lockdown. Raghu hopes more schools will want to use the songs and insists they can be developed for the future. "Making sure that children know that their voice matters isn't just for 2020," she stresses. "We have found a way to reach children and to get them talking."

You can watch the song cycle *2020: You Won't Hold Me Back* at: <https://www.into-opera.org.uk/2020>

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"I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me!"  
Matthew 25:36

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