

GO IT ALONE

Soloist's virtuoso performance

Gráinne Gilmore meets a young businesswoman in perfect tune with her clients

MILLIONS of people tickle the ivories for fun, but Sarah Balfour has turned her love of the piano into a flourishing business. Three years ago she set up Music By Arrangement (MBA), a music agency and events management company.

The 31-year-old Londoner says that the idea for the busi-

ness came while she was working as a freelance pianist. "I started out as a classical concert pianist, performing on numerous television programmes including *Song of Peace*, accompanying stars such as Charlotte Church. But clients increasingly asked me if I could find other musicians

for them. The gap in the market became very apparent. It was easy to find a music agency, but what clients really wanted was an agency that could be depended upon to supply only the highest-quality musicians."

Attracting the very best and most talented musicians on to the books of a new agency is not easy, but Sarah was determined to set herself apart from music agencies she had worked with in the past.

"As a soloist, I was always frustrated with the selfish, greedy and sometimes dishonest behaviour of most of the musical agents who represented me," she says. "I realised that if I paid my artists on time and worked hard to secure work for them without being greedy with the commission I took, then I would be a breath of fresh air."

Her method worked and the agency now has 500 artists on its books. "Frankly, MBA would not have been able to achieve the success it has, in the time it has, if we didn't have a well-earned reputation in the musical performer community for 'doing right' by the artists we use," she says.

The wide range of musicians retained by MBA means that Sarah can supply every kind of act from a piano soloist to a Caribbean steel band or a 60-piece orchestra. She also counts the world's most famous balalaika player among her artists.

Her very first clients were a couple who wanted a string quartet for their wedding day. She has since supplied music corporate clients to her books. Last week she started work for a large company that wants to stage an 18th-century evening for 1,000 people.

"I like to have as long as possible to organise events," she says. "I recently agreed to organise a wedding next summer, but I can pull events together quickly, too. I have three months to organise the 18th-century evening."

However, the entrepreneur

for dozens of couples, including the knot. But she clinched some longer-term contracts, supplying pianists for top London hotels such as the Renaissance Charterhouse Court Hotel in Holborn.

The company accounts reflect this booming trade. MBA turned over £200,000 last year and is on course for at least £250,000 this year.

Sarah says that one of the secrets of her success has been her determination to work hard after all the musicians on her books — a lesson she learned the hard way. But the ethos of the company has also helped it to expand.

Clients were impressed with the quality of musicians and asked Sarah to arrange other aspects of their parties. "At an investment banker's 30th birthday party, we supplied country and western musical performers. But I also asked to supply other country-themed entertainment. I found some professional dancers, ordered period outfits and made sure that there were plenty of red-checkered table cloths."

Sarah immediately responded to the demand for party planning. Within days, MBA was offering full event management services. This side of business has flourished in the past year and themed parties are a speciality.

She organised a surprise James Bond party for 50 people at a luxury hotel in Berkshire and a Moulin Rouge-themed evening. The parties were for private clients but she has since added social events to her books. She has also turned her hand to a more rock'n'roll venture. In April she started to manage a static, a covers band, which often plays at parties organised by MBA. Sarah says the partnership that has worked well. "They have had a real impact on my business and have had a real impact on theirs," she says.

■ MBA: 020-7794 6688, www.musicbyarrangement.co.uk

THE TIMES SATURDAY MARCH 4 2006

ANDREW DUNSMORE/PICTURE PARTNERSHIP



Special agent: Sarah Balfour has 500 artists on her books

Expert analysis: Doug Richard



"Sarah has got off to a particularly good start with her business. She has created a high-quality brand, a family of related services, her website is very well designed and the numbers reflect a clear understanding of cost control. I have to say that I am quite impressed."

"Her challenge now, however, will be to find ways to market the business effectively without incurring unreasonable expense. She will certainly attract clients through word of mouth,

but she should be careful to avoid expensive marketing or advertising. It would be better to stick with public relations-related activity."

"Sarah's ability to drive recognition will govern her growth, while her creativity in addressing that issue will probably determine her ultimate success. But so far she has done extremely well."

■ Doug Richard, who has appeared in the past two series of *Dragons' Den* on BBC Two, is the founder and chairman of Library House, a consultancy that discovers and monitors innovative new companies.

Sarah's response

"I am extremely encouraged by Doug's comments. I also have come to the same conclusion as him regarding marketing expenses. In our first couple of years of trading, most new business has been generated by word of mouth, rather than in response to a specific advertisement."

"What I have found is that if you create a product of genuine quality and deliver a service that people know they can rely on, word quickly spreads. Quality, creativity and reliability will always be our focus."

■ For the latest small business news, visit www.timesonline.co.uk/enterprise.