



# Music to our ears...

**Andrew Gwatkin**, managing director of Drums for Schools, talks to *Private Schools* about his unique business and how instruments can develop learning.

**When did you first start Drums for Schools?**

We started Drums for Schools seriously back in 2005. I'd always been interested in instruments that were easy to play and non-exclusive, and we'd been importing drums and percussion from Bali for several years. Our customers were telling us how pleased they were to find us and how difficult it was to find reasonably-priced musical instruments elsewhere on the market.

**What ages are your instruments especially for?**

We started by making instruments and adapting them for use in the school classroom – initially djembes, gamelan and percussion – but more recently we've

developed a whole range of instruments and music kits especially for babies and younger children. These instruments are essentially the same as the ones we make for older players, but are smaller, lighter and more suitable for little hands. We think it's vital that these early years' instruments should be 'real' instruments, not plastic toys, as even the tiniest baby instinctively appreciates the difference. Instruments that are carefully made from natural materials evoke a much more nuanced and sensitive response. At the other end of the age spectrum, we're also collaborating with therapists who work with the elderly, and so I think we can now safely claim that we have instruments for everyone from age 0 to 100.

**What sort of feedback do you receive?**

One of the things that makes this job so satisfying is that we're constantly receiving positive feedback from customers. Mind you, we do get some negative feedback too, and that is often the most useful, as it enables us to adapt and make the instruments better. Lots of the modifications and innovations that we make come directly from our customers' feedback.

**What do you believe is involved in an all-round education?**

For me, an all-round education should produce a fully-rounded individual. There's a tendency to assume that education happens in the nursery, at school and in university, but of course ▶



► education happens everywhere; what happens outside the education sector can be just as important as what happens in it. In the UK we have a relatively developed education sector, but we've lost much of our sense of traditional culture; that side of things has been taken over by the TV and electronic media. It's very interesting to compare the situation in Bali to that in the UK. By our standards the quality of school education in Bali is very basic and yet, because of their strong traditional culture, the Balinese as a whole are very well-rounded and socially adept people – they enjoy working, they are great team players, they appreciate and are skilled in the arts, they are patient and friendly and they have an instinctive sense of community. I would have to say that the average Balinese is actually much better-rounded and better educated than the average Briton! I think there is a lot we can learn from them.

**Where are the drums made?**

We make all our drums, percussion and gamelan instruments in Bali using materials that come from Bali, Java and other Indonesian islands. Our samba and

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taiko drums are actually made in the UK and our steel pans are made in the USA.

**How involved do you get in the designing process?**

I'm very lucky to be the go-between, communicating our requirements to the instrument makers – consequently I'm right in the middle of the design process. To give you an example, this morning I was discussing with the instrument makers some modifications needed to a new set of metal gong stands, chasing up changes to our new bamboo samba drums and testing a new set of wooden shakers. Tomorrow I have to check a new mini drum that we're making from local Balinese wood and

a friction drum that we're making from bamboo. Never a dull moment...

**Can you give an example of when you realised your products were really helping children learn?**

I've always been a musician, so I was fortunate to experience the power of music from an early age, but it has taken me a lifetime to appreciate the many subtle ways in which music-making both heals and educates. As far as examples are concerned, literally every session of ensemble playing provides a new example. I've seen so many group sessions where the children arrive distracted and are emotionally all over the place – some bored, some angry, some withdrawn, some hyper – only to see the individuals merge over the course of the session into a single musical community, where the parts all contribute to a much greater whole and in which, by the end of the session, all the players act as one. And for me this is the most important aspect of learning – learning that there is unity in diversity and that we need all the different individual voices and feelings to make a coherent and satisfying whole.