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# Youth instrumental in breaking down barriers

## Conductor James Lowe is shaking up Scotland's Last Night of the Proms

WITH his floppy hair and affable disposition, the RSNO's newest and youngest ever associate conductor looks a little like Aled Jones' twin. And like Jones before him, Lowe has the potential to turn some preconceptions on their heads.

"Call me Jim," he says, as we walk towards the library room of Carberry Towers, which adjoins where his students for the week, the West Lothian Youth Orchestra, are practising for a concert.

This week Lowe will conduct the RSNO's *Last Night of the Proms*, leading one of the hippest classical line-ups in Scotland to date. As well as boasting classical golden girl Nicola Benedetti - with whom Lowe now shares a manager - this year's finale boasts an appearance from folk band Capercaillie's leading lady, Karen Matheson, and Scotland's three tenors, Caledon.

The programme includes everything from Dvorak's *Carnival Overture* and Tchaikovsky's

*1812 Overture* through to Saint-Saens' *Havanaise* and Phil Cunningham's *Cathcart*.

As well as providing a forum for a diverse repertoire, Lowe hopes the evening will showcase the standard of the RSNO's young team and break down barriers.

"Watching a classical performance is not like going to the theatre," says Lowe. "At the theatre there is the sense that the actors talk directly to the audience. With an orchestra - particularly as the conductor has his back to you - an audience can feel there is some kind of barrier there.

"The young generation of conductors I know are keen to get rid of that 'them-and-us' feeling between orchestra and audience."

Since Lowe's appointment last year, he has been a key figure in taking the orchestra away from its central belt mentality, introducing the RSNO to a new audience and encouraging children to become interested from a young age.



Reaching out: James Lowe is targeting a new audience

"It is terrifically important to get out into the community. Going around schools is a nice way of introducing ourselves to a new audience," he says.

As a late developer himself - Lowe began to play the viola at the age of 13 - the conductor believes his ongoing visits to Stirling, Dunfermline, Galashiels and beyond as part of the RSNO's programme of pre-school events is crucial to the orchestra widening its sphere of influence.

Its innovative nursery school programme has taken the orchestra to around 24,000 under-fives in the past five years alone.

"Children are a blank canvas in

many ways: you can open their minds up to incredible possibilities," says Lowe. "Many of the kids that come along have never seen a full orchestra before. It is important that they do not associate classical music with a bunch of doddering old men."

With the help of the RSNO's impressive young team - 30-year-old principal guest conductor Garry Walker and 32-year-old music director Stéphane Denève - Nottingham-born Lowe believes the company can bring fresh talent to an evolving genre of music, encouraging his audience to take advantage of the contemporary music at their disposal, whatever their age.

With his *Proms* engagement just a week away, Lowe is most animated about working with Benedetti, who was recently referred to as the £500-a-minute-violinist for her ability to command a huge fee.

An obvious fan, he is quick to defend any Vanessa Mae-style criticisms of the young star. "There is so much positive energy around Nicola at the moment; she's a very good role model. There are lots of pretty violinists out there but she is not selling out her musicality, she is really using it, going into schools and educating with her talents throughout Scotland as well as playing and producing some really difficult pieces of music."

His own appeal, he hopes, will lie in his ability to present a young, contemporary package, while sacrificing none of his classical roots. Lowe is reluctant to sell out. Suggest that classical is becoming the new cool and he says: "That would be great. I've never been cool in my life, I'd like to start being cool now."

### ANNA MILLAR

Last Night of the Proms, Usher Hall, Edinburgh (0131-228 1155), Saturday, 7.30pm; Royal Concert Hall, Glasgow (0141-353 8000), July 2, 7.30pm