

At the ripe age of 11, I was mercilessly thrown into the deep end, also known as the brass section of the school orchestra, by none other than the musical legend Mr Byers. To be fair, he had kindly asked me if I wanted to join, however, I made the mistake of answering with a hesitant “yes?” knowing full well that I could barely play the baritone horn. I braved the dangerous waters of the first rehearsal, receiving snarky looks from the sixth-form boys who played the trombone. I thought it would be best if I resorted to air-playing my instrument until it was over. For fear of playing one wrong note, I played none. However, what I failed to realise at the time was that I was being challenged and encouraged, regardless of my ability, to harness my potential. Camden’s continued dedication to providing all of its students with equal opportunities, no matter one’s background, epitomises the beautiful legacy our Founder, Frances Mary Buss, left behind.

Education was at the forefront of Miss Buss’ life from a very early age. In her teens, she began working at the small private school her mother opened in Kentish town, balancing this with attending evening classes to ensure she received sufficient schooling. However, access to education for women was considerably limited, usually taking place in homes of the wealthy under the guidance of governesses whose role was to equip young women with the desired qualities and ‘accomplishments’ of a wife, reducing their existence to being subservient to their husbands. Such accomplishments included playing the piano, singing and flower-arranging.

Frances understood the value of female power. She saw women as capable, as intelligent, as interesting, and most of all, as human, deserving of every right to achieve greatness. Thus, she brought Camden School for Girls to life in 1871, a school to prepare girls (in her words) ‘for any position in life which they may be called upon to occupy’.

Women were finally given the space to excel, many graduating with arts, science, law and music qualifications and going on to attend universities, art schools and music conservatoires. Music was no longer reserved for the entertainment of one’s husband, but became an available career opportunity for women, opening doors to which they previously had no key, allowing them to contribute significantly to the development of various musical cultures over the years.

Ms Buss is my rockstar and her stage is this school. Although she wasn’t a Freddie Mercury, wowing the audience with a flamboyant persona, she created a space for all of us to share, to dream, and to be happy. Although I wouldn’t be surprised if she

could belt Bohemian Rhapsody using a four-octave vocal range. She was clearly a skilled woman.

Her incredible fearlessness in fighting for women against all odds is the essence of the highly infectious effervescent Camden spirit. A CSG student is brave and bold, but most importantly, passionate. Miss Buss' life's work and utter devotion to girls' education proves to every woman in this room that you can take your hopes and ambitions by the hand and run as far and as fast with them as you desire.

Camden is the place where I fell in love with music.

Here, I have witnessed countless outstanding performances - my peers never cease to amaze and inspire me. Here, I have been encouraged to sing my heart out in every musical, most recently as Bruce Bogtrotter from Matilda, eating a nauseating amount of chocolate cake in the process. Here, I have been empowered to be a girl who bashes the drums as hard and loud as I want, allowing me to be the biggest version of myself.

Camden's exuberance lies not only within the music we create but in everything that we do.

It is the school that never sleeps. I'd like to think Francis Mary Buss is with us every Pink Day, at the head of the conga, marching toward achieving life-changing support for Breast Cancer patients. I'd like to think she's an active member of the Queer Club, Debate Club, and Feminist Society, championing necessary social change and never giving up on the fight for equality in every regard. I'd like to think she's sitting in the school orchestra, actually playing her instrument unlike my timid Year 7 self. I want her to see how far we've run with her hopes and dreams.

CSG has placed a host of incredible, strong-willed and independent female musicians on the map, challenging the historically male-dominated musical landscapes of the world. The accomplished jazz saxophonist and composer Nubya Garcia began her secondary education here. She is the recipient of numerous accolades including 2 Jazz FM awards, has performed at the BBC Proms and has headlined sell-out shows at the renowned Ronnie Scott's Jazz club.

I will never forget the feeling of attending one of her concerts and shouting out with my friends from the audience "love from Camden school for girls!". She was stunned and replied with an excited "no way!".

Ellen Rowsell, the lead singer of the rock band 'Wolf Alice', came to Camden. She named her band after an Angela Carter short story she was studying whilst here at CSG. Her band has received a Mercury Prize, and a Brit award and has been nominated for a grammy.

Regardless of the awards and fame they've received, what is most important is that these women have brought people from all walks of life together, unified in their shared love of music.

Dame Athene Donald, the esteemed physicist and professor of experimental physics at the university of Cambridge summarises her musical experience at CSG in the wonderful quote: "I found that the musical life gave me my sense of community".

The "headline" of actor and screenwriter Dame Emma Thompson's experience at CSG was (in her words) the "confidence in her voice" the school had provided as "no one told [her] to shut up or that [she] was stupid".

The lives and achievements of these remarkable women are a testament to the ethos of our school and undoubtedly fulfil every wish Miss Buss had for future generations of CSG students.

I am so lucky and grateful to have grown up around such inspiring women in a climate where our ambitions are not repressed but fostered, where we are encouraged and empowered to use our voices to advocate for ourselves, our peers and those in need and where we have learnt what it means to fall in love with something and devote our life's energies and efforts to it, simply because we must.

Standing here, I see the next Nubya Garcias, the next Athene Donalds and the next Emma Thompsons in front of me, ready to show your brilliance to the world.

There is nothing too small or too big that we cannot achieve, nothing too feminine or unfeminine. Camden has paved our varied paths. Femininity is what you make it - it comes from within.

Frances Mary Buss created a space where women could be themselves, leaving "class distinctions" outside the classroom door. Our student body has diversified extremely over the years, as a co-educational sixth form was introduced in the 70s where boys, girls and people of all genders can flourish into strong, young adults. I

am sure that Frances would be proud to know that her pioneering work has reached and changed the lives of so many.

I want to thank all mothers, who have nurtured us and given us strength in times of struggle.

To my mother, thank you for teaching me what it means to be driven, for encouraging all my creative endeavours and for telling me to never give up on what I love. I do promise I'll try my best to stop playing the drums at some ungodly hour of the night.

Thank you to Francis Mary Buss, a “universal mother”, who, after 152 years of establishing CSG as an institution, continues to tend to the needs of her students, breaking off a piece of her fighting spirit for every person who walks through our gates.

To all teachers, thank you for devoting so much of your time to ensuring an outstanding education for everyone. Thank you to my music teachers for always pushing me, inspiring me and encouraging my love of music.

And to my Camden family, I am forever indebted to you for gifting me with my wonderful womanhood.

Music is the language of the heart, and my heart lies in Camden.

Though I'll soon be leaving, I will never forget that my journey started here, as a tiny Year 7 always desperately trying to grab an empty practice room at lunchtime.

Thank you.

Biba McCrindle