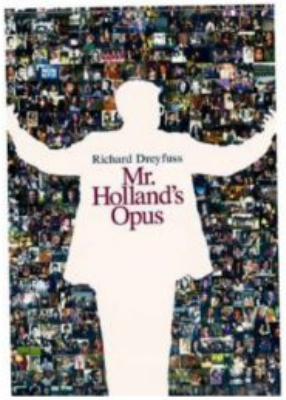


Making dreams come true: a student at Watertown Middle School in Massachusetts opens the case of his new Mr Holland's Opus Foundation-granted saxophone, 2024

Thank you, Mr Holland...

As the Mr Holland's Opus Foundation approaches its 30th birthday, Michael Beek explores the charity's impact and the composer behind it



At the end of the film *Mr. Holland's Opus*, Glenn Holland (Richard Dreyfuss), an elementary school music teacher for 30 years, finds his subject cut from the curriculum along with the rest of the arts programme. Holland never wanted to be a teacher – he wanted to compose but, to paraphrase John Lennon, life happened while he was making other plans. He grows to love his role, though, and inspires generations to appreciate and play music. While the audience wipes its tears as Mr Holland is given an emotional farewell – including a surprise performance of the symphony he's been working on for decades but has never heard – it can rest in the knowledge that this is fiction. But then again...

The provision for music education in American schools in the early-to-mid-1990s really was under threat; arts programmes were being reduced and even eliminated as budgets tightened at both state and local levels. Music was fast becoming a 'nice to have', a neglected corner of the curriculum, and the late composer Michael Kamen witnessed it first-hand.

Kamen was working on the soundtrack for *Mr. Holland's Opus* when he paid a visit to his old school in New York; while there, a place of many happy memories, he was shown a cupboard full of broken instruments and it had an impact.





Playing together: (above) students at Longfellow Elementary School, California, show off their Foundation violins, 2019; (above right) a student at Donelson Middle School, Tennessee, unwraps his trombone, 2024; (right) *Mr. Holland's Opus* star Richard Dreyfuss in Los Angeles, 1996

COURTESY OF THE MR HOLLAND'S OPUS FOUNDATION; GETTY

'They said they were all the instruments that they used to have available for kids and now they couldn't afford to repair them,' explains Kamen's daughter Zoe. 'For them not to be able to provide instruments for the kids really hit him, and I remember that was all he could talk about and what occupied his mind. He realised there was one simple thing that could be done: if they could get instruments into the hands of kids, then that would enable the music programmes to continue running. And then he quickly realised that the way to support it was to support the teachers themselves.'

And so, the germ of an idea was born, and the Mr Holland's Opus Foundation was the result. After that visit to New York, Kamen didn't hang about. Tricia Williams, CEO of the Foundation, picks up the story: 'He told his manager that he wanted to create a charitable organisation. His manager replied, "What are you talking about? We don't know what we're doing!" But they pulled it off and we were incorporated in 1996!'

Kamen was simply following his heart, and he called on anyone and everyone he had ever worked with to help him realise his dream, raise money and awareness. This included *Mr. Holland's Opus* director Stephen Herek, leading man Richard Dreyfuss and screenwriter Patrick Sheane Duncan. Many might have thought him nuts, but for his family it wasn't a surprise.

'Dad did a lot of crazy things,' recalls Zoe. 'That was a feature of my childhood, that he had ideas about who he could pull together and what he could create. I think that was his way of living. For me watching him it was like, "Of course that's what he's going to do..." So, there was no question, but there was definitely a sense of watching him struggle through it, becomming more and more driven.



Kamen called upon everyone he had ever worked with to help him realise his dream, including *Mr. Holland* director Stephen Herek and leading man Richard Dreyfuss

'He did movies after that, and he did some projects that he loved the music for, but behind it all was "try and get the Foundation up and running". And it felt like there was another child, honestly; he was away a lot, travelling for work, but that upped the ante for him.'

Kamen really threw himself into the Foundation, doing whatever he could, from visiting schools in person to arranging helicopter drops of instruments to schools in remote parts of the country. His passion was infectious; that, and the Hollywood connection, made all the difference, as Tricia Williams explains: 'The beauty of this organisation is that everyone who has been involved in it, from our founder Michael to the group of people he brought in at the very beginning, was so determined and passionate. You talk about passion projects – this is one of them, and it could have been just that, a project. But I think the movie really positioned the organisation, because it was created on the heels of it; I think the public at large thought that movie was the little engine that could. It is what connected the idea of music in schools to the public, so we slowly started getting donations, – $10, $50 – and it meant the world... and it still does.'

Almost 30 years on, the Mr Holland's Opus Foundation is still going strong, and has developed its mission. Since it began, it has



Mixing with the stars: Kamen with Annie Lennox in London, 2002

Michael Kamen

From Rock to Robin Hood

Michael Kamen was a New Yorker but ultimately made his life and career in London. His death from a heart attack in 2003, at the age of just 55, deprived the world of an artist who poured himself into everything he wrote and loved, and who brought everyone around him along for the ride.

Before he scored some of the biggest films of the 1980s and '90s, the Juilliard-trained composer played the oboe, co-founded The New York Rock & Roll Ensemble and honed his craft as an arranger for some of the world's biggest rock and pop acts. Indeed, he worked closely with Pink Floyd and went on to perform with both Roger Waters and David Gilmour after the band split. Other collaborators included Queen, Eurythmics and Kate Bush, and while orchestral music beckoned (he wrote 11 ballet scores), Kamen never really forgot his rock roots. His 1990 Concerto for Electric Guitar was premiered by Eric Clapton and he worked with Metallica on their memorable *S&M* (Symphony & Metallica) live album in 1999.

On screen, Kamen left an indelible mark, from the *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* films and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* to *Band of Brothers* and *Brazil*.



Let's make some noise: students at Wheatley Education Campus thank the Mr Holland's Opus Foundation, 2013

donated over $37m worth of instruments to schools across the US and impacted the lives of over half-a-million children. That now includes disaster relief work, replacing instruments lost to hurricanes and wildfires. Most of the instruments are brand new, provided at discounted rates to help funds go further. The Foundation also occasionally calls for used instrument donations – a key aspect of its early work. These are taken to a Los Angeles repair shop, made famous in the Oscar-winning short 2023 documentary called *The Last Repair Shop*. But Kamen's original aim remains at the core of what the Foundation is about.

'The heartbeat of everything we do is to place instruments into the hands of students who are economically disadvantaged, who cannot afford to rent or purchase their own instrument,' says Williams. 'We place them in their hands, but we do it through schools, because we are big believers that kids should have access to in-school music education.

'The schools that we donate the instruments to typically have an annual music budget of up to $5,000 – but sometimes there is no budget,' she continues. 'To put that into perspective, a student-model tuba starts at $3,000. That budget has to pay for music stands, chairs, method books, transportation, uniforms, clinicians, instrument repairs and so much more. Unfortunately, the need is greater than what the country has been able to facilitate; there just isn't funding for it. So that's why we exist.'

Working directly with schools means the Foundation can not only get much-needed equipment to music departments with over-stretched budgets and programmes in need of support, they can also get a better understanding of the barriers that might exist for children who want to participate but can't.

'It may be that students of colour are underrepresented in music and arts enrolment; it may be teachers are not confident in recruiting special education students into their programme,' says Williams. 'Or it may be that they don't have enough equipment, that they don't have the proper training, or the schedules are conflicting – for example, English remediation reading class may take place at the same time as the music class and therefore those students can't participate.'

In 2026, the kind of threat faced by Mr Holland's music programme in the film is largely a thing of the past; indeed, most US schools offer



Important lessons: Richard Dreyfuss as Glenn Holland in 1995's *Mr. Holland's Opus*; (below) composer Michael Kamen

a music programme, as well as opportunities to play in bands and orchestras. But that doesn't paint the full picture and there is a problem hiding in plain sight that the Mr Holland's Opus Foundation is keen to address. 'The story that hasn't been told publicly is that just because a music programme exists, doesn't mean that every student who wants to access it can do so. Unfortunately, those student populations tend to be our low-income, our English-language learners, our students of colour, or our special education kids. So that is, I think, the current-day story that needs to be shared a little louder for those in the back.'

In the UK it feels as if we are experiencing something akin to what was happening in the US in the 1990s, with music education provision in school curricula seemingly being pushed further and further down the list of priorities. Could something like the Mr Holland's Opus Foundation work on this side of the Atlantic? Actually, it's something Michael Kamen explored, as Zoe Kamen remembers: 'Dad really did try to bring the Mr Holland's Opus Foundation to the UK. He was really involved, but because of the government systems it didn't work, he couldn't just bring the model

COURTESY OF THE MR HOLLAND'S OPUS FOUNDATION (2)(7)



> 'Adding music to a child's life is like watering a flower. It's imperative that we keep music education alive and well'

straight over. He started to work with the music education consortium and the Labour Party at the time. That was one of his frustrations, that he couldn't do it, because he thought that it needed to happen.'

It makes you wonder whether the landscape might have been different in the UK today had Kamen been successful. The Foundation's existence 30 years after he stared into that school cupboard of broken instruments proves that it's worth dreaming big, and the team are reminded of their founder's original vision every day.

'When you walk into our office in Los Angeles, the first thing you see on the wall is this beautiful quote by Michael in the very first meeting of creating this Foundation,' shares Tricia Williams. 'It says, "Adding music to a child's life is like watering a flower. Music makes a child grow in so many ways, that it is absolutely imperative that we keep music education programmes alive and well in this country." It's in his handwriting. We see it every day.'

And the Foundation is doing just that; American children have a lot to thank Mr Holland, and Mr Kamen, for.

For more information on the Mr Holland's Opus Foundation, visit mhopus.org.