

Working as an Artist in a Community: Joy of Sound

Background

The music community I worked with was called Joy Of Sound. Joy of Sound is a community based around music accessibility, and it aims to:

- Promote non-verbal communication
- Encourage improved mental health and wellbeing
- Build self confidence
- Create a joyful, non-judgemental space for individual creativity and equal participation
- Provide new opportunities for learning and career development.

(Joy of Sound, undated)

Joy of Sound was founded in 2000 by William Longden. The inspiration came from working with someone with multiple learning difficulties, and seeing how having an instrument suited for his specific needs created a musical connection, the group was founded. There are now a number of bespoke instruments in their collection, such as the original guitar designed at the beginning of the project, as well as a wheelchair presentable marimba. There are also many non purpose built instruments as well. Joy of Sound has grown to several locations in London.

My interest in the group grew from the purpose built instruments. Having been involved in guitar luthiery and setup, it interested me to see a completely different

approach to traditional/popular instrument setup. The idea of there not being a single best kind of instrument setup intrigued me.

What is community music?

Community music is discussed in Veblen, K. and Olsson, B. 2002. Community music: Toward an international overview, with them saying that community music programs are “often based on the premise that everyone has the right and ability to make and create music.”

To be classed a community music activity, it needs to have

- Emphasis on a variety and diversity of musics that reflect and enrich the cultural life of the community and of the participants
- Active participation in music-making of all kinds (performing, improvising and creating)
- Development of active musical knowing (including verbal musical knowledge where appropriate)
- Multiple learner/teacher relationships and processes
- Commitment to lifelong musical learning and access for all members of the community
- Awareness of the need to include disenfranchised and disadvantaged individuals or groups
- Recognition that participants' social and personal growth are as important as their musical growth
- Belief in the value and use of music to foster inter-cultural acceptance and understanding

- Respect for the cultural property of a given community and acknowledgment of both individual and group ownership of musics
- On-going commitment to accountability through regular and diverse assessment and evaluation procedures
- Fostering of personal delight and confidence in individual creativity
- Flexible teaching, learning and facilitation modes (oral, notational, holistic, experiential, analytic)
- Excellence/quality in both the processes and products of music-making relative to individual goals of participants
- Honoring (sic) of origins and intents of specific musical practices

Joy of Sound's aims as described above focus on this approach and as a result the project has most of these features, including the variety and diversity of different types of music, and the active participation in music making of all kinds.

Approaches to community music, current and historical

The approach to this that was taken by Joy of Sound was closer to a modern anthropological approach than the traditional approach outlined below. The aim was to get involved with the community to understand how it functions, rather than just existing as an outsider perspective.

The community also fostered this approach, as they actively wanted me to get involved rather than sit on the sidelines. Access to this community is very welcoming, and any chances to help with assisting with the sessions is welcome as they are a charity.

The recording produced from this work is also a form of archiving a snapshot of the community music that is being created. This changes the music from being ephemeral to a recording. Historical examples of this approach include Alan Lomax (Lomax, 2002), who travelled the world getting recordings of folk music. Although he did a lot of work in the folk music revival. He was always a welcome outside participant rather than trying to get involved himself. This is the opposite to the workflow used with this project where being directly involved rather than being a passive observer was the aim.

More contemporary examples of archiving music include Dust to Digital. They focus on making old recordings on obsolete, degrading mediums - such as old shellac records - archived and available to the public via more modern mediums like CD and Digital, as well as vinyl boxsets (Dust to Digital, undated). One of the challenges of archiving shellac records was the lack of liner notes and information on the labels, so another challenge for Dust to Digital is to research the records, and give them context. Although there is a community of people that are dedicated to preserving these records, and there is research being done to find out the history of the records, there isn't any direct community interface due to those involved in making the original recordings being a historic community.

Another contemporary example of archiving is hate5six, who archives hardcore punk shows (Nazuk, 2018). Although the emphasis is on recording contemporary shows, there is also a focus on restoring older tapes of shows, as due to their age the magnetic tape they are recording on is degrading. This adds a time pressure to go

and digitise and archive the footage before it degrades too much to the point it can't get played and restored (CLIR, No Date). However, as the archiving focus is on contemporary shows rather than historic, there is much more interaction from the community. There is a voting system that lets people who financially support the project choose what order the videos come out in. This allows for much more cultural integration than the other examples that I listed, and I wanted to take inspiration from that. Compared to Dust to Digital, the archived live sets are also available publicly in full, without an income barrier, so the whole community, as well as newcomers can easily start getting involved, as it is an easy entry point.

In Time, Place Metaphor, Timothy Rice (2003) suggests instead of looking at x y z, tries to be subject centred, which this project also tried to do with its focus on what the subjects were saying specifically.

Working with Joy of Sound

The project involved visiting and talking to the participants/organisers to find their opinions on any of the differences between tailored and untailored instruments. It also involved getting their opinions on how disability affects the way they interact with instruments and how different designs can help with access to this. There was also a focus on listening to the participants rather than their carers as much as possible, as the project aimed to place an emphasis on the experiences of the participants rather than having it diluted through other people's interpretation. However, many of the participants had communication difficulties which made pure direct communication challenging in some circumstances.

The original aim was to compare and contrast the experiences of the participants' use of non tailored instruments, but a significant unexpected theme found throughout the interviews was the number of participants did not have much, if any, access to performing music before Joy of Sound. The assumption before the interviews was that there would have been failed attempts beforehand, but as it became clear that they had not had any access to music making before their involvement in Joy of Sound, the interview strategy needed to change. As the project developed Joy of Sound felt increasingly like the “ground zero” in relation to the participants’ musical exploration. As a result they had had no experience with conventional mass produced musical instruments and the tailored and modified instruments were the only ones that they had tried. It is hard to ask what changes someone would make to instrument design if they have no experience of conventional design to start with. Due to this, the direction of the project had to change to being about disabled people having places to access music making to begin with, and to help gain insight on the experiences of those dealing with disability within music, as it was more accurate to the communities experiences.

For the piece on this community, the artefact produced from the investigation aimed to be a linear piece inspired The Solitude Trilogy (Gould, 1967), and its process of overlapping different interviews. Creating a more abstract soundscape of the interviews and sounds of the sessions felt more appropriate for the situation, as even though some of the interviews were not as clear and concise, having them offset with the music from the session filled in the gaps and successfully captured the atmosphere of the sessions both in terms of the sounds made and the participants experiences and feelings.

The founder of Joy of Sound, William Longden, wrote a paper that explored how disabled and impaired co-designers could help design instruments, which the project wanted to explore as well. The first aim of the project was to examine how instruments could be specifically tailored to the users, with the users input, but there were roadblocks in the users experience, as well as bad assumptions that got in the way. There were also problems with the timescale needed to complete the project, so in future, it may be possible to have time to have follow up interviews, and possibly tests of original tailored instruments as well.

Despite Harry Partch claiming that no instrument manufacturer would be willing to push instrument design forward (Partch, 1946), there are always going to be hobbyists wanting to develop and change instrument design commercial success coming later. Examples of this include (floyd rose, gizmotron, sustainiac on guitar).

Technical Standards and Workflows

As the only records taken were audio, verbal consent was the only consent needed. The aim of the project was only to get audio for the piece, as it helps focus it on the audio rather than the visual parts of the experience, which felt appropriate as it is about the Joy of Sound.

One issue I had was the recording settings being not set to the highest quality, and it being done on my phone, due to a lack of equipment. The lack of quality could not be fixed, but was a restriction that was worked around in the piece, and gave it a specific quality to it that felt artistically useful. The recordings being made on the

phone didn't affect the directionality of the audio that much, and the phone ended up an acceptable alternative to a dedicated field recorder.

For the recordings of the main session, the phone that was being used as an audio recorder was placed behind the chair, with the aim to try and baffle the sound of what I was playing and include a more even representation of what was happening in the room. The phone placement also tried to pick up some of the ambient reverb of the location (a church) to help aid in glueing the recordings together. During the interviews, the phone's microphone was instead placed as close as possible to the participant being interviewed, as the aim was to get their responses as clear as possible. This also eliminated some of the, this time, unwanted reverberations that would have muddled the interview.

Summary

Joy of Sound is a good example of a contemporary community music project. As well as being a charity and supporting people in charitable ways, it also does foster a community outside of just the structure of the sessions.

The first aim of this project was to find out the difference between their experience of tailored and non tailored instruments. This ended up not being the right question to ask, as the participants I interviewed didn't have access to instruments before Joy of Sound. There were also communication barrier issues with some of the participants, which was understandable, considering that Joy of Sound has many participants with communication impediments. This conflicted with one of the aims of the project of

trying to focus on only what the participants were saying, echoing the NHS “no decision about me without me” philosophy (NHS, 2012).

Joy of Sound focuses on the audio rather than the visual side of art (as is in the name) so the focus for this project was on audio. I used the equipment available (my phone) to make the recordings which affected the quality but not the content.

Conclusion

For many people it can be hard to start exploring sound. One of the barriers to this is the design of conventional instruments. Joy of Sound shows that existing instruments can act as a barrier to even starting that exploration and how tailored instruments can make a huge difference to giving people access to music. In many cases even a small modification to existing instruments can make them more accessible. It is hard to break in to starting to explore sound without things that are tailored to your needs, and this wider accessibility and availability of modified instruments will only add to the diversity and quality of community music.

References

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