

A rising star in conducting, Jessica Cottis believes in collaboration and interaction for young musicians, she tells **David Kettle**

EVERY time I work with a youth orchestra, it's incredible. There's something about the energy, the desire to make things work, that these young people have." Australian-born conductor Jessica Cottis is thinking about the extensive experience she's had working with young people's music ensembles internationally. So far, that's been with groups including the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, Aldeburgh Young Musicians and Sistema Europe. "You come in on day one and start playing, and then four or five days later you're in a completely different place," she continues. "It's the act of rehearsing: all these young people working together, listening to each other, communicating with each other. It's really transformative."

Cottis adds one more youth ensemble to her roster at the start of August, when she makes her debut with the NYOS Symphony Orchestra in its three-stop summer tour taking in Orkney, Dundee and Stirling.

She's a rapidly rising star in the conducting world, in demand across the globe, as well as making return visits to the BBC Proms and Royal Opera House. Given that breadth of experience, how would she describe the differences between working with a professional orchestra and a youth ensemble? "In many ways, I conduct them both in exactly the same way – and I expect as much from a youth orchestra as I do from a professional group," she explains. "But I guess there are different emphases placed on things. I see my role as opening a door of possibilities for young players, to explore why a piece of music was written, what it might mean, how they can build on the work they've done with their individual teachers and play better together."

Underlying Cottis's practical aims for developing young musicians' skills and awareness are some deep-rooted beliefs, she says. "Almost on a cosmic level, it's ultimately about the power of art, and the importance of music in all our lives, so that these young people are able to experience something that's beyond the everyday. It's so important to have those experiences at a young age, because that's when we're at our most receptive. And then we can build on them as we go through life."

Cottis is clearly speaking from experience: she credits youth music groups as playing a formative role in her own musical training. As the daughter of an Australian diplomat, she had something of an unconventional upbringing, growing up in various countries across the world. But that didn't stop the young Cottis join-

ing in various orchestras wherever she found herself: "As a child, you just turn up in a new place and assume there will be an orchestra of some sort." Luckily, there usually was.

Her first instrument was the piano ("I learnt from my mother from the age of about three," she remembers) but she got her first trumpet aged nine. "I was completely obsessed with brass instruments and their sound," she says. "And I had some great experiences as a young trumpeter in Australia – in one orchestra we did everything from symphonies to film music. And there were lots of opportunities beyond classical music too. It helped having older brothers who would bring their band to a local pub right in the centre of Canberra, so I could join them for a couple of songs." Most of all, though, it was about teamwork, the critical skill for young players that she mentions again and again. "It was the interactions with musicians around you that was crucial – learning that it was all about collaboration, and also about listening. It attunes your ear, but I think it's also about the philosophy of working with other people."



The repertoire she's brought together for her NYOS concerts is nothing if not meaty. "It's a challenging programme, with a lot of notes!" she agrees. Cottis and NYOS Artistic Director Nicolas Žekulin have hit upon Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra as the centrepiece, specifically for the many opportunities it offers for individual players to shine.

"We were also keen to include a representation of different composers, so we begin with an Overture by Grazyna Bacewicz, an amazing piece by an extraordi-

nary composer who isn't played as much as she should be," Cottis continues.

The programme is completed by Shostakovich's intense First Violin Concerto, with Berlin Philharmonic concertmaster Daishin Kashiimoto as soloist.

It might be Cottis's debut with NYOS, but it's far from her first time in Scotland. She was Conducting Fellow at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and Assistant Conductor of the BBC SSO from 2009 to 2011, "and that for me was the beginning of a real love affair with Scotland," she enthuses. She ended up staying until 2016, when career demands took her to London, where she's now based. "But I'm back and forth regularly. And on my mother's side everyone's Scottish, so it's very much a place I feel at home."

● Jessica Cottis conducts the NYOS Symphony Orchestra at the Pickaquoy Centre, Kirkwall, 7 August, Caird Hall, Dundee, 8 August and the Albert Halls, Stirling, 9 August, www.nyos.co.uk