

# The BEAT

*Katie Randall* goes in search of a heartbeat and finds a pulse in an unlikely source on an industrial road in Wandsworth



The 51st State Band, photo by Neelakshi

The music produced by the performers at the World Heart Beat Music Academy in Wandsworth is unlike any other in London. It is so special, in fact, that it has secured the support of international luxury brand Gucci Timepieces & Jewelry.

Perusing the photographs adorning the organisation's walls, I can almost hear the notes beaming out from the photographs of smiling faces. Music means the world to these young people, and founder and musical director of the Academy Sahana Gero is determined to give them the world.

The doors to the Music Academy – a space where more than 240 students learn to play instruments, rehearse and perform in public concerts – were opened in May 2012, but its roots go back much further. Sahana's first musical foray was launched in 2000. From humble beginnings at a doughnut party held in a small living room in East Sheen, the 51st State Band emerged.

'My living room was packed with 30 children, eager to learn an instrument,' recalls the petite Sahana.

“When it comes to learning music, Sahana works tirelessly, making every effort to remove any obstacles for her pupils”

'We needed extra space so I hired a hall, and within a few years my venture grew to become one of the largest concert bands for young people in London. We have well over 100 musicians and have performed in the Royal Festival Hall, as well as with many renowned figures in the world of music.'

Music has taken the softly-spoken Sahana to the four corners of the globe, performing concerts in more than 50 countries, therefore she recognises the impact this art form can have on young lives. She has visited schools all over the world, striving to make music accessible and inspirational for children everywhere. Until recently, she was working on a musical project with children from the slums of Dhaka in Bangladesh.

Specialising in playing the Bengali music of Sri Chinmoy, as a teacher, she has more than 18 years of experience and has taught more than 1,000 young people how to play an instrument. 'I wanted to do more for young people from diverse cultural backgrounds in the UK,' Sahana begins. 'I've travelled to more than 50 countries to play instruments, so I've seen how music influences people and how it can change their lives. This wasn't being reflected in the UK though, and there were disadvantaged children missing out, their talent slipping under the radar.'

'I wanted to offer young people an alternative to the streets, boredom and lack of opportunity and to engage them.'

'I felt the urge to open a music academy, so I formed a charity – and the name actually came to me in a dream. The one thing that all of humanity has in common is a heartbeat. I live in a loft in Wandsworth and you can look out over London and sense everyone in the city. Even if they are all asleep, on quiet mornings you can almost feel the heartbeats.'

Gucci Timepieces & Jewelry UK, which is based in Fulham, heard about Sahana's venture and magnanimously reached out to the Academy. The organisation was launching its music sponsorship programme (the Gucci Timepieces & Jewelry Music Fund) with Grammy-winning mentors, such as Emeli Sandé. The Fund seeks to discover and promote talented young musicians within the United Kingdom.

Through the sales of a striking, interlocking stainless steel timepiece, itself inspired by music, Gucci Timepieces & Jewelry is supporting ten young people at the Academy for an entire year. Excitingly, the programme also partners with the renowned GRAMMY Camp in Los Angeles and, in 2013, sent two candidates from the Wandsworth-based organisation to partake in the prestigious live-in music industry camp. One of the most notable faces in the international music industry, Neil Portnow, president of the National Academy of Recording Arts



Founder of the World Heart Beat Music Academy, Sahana Gero



World Heart Beat Music Academy student Mansur Brown with his guitar



Sahana conducting the 51st State Band



Amy Mason and Larissa Dalledone of the Celtic Fiddle School



and Sciences, has since paid the Wandsworth Academy a visit, taking the time to chat with each student about their art.

'The Fund wanted to support young people who weren't under the tutelage of the Royal College of Music or benefiting from the support of the Royal Academy of Music,' Sahana tells me. 'It sought out musicians with a broader mindset, disadvantaged youths who wanted to learn about the whole of the music industry, as well as those who love to play instruments.'

An assortment of ten young people

from the World Heart Beat Music Academy, all with a variety of different musical interests, have been chosen by the Fund, from vocalists and producers to saxophonists and guitarists.

Among these ten, 17-year-old Quinn Oulton, a saxophonist and jazz enthusiast, as well as 18-year-old Isaac Duribe, an electronic-music producer, both from Wandsworth, were selected to attend the GRAMMY Camp.

'Without wanting to sound too predictable or clichéd, I honestly don't



Students from Sahana's Academy perform at the Palazzo Corsini in Florence, Italy



Gucci Timepieces & Jewelry UK CEO Michele Sofisti with Sahana Gero

know what I would do without music, and no matter what the future holds I know it will always stay that way,' says Quinn, who completed his Grade eight with distinction at the tender age of 11. 'The GRAMMY Camp has really great energy,' Sahana explains. 'The important thing to note is that they work with all sorts of musically-gifted young people, not just performers. They teach music production, music journalism, song writing and the business of music, as well as singing and playing instruments. This means that ambitious people such as Isaac Duribe have the opportunity to develop their skills.' An electronic-music producer who

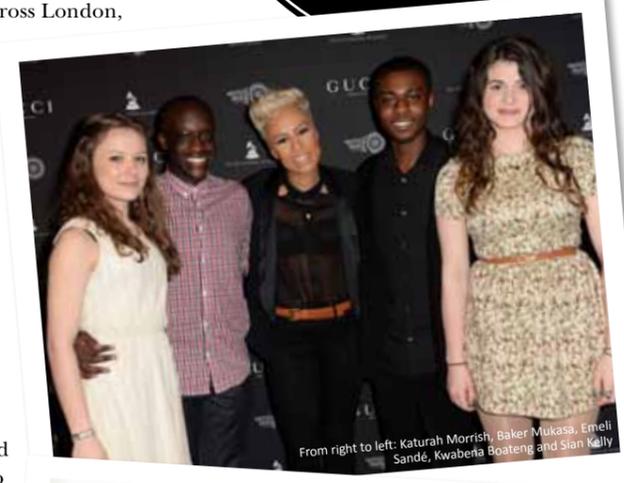
is planning to produce his first EP, Duribe says of the genre he loves: 'I enjoy the feelings that electronic music can convey, including euphoria and deep sadness.' Interested in music from a young age, he has also practised the flute since he was 14. It appears that travel is a common denominator for the lucky ten, although only two flew across the pond to the camp; the entire group was flown to Florence, Italy to perform at an annual Gucci Timepieces & Jewelry business conference. Duribe and Oulton, were joined by fellow sponsored students: vocalist Baker Mukasa; saxophonist and pianist Kwabena Boateng; songwriter Meg Diamond; drummer Stephen Asamoah-Duah; singer and clarinet player Katurah Morrish; singer and songwriter Dieu Mercy; singer and songwriter Sian Kelly; and guitarist Mansur Brown. Many of the group had never been abroad before, let alone treated like royalty on a no-expense-

spared trip to meet and perform for hundreds of fashion brand executives. The confidence bestowed upon these young people from this support is astounding; all articulate their love of music with passion and flair. As Sahana admits, they have all dedicated many hours down at the Academy on Kimber Road. 'It pays off,' she says. 'When Quinn and Isaac returned home from the camp, they had made lasting friends and now communicate electronically, reinforcing connections to forge a network of music contacts across the world.' Oulton has also been awarded a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music, a prestigious offer, considering only two saxophonists each year across the globe will be accepted on the course. Duribe is also sky-rocketed, making the decision to study music at Leeds University College of Music on a composing course. 'The Gucci

Timepieces & Jewelry scholarship has enabled Isaac access to tuition with a top composer at the Academy. As well as Isaac's impressive composition skills, to join this course, he needs his Grade five in Music Theory. The World Heart Beat Music Academy is far from your average musty music school with an aged professor falling asleep on his or her trombone, as multifarious, lively musical styles waft from its corridors. The 51st State Band is alive and kicking, performing across London, with new recruits making marked progress thanks to practice sessions, access to free tuition and instrument hire at the Academy. Leading the Stardust People Jazz Improvising Choir, virtuoso vocalist, actor and composer Cleveland Watkiss inspires a new generation of singers. Children of all ages and abilities are welcome to join this group. A new reggae school offers children and young people the opportunity to learn an instrument through the groove and soul of this music genre. The only rigid policy that must be adhered to at the Academy is imbuing young people with an appreciation for greatness in culture, whatever musical form it takes. When it comes to learning music, Sahana works tirelessly, making every effort to remove any obstacles for her pupils. She has twice been recognised for her efforts with nominations at the Women of the Year Luncheon Awards (2010 and 2013), which sees women from all walks of life honoured for their unique contributions to society. 'We've been in our current space for two years now,' says Sahana and looks directly at me. 'With a figure approaching 250 students, we are bursting at the seams in our building. We're looking for a new space now and are about to open up a development board. Hopefully, some volunteers and trustees with social influence will join to help us. 'Ultimately, all of the work we do here is driven by the desire to see young people succeed. Every child is born with



The Gucci Interlocking G Music Fund Watch, £675, stockist number: 0845 674 8224



From right to left: Katurah Morrish, Baker Mukasa, Emeli Sandé, Kwabena Boateng and Sian Kelly



The lucky ten Academy students with Neil Portnow, president of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS)

“The one thing that all of humanity has in common is a heartbeat”

an inalienable connection to music, which begins with that most essential rhythm of life – the heartbeat, and we want to keep the pulse alive.’ ■

For more information on the World Heart Beat Music Academy, visit [worldheartbeat.org](http://worldheartbeat.org) or call 020 8870 3042 First floor, 58 Kimber Road, SW18 4PP ([guccitimeless.com](http://guccitimeless.com))