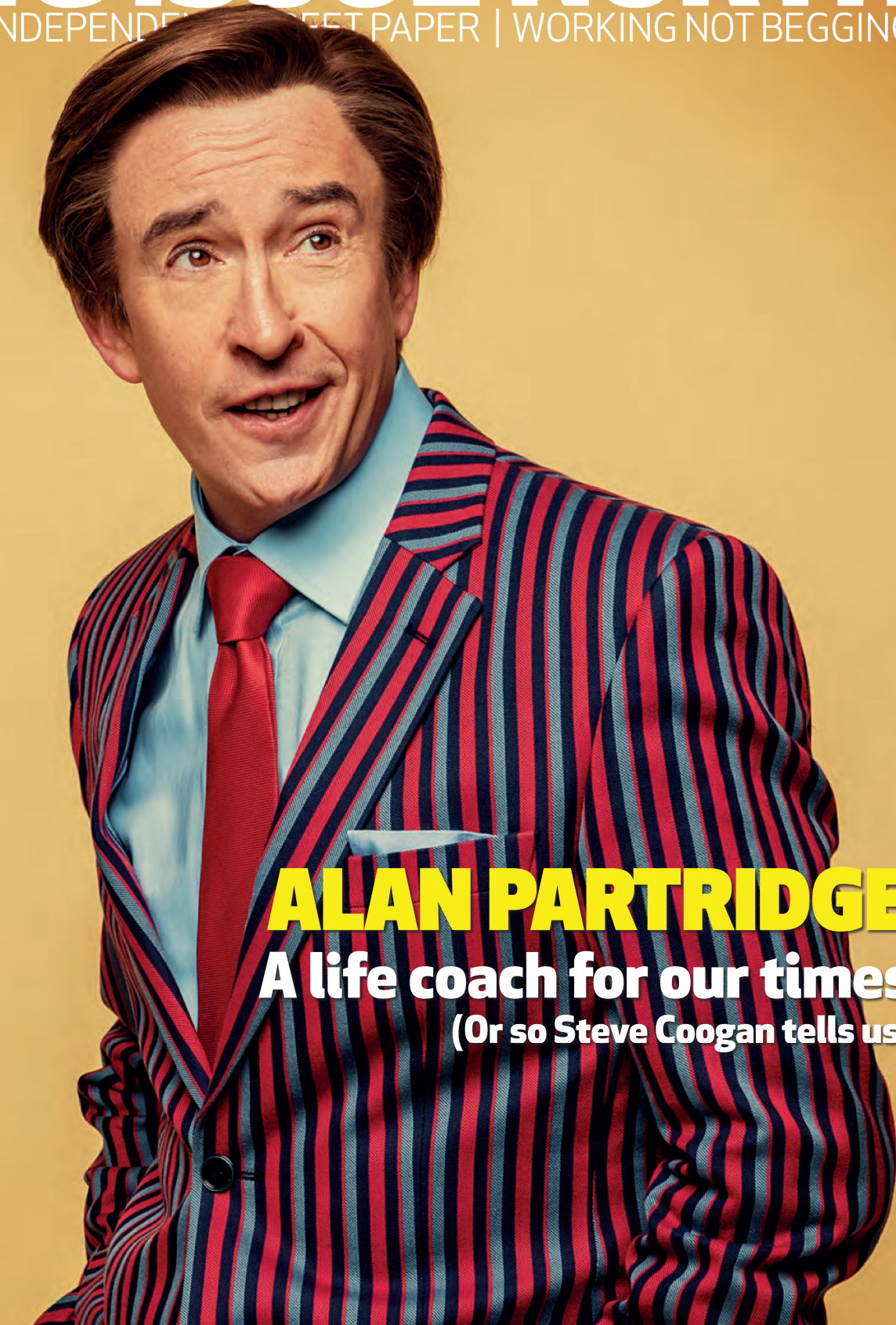


NO.1431 · 9 - 15 MAY 2022

DIGITAL EDITION £2

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SOUL MUSIC

Acclaimed saxophonist and BBC Radio 3's youngest host, Jess Gillam speaks with **Simon Bland** about her passion for the power of music and celebrating 50 years of Manchester Camerata



Jess Gillam is only 23 but she's already racked up enough accomplishments to rival anyone twice her age. An award-winning saxophonist and BBC Radio 3's youngest ever presenter, the Ulverston native began her musical journey at just seven years old, playing with a colourful carnival band in Barrow-in-Furness. It sparked a desire to champion the power and therapeutic impact music can have on the soul that she's carried into her career.

While many of us were struggling during lockdown, Gillam took to the internet to invite musicians who were stuck indoors to take part in virtual orchestras, where they could submit videos and have their performances stitched together with other people's work. Around the same period, she released her second album, *Time*, a collection of contemplative covers of works by Björk, Radiohead's Thom Yorke, James Blake and more, each played on her beloved saxophone. Met with quick critical acclaim, it too provided a moment of much-needed calm during difficult and uncertain times.

Earlier this year, Gillam returned to the city that helped catalyse her musical interests to partner with the Manchester Camerata as part of its 50th birthday celebrations. Joining it for a handful of live performances that began in early March and spill over into this month, Gillam hopes this platform will further showcase the important role music can play in everyday life.

"I started playing with a carnival band at a community centre and at its heart was giving people something to look forward to and be a part of," says Gillam. "It was about people coming together to enjoy music and wasn't about striving for perfection. It was more about the emotion and joy that we could bring to people and the splash of colour and brightness for those taking part. It was a two way exchange.

"I've tried to hold onto that ethos moving into a more classical arena and bring personality, life and joy to people through the pieces I perform. That's definitely come from starting in a community centre. I've seen the tangible impact music can have and I want to share that as much as I can."

As well as performing at the 2018 Proms and hosting her own weekly radio show, *This Classical Life*, Gillam is also an advocate of teaching the next generation about music.

"There's huge benefits for mental health. Studying music academically improves both sides of the brain and can instil a sense of empathy and personal skills. There are so many benefits to it as well as simply doing it. It's good for our souls and minds."

Her virtual orchestras kept musicians going when they were separated from their audiences.

"They just highlighted what music can do for people. It can bring people together and give them hope and light when there doesn't seem to be much around. It's such a rewarding feeling. I feel so lucky to be doing it."

However with live music returning to its pre-pandemic state, Gillam is one of the many musicians who are overjoyed to be performing live once more.

"In our virtual orchestra we were playing with people without an audience and it was so sad. To have that special atmosphere back and to have audiences to interact with is so special. It's made me value the experience even more."

That makes her even more pleased to be involved with the Manchester Camerata anniversary concerts.

"They were one of the first orchestras I ever played with professionally and they're such a welcoming group of musicians. Their organisational team are so passionate about music. It's always such a pleasure to play with the group."

They also share a similar creative mission. "It's great to see the inspirational work they do with taking music out into the community and engaging with as many people as possible. It's brilliant to work with them on so many concerts this year."

It's also a role that allows Gillam to return to Manchester, the city that helped her on to her musical path.

"I was seven years old and I'd saved up all of my pocket money," smiles Gillam, remembering the day she bought her first sax from Johnny Roadhouse, the famous musical instrument store on Oxford Road. "I'd come to play at Manchester Pride with the carnival band and I was really

excited but all I could think about all day was that I was going to get my own saxophone."

Johnny Roadhouse himself served her. "He gave me a bit of guidance as to which one to get. I'd never seen so many saxophones in one place."

Later she studied at the Royal Northern College of Music before graduating from London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama in 2020. "Manchester is such an amazing cultural city. There's so many different scenes and so much happening. I came through every Saturday to study growing up, seeing how people interact, and some of the greatest bands have come out of Manchester. It definitely played a big part in my realisation of wanting to be in the arts and in music."

Cut to the present day and Gillam has used her sax skills to great effect in *Time*. "I'd moved to London and everything was moving at a million miles an hour. I needed to create some music and I'd recently read an interview with Björk where she was talking about going inside music almost like a gallery so you can look around it. Trying to create that idea was really influential on me," she reveals. "I'm trying to create an atmosphere with the saxophone to show what it can do. Hopefully the albums I create going forward will each be their own little worlds and sound planets."

Gillam hopes to offer a glimpse inside these aural worlds during her upcoming Camerata performances, when she'll perform one of *Time*'s standout tracks – a haunting, delicate and unexpectedly timely rendition of Max Richter's *On The Nature of Daylight*.

"It's such a poignant piece. It was written in a time of conflict and became a kind of protest for peace written by Richter in response to the Afghanistan war. To be playing it in the context of the war in Ukraine right now, that a piece of music can stand for peace and hopefully give people a moment to reflect – it's really important. It reminds you that music is incredible. There will be an added poignance to playing that piece with the Camerata." ■

Jess Gillam plays with the Manchester Camerata at King George's Hall as part of Blackburn Classics Season, 20 May