

# Music for a changing world

Yesterday afternoon I was sitting with a group of colleagues playing the Gamelan, an Indonesian percussion orchestra. It was our first encounter with these instruments - for some their first experience of participating in music since they were at school.

What started as ten individuals nervously picking up beaters and cautiously eyeing their allotted instruments, and each other, ended with a group which was engrossed in a shared activity, working together to create music, and listening to each other's contribution.

As well as achieving a performance, the group got a chance to experience a situation where everyone's contribution was valued, no matter what their place in the particular workplace hierarchy, or their particular skills and abilities. It produced a sense of shared experience and team spirit and, most importantly, it gave people the opportunity to create music - something that many people simply don't know how to do.

Music used to be a part of everyone's everyday life, before it was hijacked as a commodity and made out to be something that only talented people do. Community music helps to place music into the hands of everyone by creating opportunities to enjoy active and creative participation. This can involve musicians working in any musical discipline - bhangra, classical, indie, jazz, jungle, folk, techno - with groups of people from any type of community and with a range of abilities and disabilities.

Sound Sense is the national development agency for community music, and members include not only musicians but people working in education, multi-cultural arts, organisations for disabled people, health and social services, youth services and prison and probation services.

As well as providing magazines, newsletters and other publications, information and advice, conferences and

training events, Sound Sense is working in a variety of ways to promote the value of community music and to develop the professional practice.

In the last 18 months, Sound Sense's work has developed rapidly, due to an A4E lottery grant, with a series of training events across the country, articles in various professional magazines, a partnership with a library service, an agreement with the British Library to include recordings of community music in the National Sound Archive, a guide to courses and a leaflet about community music. Sound Sense has also been lobbying government at all levels, and submitting a number of responses to Government papers.

As a result, the constituency for community music is expanding and the timing couldn't be better. Policy-makers in the arts, health, social welfare, education, and community development are recognising the value of creating partnerships between different sectors as well as involving people more actively in how their communities are run.

In health, the development of a broader, holistic approach which promotes healthy living and quality of life, physical and mental well-being and personal responsibility for health offers great potential for community artists. Community musicians can and do work with health promotion agencies to help people to explore issues such as drug abuse, heart disease, aids prevention; run workshops in hospitals to improve patients' quality of life and create a stimulating environment; and work in centres with sufferers and survivors of mental illness.

Many people feel that curriculum-based learning activities aren't the best place to foster the musical development of young people, and that working with community musicians outside the academic curriculum creates a richer musical environment for young people, so there are initiatives to encourage learning out of school.

**Anita Holford reports on Sound Sense, a growing initiative for community music**

Community music can also be particularly effective with people for whom traditional routes to learning or to making music are not available. Playing and creating music is in itself valid as both a creative and a learning activity and has a whole bundle of associated benefits - helping in building confidence and self-esteem, improving social and learning skills, encouraging self-determination.

A final example is a group of performers taking the public and the media by storm. You've probably seen them - they're the ones called STOMP who bang and slap dustbin lids, wire fences, parts of their bodies, boxes, in fact anything they can get their hands on. People go to see them expecting a performance which they will sit in on, watch, listen to, and enjoy. But what happens is that the performers play with the noises of everyday objects and everyday activities - sweeping the floor, flicking a lighter, rustling a newspaper - and the audience can contribute, making noises with hands, fingers, feet. The result is that the audience leave clicking their fingers, tapping their toes and being just a bit more aware of how musical everyday life can be.

Music isn't something that should be marginalised and only experienced vicariously through record industry outputs or the broadcast media. We all have the capacity to participate in music and it need only take a slight change in attitude and someone to encourage and help us for all of us to discover just how musical we can be.

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