

Royal Blind School has placement opportunities

By GAYNOR ALLEN

WHEN Saad Attich was five years old, it was obvious he had a special talent. When he sat at the piano, he became more animated and alive. As his older brothers grew bored with piano lessons, Saad became more enthralled. Ten years later, his love affair with the keys continues.

At Scotland's first ever Royal Variety Performance last October, Saad – then just 14 – stunned everyone with a hauntingly beautiful piece he composed himself, called *The Passing Waves*.

The fact that someone so young stole the show is amazing. What is even more amazing is that Saad Attich is blind.

Now a fourth-year boarder at Edinburgh's Royal Blind School, Saad has turned into a brilliant pianist and composer – although he can't see the notes on the piano or read music. Even at a very young age, he could hear the sounds and reproduce them fluently.

Saad, now 15, can listen to music, memorise what he hears and then play it, faultlessly, on the piano. "I cannot read music and play it at the same time, so that's the way I do it," he says. "I can read Braille music too but that's like a totally different language."

The Passing Waves is the first piece that Saad has written on the piano. His other compositions have begun life on his laptop and, he admits, often languish unfinished until he gets bored of them. This is the first piece that he has completed and is happy to perform.

"I really enjoy just messing



about on my laptop making up different pieces, but I hardly ever finish them, I get bored and move on," he admits.

"I thought for ages about what to call it. When I play it, there are a lot of changes in tempo, it starts quiet and then it gets fast and loud and I thought it's just like the weather and like waves."

Saad's journey to Edinburgh began when he was seven and Vicky, his carer in his home town of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, suggested that he would benefit from attending the Royal Blind School for his secondary education. Once enrolled at the world-renowned school, teachers quickly recognised Saad's talent and began to nurture his ability. He was encouraged to learn more instruments like the flute, drums and accordion.

Saad was also encouraged to take his music exams early and gained an A at Higher Music three years before his peers. He is the youngest and most ad-

vanced student in his music classes and plans to sit his Advanced Higher exam this year (about two years ahead of schedule) and possibly an even more difficult music qualification after that.

Thanks to the support from the school, Saad feels he now stands out for his musical achievements and not for the fact that he is blind.

"When I came to the Royal Blind, it was the first time I had met anyone else who was either blind or partially sighted and it was great to make friends who were the same as me," he explains. "I don't stand out here and my friends have a far better understanding of each other."

"This is a great place to be. I think all blind people should attend schools like this that have the right resources and staff to deal with their needs. And there are so many talented kids here, who are all supported and encouraged to follow their specialism. I feel much more confident in myself and my music since coming here."

Saad wasn't born blind. He lost his sight at the age of two when he had his eyes surgically removed after being diagnosed with retinoblastoma, cancerous tumours in both eyes. He cannot remember what it was like to have his sight, and says that being blind has made no difference to his music.

As well as music, Saad is also working towards a full range of exams in other subjects this year and is intending to do a four-year degree in sound recording and production at Surrey University.

"I also enjoy maths and physics, and this course combines all three," he says. "I have been looking at what courses to take and found this one, and the careers teachers have really helped."

"I have been helped here in every aspect of life. We learn living skills and mobility as well as everything else. We have s-



mall classes so we get lots of personal attention and anyone with any special talents will be encouraged and nurtured. This could not happen in many schools that don't have the resources or skills we have here.

"I feel very strongly that blind people should go to a blind school and not a mainstream school. The Royal Blind School provided the very best for all of its students."

While he is a long way from his parents, Saad says the blind school has become home to him.

"I go back to Saudi at the end of every term," he says. "I'm used to being here now and this is normal to me. My dad is in the UK on business, so he comes up when he can and both mum and dad often come over for half term. My two brothers are in the UK, one at school in Edinburgh and another at university in Bath. I don't really feel homesick."

Saad's friends at the Blind School include brothers James and Stephen Clegg who are following in their sister's footsteps to be medal-winning Paralympians. Both boys are excellent swimmers, and the only Scottish-based members of the British National Squad for disabled swimmers. Their sister Libby, who also attended the Royal Blind School, sprinted her way to a silver medal in the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing.

Julie Shylan, principal at the Royal Blind School, says: "We

are immensely proud of Saad and his achievements – as we are immensely proud of all our pupils. The Royal Blind School deals with a wide range of pupils from those with multiple disabilities to students seeking places at university. We strive to do our very best for all of them and to give them confidence to develop to the best of their abilities."

Saad is both confident and eloquent, far more so than most boys of his age. He says performing at the Royal Variety was "a great experience", but despite his successes, he is very modest and says he is only one of many talented musicians at the school.

"There is an amazing amount of talent here," he adds. "The school does its very best to nurture that talent."

The host of the Royal Variety Performance, Tam Cowan, described Saad as the star of the show. This was high praise indeed on a bill packed with professional entertainers. Yet there is no doubt that Saad is a star – and one that will continue shining.

The Royal Blind School, Edinburgh

The Royal Blind School which is based in Edinburgh, Scotland is a National Centre of Excellence in the education and care of children and young people who are blind or visually impaired (VI), including those who have multiple disabilities and visual impairment (MDVI). The school offers both day placement and residential services and currently there are spaces available for pupil placements.

At all times, high priority is given to maintaining the privacy and dignity of pupils and the school offers a broad, balanced, relevant and differentiated curriculum that enables all pupils to fulfill their potential intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, physically and socially.

It is the belief of the school that all pupils have the right to achieve a range of learning outcomes including academic, vocational, social, communication and independent living skills. It provides high standards of education and care for pupils at all times, offering a range of opportunities and experiences that will enable them to become successful learners, responsible citizens, confident individuals and effective contributors to society. Achieving this requires genuine academic opportunity and choice. Pupils' programmes are fully individualised to deliver teaching and learning that is accessible, relevant and motivating in a safe, yet challenging, environment.

Modern Greek HSC Study Day on Saturday 15 May 2010

The NSW Department of Education-Saturday School of Community Languages (SSCL) is organising a Modern Greek HSC Study Day on Saturday 15 May 2010 at SSCL-St George Girls' High School Centre for all the Year 12 students studying Modern Greek at the Saturday School of Community Languages:

Arthur Phillip High School Centre (Parramatta),
Ashfield Boys' High School Centre (Ashfield),
Bankstown Girls' High School Centre (Bankstown),
Chatswood High School Centre (Chatswood),
Liverpool Boys' High School Centre (Liverpool),
Merewether High School Centre (Newcastle),
Smith Hill High School Centre (Wollongong),
St George Girls' High School Centre (Kogarah),
The Hills High School Centre (Seven Hills/Blacktown).

Senior Students and their Modern Greek Teachers will participate in this annual event to receive tips how to improve their performance in the 2010 HSC Modern Greek Exam for both Continuers and Extension levels.

For more information, people may telephone the Saturday School of Community Languages Office on (02) 9886 7506 business hours.