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Composer Mark-Anthony Turnage has swapped the classical music world for a category B jail as he premieres a work written and performed with prisoners.

The acclaimed composer said the project was "really changing people and it's incredibly important work".

It is one of 20 new pieces of music commissioned for the Cultural Olympiad.

But he described the Cultural Olympiad, a national arts festival running parallel to the London 2012 Olympic Games, as "a bit of tokenism".

Turnage made his name with the opera *Greek* and staged an opera based on the life of the late model Anna Nicole-Smith at the Royal Opera House in London last year.

He has worked with 15 inmates on the piece, titled *Beyond This*, which will get its world premiere in front of fellow prisoners in the jail's education wing.

"It's very different from my normal work so it is quite a challenge for me," Turnage said. "Usually when I collaborate I'm working with people that are highly trained musicians so it's a very different thing."



The prisoners helped write the four movements, including reggae and a rap song delivered by one of the inmates and featuring a female prison officer on backing vocals.

"We work on it together and it's a true collaboration," he said. "That's where it gets quite emotional because it's a really nice bunch of guys.

"You just don't know what's lurking in prison. Maybe people haven't had the confidence or the background to develop themselves. It's a shame.

"But that's what it's all about - people sometimes come out of their shell. Music can be really powerful in that way. I've got no patience with people who say it's just fun - it's educational as well."

One of the prisoners, a drummer and bass guitarist who can be only identified as Barry, said: "It achieves teamwork and it's something different from what we're doing normally in prison. Good teambuilding.

"It's a good opportunity - it's a shame to have to come to prison to have to work with Mark Turnage."

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Start Quote

Beyond This is among the 12-minute compositions commissioned for the PRS For Music Foundation's New Music 20x12 project as part of the Cultural Olympiad.

The others include a work in which the National Youth Orchestra abandoned their instruments and made music by clapping and slapping themselves.

There is also one based around the sounds and rhythms of table tennis and a chamber opera about the Czech runner Emil Zatopek.

But asked about the Cultural Olympiad, Turnage said the arts were not taken seriously enough in the UK.

"I'm a big sports fan but unfortunately I think art in this country is relegated to second position," he said.

"Having worked a lot in America and Germany and places like that, I don't see a seriousness about culture [in Britain] that I see in some other countries and that makes me very sad.

"So I think it's a bit of tokenism I'm afraid if I'm being honest."

Beyond This has also been written in conjunction with Music In Prisons, a charity that runs creative projects in jails in order to help rehabilitation.

New skills

Music In Prisons artistic director Sara Lee said: "It demands a huge amount of teamwork - listening, communication, understanding, and also respect for the people you're working with.

"So they're all very useful skills as well as music that help them forge ahead. It's definitely about equipping people with skills."

The 900 inmates at HMP Lowdham Grange are serving a minimum of four years each, with one third serving indeterminate sentences, meaning they must serve a minimum term and are then only released if they are not deemed to pose a threat to the community.

Prison director Gareth Sands said music was among a number of activities the inmates take part in. "We see changes in them and music is part of that driver for change," he said.

Javed Khan, chief executive of the charity Victim Support, said victims of crime wanted to see criminals stop reoffending.

"Music and the arts can play a part in their rehabilitation and we hope the Turnage project will be successful in helping prisoners raise their aspirations so they don't return to a life of crime," he said.

Ian Young - BBC