

# School of rock



The new music building at Solihull school offers its students professional-standard facilities. From wall panels that can adjust a room's acoustics, to the 'rock and percussion' rooms for budding student bands, the building has changed the school, says **Jayne Howarth**.

When Birmingham architects Malcolm Payne Group were tasked with designing a £3 million music centre at a West Midlands school, the brief was clear: it had to be the best in the region.

Solihull School, a co-educational independent school, is renowned for the music provision it delivers its 1000 pupils. The school wanted to consolidate its reputation for excellence with a showcase building with interior features that matched the promise of the exterior.

And Malcolm Payne, who founded the architects' practice, was keen to incorporate as many professional-standard music facilities as he could within the 'David Turnbull Music School' (named after a former head of music at the school).

"This is not just a school with a long and proud tradition. It has a very strong music department and that was our prime focus," he said.

"Although the independent education sector is an important part of our portfolio, this was the first dedicated music school we designed."

The music school, which opened in September, was completed in two years from initial instruction to hand-over. It provides a high-quality learning environment specifically designed to attract young musicians and prepare them for a musical career.

The scale and the materials of the building were chosen to reinforce the character of the campus, but the stand-alone building itself is bright, modern and airy and designed to maximise daylight in teaching areas.

Payne said he was keen to design a centre with a strong sense of identity. It is arranged on the axis of the existing theatre at the school, the radiating form echoing its curved façade to complete the performing arts quarter.

And the linear plan form means that, should the school decide to expand the teaching areas and recital space, it can do so easily along the axis of the atrium.

## Facilities

But it is the facilities within the dedicated centre that are most striking and show the school's commitment to music education and performing arts excellence.

The building comprises zoned teaching and practice and performance spaces arranged around a double-height atrium. It uses under-floor heating and thermostatically-controlled roof lights to prevent heat build-up.

This central circulation space functions as an 'internal street' - and provides reception, exhibition and social spaces.

"We wanted it to foster a vibrant, creative atmosphere. We believe we have achieved that very well," explained Malcolm.

"It is purposely paved to form a continuation of the surrounding paths. The most satisfying aspect of the occupied premises for me is the atmosphere that has been created in the 'street' running through the building.

"As we intended, the space has become a lively meeting place for music scholars across the range of ages and disciplines. It has the feeling of a small arts centre, with displays of paintings from the art department and theatre posters from the drama department."

The layout comprises a series of rectangular and non-rectangular spaces that are designed to enhance acoustic performance. An absorption panel system allows the acoustic properties of each space to be quickly 'tuned' to provide optimum conditions for every instrument.



Each space is acoustically insulated. The dedicated pupil rock band practice rooms and percussion spaces are physically separated from adjoining areas. The school's rockers are encouraged to explore their creativity just like the classical students – but, presumably to the relief of parents, not at home in the garage!

Because of the school's need for high-quality production, the design also incorporates a recording studio, which links to the atrium and other main spaces to allow performances to be networked.

And would-be composers have access to a fully-equipped ICT suite.

Stephen Perrins, head of music, said the new centre was built not a minute too soon.

"The governors decided that our pupils' enthusiasm for music had vastly outgrown its accommodation. There were not enough rooms for pupils to practise or for staff to teach in," he explained.

"The facilities for rehearsing the various orchestras/bands and choirs were insufficient and also had to serve as classrooms.

"It's wonderful to have three purpose-built classrooms, used just for that purpose.

"We have two rehearsal rooms, which means we can operate two different music groups simultaneously in light, spacious conditions.

"We are completely thrilled with this new facility – as are the pupils and parents. Rightly so - it has transformed how we deliver music throughout the school.



"It is stunning, spacious and light. We feel incredibly lucky to have these facilities."

"The school's facilities for music teaching and performance have been greatly expanded, increasing opportunities for pupils across the musical spectrum," said Payne.

Jayne Howarth is a freelance journalist who has written for several architecture publications.

