The Millfield Camerata was launched in 2009. The vision of Director of Music Julian Jensen, its aim was to create a specialist concert choir showcasing the school’s brightest singing talent. More than 80 pupils auditioned for the 26 available places, and three years later the Camerata is in full voice.

The Camerata – the word means ‘a small group, working together’ – won the Best Programme Prize at the 2011 Berlin International Choral Festival.

The group’s appearance at the festival is an example of the regular opportunities members have to perform at the highest level, as part of their musical education and development. The Camerata has travelled widely to hear top choirs and vocalists, and has performed in competitions and concert halls throughout the world. The members have formed strong friendships alongside musical connections.

Lower Sixth pupil Alec Poore initially declined joining the Camerata due to his GCSE revision. “I didn’t think I had the time, but now I wish I’d signed up from the beginning” he says. “It’s awesome.”

Alec, a National Youth Theatre member who hopes to use his Camerata experience as a platform for a career in musical theatre, had never had a singing lesson until last term, but his natural ability was able to flourish in the supportive environment of the Camerata.

He believes being a member of the group has improved his listening skills. “Because it is so small there is less room for mistake.
You are relying on each other and get to know everyone’s voices really well. We learn a lot from each other.”

Julian believes the choir allows singers recognition not only as individuals but as a group; their concerts are occasions to celebrate Millfield’s musical talent.

Alec reinforces this view; enthusiastically describing the ‘team spirit’ within the Camerata. “We obviously practice a lot together, but we also spend time together socially. We’ll go out for meals, and spend lots of time travelling for concerts and competitions.”

Although the limited places on the Camerata are auditioned for, Alec says the relationship with the main choir remains positive. “Everyone wants to be in the Camerata, that is true, but the support for the Camerata from the other members of the choir is great, and we really enjoy performing together.”

The vibe of teamwork and collaboration is reflected in the Camerata’s approach to picking music. Members will choose from a selection suggested by Julian, or bring in their own pieces. The winning song from the annual Millfield house song competition is added to the Camerata repertoire, and the country standard That Lonesome Road, by James Taylor, has become the Camerata anthem, regularly sung on coach trips and other journeys as well as in concert. The result is a refreshing mix of styles and moods during performances.

The Camerata was what brought Year 10 pupil Caitlin Anderson to Millfield. A music scholar, currently preparing for her Grade 8 singing exam and Grade 6 saxophone, Caitlin was impressed by the variety of opportunities that Millfield offered, and the Camerata represented the ideal environment for her to pursue her personal talent.

Julian is keen to build on the Camerata’s early success and plans are developing for further performance opportunities. In the next academic year the group will give concerts in Cambridge, Amsterdam and Brussels, but the highlight looks set to be the performance of a new commission by Old Millfieldian Stewart Copeland at the Cadogan Hall in London.

Stewart has forged a highly successful career as a composer since his group The Police disbanded. His bespoke composition for the Camerata will receive its world premiere in March 2013 at a special concert at the Cadogan Hall in London, home to the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.
Caitlin’s introduction to singing began at 12, in the Haddo youth choir in Scotland. She was handed a main role in an opera production, and has not looked back since. Now living in Oman, her vocal talents saw her sing at a welcoming ceremony for the Queen at the British Ambassador’s house.

Caitlin has her sights set on a career as an opera singer, and is looking to line up youth opera workshops during her summer holidays.

Although her future may lie as a soloist, Caitlin says the Camerata introduced her to new aspects of singing. “It has taught me how to sing in a group. It is completely different; the techniques are different, the textures are different.

“You feel like a real team. When Mr Jensen takes us all off a note together it is really exciting – it feels amazing when you get a song right.”

Another example of the Camerata’s ability to identify and nurture potential is Henry Tait-Harris. The bass was unable to read music when he first joined the group, but rather than restrict him, Julian saw this as an opportunity to equip a natural musician with further skills to complement his deft ear and singing talent.

The choir has greatly benefited from exposure to diverse talent. Romero’s version of Ave Maria is often sung by the group; but hearing the multi award-winning Venezuelan choir Venneziola perform it inspired the Camerata to greater heights.

In spring 2011 the choir completed a highly successful tour to Berlin by bringing home the award for Best Programme from the Berlin International Choral Festival. The group was invited to represent the United Kingdom at the festival, held at the Kammermusiksaal of the world-renowned Berlin Philharmonic Hall. The Millfield singers were also privileged to perform at the St Matthias Catholic Church, and on the Sunday morning sang as part of the service in the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. The final event of the marathon weekend was a complete performance of Vivaldi’s Gloria at the Memorial church, one of the most famous postwar landmarks in the city, to a very appreciative audience.

“That was a wonderful achievement for the Camerata,” says Julian. “Especially given that we were the only student choir, competing against very experienced adult and university choirs from around the world.”

Other concerts abroad have included several in New York during the Camerata’s December trip, where they performed at St Patrick’s Cathedral, St Paul the Apostle and Madison Avenue Sculpture Garden.

Back home, regular recitals at school complement visits to Wells Cathedral for concerts and services. The second annual Joint Choral Concert, with choirs from the Prep and Senior School, was another success and a demonstration of the strong links throughout the Millfield music community.

Recently the pupils were treated to a masterclass by a capella group Voces8, before an evening concert for pupils and staff. Leader of Voces8, Paul Smith, was impressed: “They are an extremely responsive choir,” he said. Conducting them is like driving a finely-tuned Porsche.”

Alec Poore (Upper Sixth) and Caitlin Anderson (Year 10) have different aspirations for their vocal talents but both have benefitted from singing with the Camerata.