School that gives kids the X-factor

Amy Winehouse and Leona Lewis may be former students, but it's not all about fame, says **Wendy Miller**

PAUL GROVER

Keyboard to success: students make music on computers at the Brit School in Croydon

IT'S a cold, wet Monday morning in south London but, unlike many of their contemporaries up and down the country, none of the pupils at the Brit School is gazing out of the window. They're far too wrapped up in what they're doing.

On the ground floor, two woolly-hatted bands are practising for the school concert, while in the dance studio next door the ballet class is rehearsing an ensemble piece in black leotards.

Upstairs, a group of actors is rehearsing a gritty, modern play about British soldiers, while in the new recording wing some of the school's composers and songwriters are transferring their music on to computer, with the help of Sibelius (a software program that turns recorded music into a written score).

To the first-time visitor, it's like walking into a Channel 4 drama series about talented teenagers trying to make it in showbusiness. Everyone's confident, everyone's got opinions, everyone's dressed like they're on their way to a rock gig. In other words, it looks like far too much fun to be school.

But don't be confused by appearances, urges the principal Nick Williams.

"When you send your child here, you are not consigning him to some kind of unstructured mêlée," he insists. "Everyone here comes to lessons, everyone turns up on time, and everything we do is designed to instil the kind of rigour and self-discipline that will equip our students for a rapidly changing world."

And the academic results bear him out, too. In last summer's GCSEs, 99 per cent of pupils got five grades A* to C, while in the BTEC National Diploma, which is the equivalent of three A-levels, 96 per cent got either a distinction or merit.

The big difference is that instead of studying traditional subjects, the sixth-formers opt for one of six creative "strands": dance, music, theatre, media, musical theatre or art and design.

To which, of course, the conventional parental question is: what will that qualify them for, apart from ending up in their mid-twenties as a frustrated wannabe with nothing to fall back on? It's the sort of worry that Williams, himself a traditionally educated grammar school boy, is well used to addressing.

"The first thing I point out is that not only do the creative industries in Britain contribute eight per cent of our national GDP, but they constitute a section of the economy which is growing, even in a recession," he says.

"The second thing I stress is that this is not a fame school. While any institution craves people who go on to achieve success [see panel for Brit School alumni], the main aim of the school is to help young people find lasting employment within the creative industries."

So, while a large number of the school's music students harbour notions of achieving Amy Winehouse or Leona Lewis-like stardom, at the same time they learn how to use their skills in less rollercoaster ways, such as composing music for films or video games.

A case in point is 19-year-old singer-songwriter Alice Barnard, who, having got her National Diploma, is doing a two-day a week arts management course at the school. "Music and performing is my thing, but I want to learn about the business from all angles," she says.

Meanwhile, 18-year-old media student Darryl Kidd plans to work in the film industry ("Horror is my forte"), but wants to work outdoors rather than in the editing suite. "After looking at the options, I think being a location scout really appeals to me," he says.

Either way, both he and all the other Brit School pupils will be entering the entertainment world with their eyes wide open, and with years not just of work experience behind them, but of access to the latest equipment. The school may be a state comprehensive, but it gets enviably generous contributions from the British Record Industry Trust.

"These are state-of-the-art Apple Macs," says Ken McGill, the school's film and digital arts manager, himself an experienced documentary-maker.

"When I started my career, a documentary film crew was 14 people. These days, though, the means of production are available to everyone, and our students will leave here able to make and cut a film in their own front room."

Which puts them, at the age of 18, several streets ahead of their university-educated counterparts, who won't be graduating until they're 21.

"Of course, all our pupils have dreams," says Williams, smiling. "But what we do is to encourage them to dream positively."

The Brit School for the Performing Arts and Technology, 60 The Crescent, Croydon (+44 20 8665 5242; www.brit.croydon.sch.uk)

GREATEST HITS

Top musical acts to have come out of the Brit School

- Amy Winehouse: the singer's barely been out of the news since she left
- Leona Lewis: the *X Factor* winner who's now an international star
- Dan Gillespie-Sells, Richard Jones, Ciaran Jeremiah, Paul Stewart: all members of big-name band The Feeling
- Polly Scattergood: hugely original singer-songwriter. Debut album this year
- Katie Melua: big reputation, countless awards
- Paul Garred, Hugh Harris, Luke Pritchard: better known as indie band The Kooks
- Kate Nash: her debut album *Made of Bricks* went platinum
- Joe Worricker: blues-jazz singer, just signed three-record deal
- Adele: double Grammy Award-winning singer songwriter
- Imogen Heap: her third album *Ellipse* was a No 1 in the US

Dulwich College leads the way by branching out into China

STRAW boaters, striped jackets, bow ties; teachers in caped gowns and children looking like characters out of *Just William* carrying briefcases are on their way to the morning assembly in the Great Hall. If it sounds rather like the start of a typical day at an English public school, it does. But this school is in China.

For companies such as Boeing, Airbus, Coca-Cola, Microsoft and General Electric, part of the relocation package for expatriates includes school fees. For international schools in China this means the equivalent of £10,000 to £22,000 per year. But for that they provide the education one would expect in the UK.

Lessons are taught in English and some schools provide qualifications which will enable expatriate children to apply for British and American universities.

The economic downturn has had a negative impact on international education for expatriates around the world, particularly in Dubai and New Zealand. China has been hit, too, but not as badly: while many of the salaried corporate expats have had to return to their home countries, they have been replaced by the entrepreneurs who still regard China as the greatest opportunity in this time of recession.

This has allowed the top-quality schools to clear their waiting lists and remain on track for their 2009/2010 targets. Many mid-range international schools, however, have suffered dramatic falls in enrolment.

With competition getting ever stiffer, how can schools make sure that they have something different to offer?

One way is by taking the brand name of a well-known British or American school and creating a franchised branch in China. Dulwich College, a leading English public school, was one of the pioneer international schools in China. Dulwich College Management International (DCMI) set up its first campus in Shanghai in 2002.

What initially started as an experiment has turned out to be a success, not just for Dulwich, but for other private schools, too; Harrow, another leading public school, has had an international branch in Beijing since 2005. More recently the school has won a bid for a school site in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, Wellington College is set to open an international branch in Tianjin.

Dulwich College in Shanghai is co-educational and secular, offering education to the expatriate community based on the same philosophy of Dulwich College, London. DCMI has also established colleges in Beijing and Suzhou.

Although there has been no shortage of highly qualified teachers keen to relocate to China, finding staff who want to stay for the long term has been a problem.

There is also the difficulty that, unlike many other countries, where anyone can attend international schools, irrespective of whether they are expatriates or not, the law still forbids Chinese nationals from attending international schools.

Ironically, this is one of the main reasons why a significant number of Chinese nationals send their children to the leading public schools in the UK.

Navjot Singh