

## CONFERENCE REPORT

# Collaborative approaches to music and wellbeing research

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### CONFERENCE DETAILS

Collaborative approaches to music and wellbeing research  
Society for Education and Music Psychology Research (SEMPRE)  
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### INTRODUCTION

This two-day conference was an opportunity for academics, practitioners, musicians and students to come together and discuss the relationship between musical engagement and wellbeing. In their opening remarks conference directors Freya Bailes and Karen Burland, both music psychologists, provided some background information about their journey into this area of research. As academics at the University of Leeds, they were approached by the North Yorkshire Music Therapy Trust, who had received funding to explore the value of music therapy in Yorkshire communities. The initial purpose of this collaborative project was to distinguish the unique attributes of music therapy as compared to other forms of musical activity. However, as a result of mapping the range of interactive music making opportunities across the region, new connections between music therapists and community arts providers were identified. It was hoped that this conference would continue to explore the potential benefits arising from a collaborative approach to mapping therapeutic needs and provisions as well as fostering opportunities to share knowledge and practice.

### DAY ONE

The conference was a relatively small gathering but, as well as researchers from local universities, there were delegates from London, Croatia and even Australia. How the arts contribute to our health and wellbeing is a diverse topic that has gained increased recognition since the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing Inquiry Report (2017). The University of Leeds had brochures on

display advertising their new MA in Music and Wellbeing, and there were other academics present from York and Sheffield developing courses in this area. As a music therapist, I was slightly apprehensive about being one of a few practitioners present. However, at registration I spoke with a psychologist who shared his understanding of the conflicting views and expectations that can arise between research and practice, and I was impressed by his conviction that this area of research needs more interdisciplinary collaboration.

The sessions on this first day were divided into social enterprise, inclusive design, theories and models, and communities. The opening presentation was by Simon Glenister, director of Noise Solution, a one-to-one music mentoring program (see [www.noisesolution.org](http://www.noisesolution.org)). Simon described his Masters research project using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) to measure changes for young people in challenging circumstances over a ten-week period. The impetus for the research came from Simon's work with community arts organisations who were unsure how to measure their work. This sounded like a familiar struggle, but the intervention itself appeared very new: pairing vulnerable youngsters with music producers who then mentor them in the music making process. The journey into the studio was captured and then the highlights from each session could be shared on a purpose-built social media platform. Simon believes that the social media network is a crucial aspect of the intervention to help confirm the young person being good at something. The quantitative results presented showed a significant effect in the wellbeing of participants, although I think myself and others in the audience were also hoping to hear some of the finished recordings as meaningful arts-based evidence.

The presentations on inclusive design included a three-year collaboration between the University of Leeds and NHS hospitals to develop hearing aids to facilitate musical engagement for people with hearing loss. Alinka Greasley reflected on the benefits of academics working alongside practicing audiologists to gather and interpret audiometric data to understand how different profiles of hearing loss may affect musical experiences. After this, William Longden, a researcher at London Metropolitan University, presented his practice-based research exploring the production of bespoke musical instruments. He used case studies to illustrate an approach to co-designing instruments with severely impaired and marginalised people to promote social inclusion and participation. Some of the instruments were truly unique and beautifully made. More details about William's work and pictures of the instruments can be found via his charity's website: [www.joyofsound.org](http://www.joyofsound.org)

Later presentations challenged existing theories concerning arts engagement, with Urszula Tymoszek providing an epidemiological perspective. Joel Swaine presented an interesting psychological model of music and emotion using video examples of Diane Austin's vocal psychotherapy to suggest how emotional states can be regulated and transformed through singing. There was also an interesting historical talk from Helen English about how music-making can be a world-building resource for migrant communities, helping to forge new connections but also connect back to past lives and places. The first day ended with a session entitled *Collaborative Conversations*, where people were invited to meet with others who shared common research interests.

## DAY TWO

The second day began with the keynote from Katie Overy about music workshops with individuals living with severe dementia. The study involved a five-year collaboration between NHS Lothian and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra's outreach programme, culminating in a pilot trial to establish parameters for a future randomised controlled trial. There is an increasing scientific interest in the benefits that music can bring to individuals with dementia, but experimental research is still relatively scarce, as shown in the recent Cochrane review in this area (Van der Steen et al., 2017). The aims of this pilot study were to compare interactive versus passive music listening, identify rates of eligibility, recruitment and retention for participants on a dementia ward, and assess the intervention fidelity. The study used a between-group design with single blind allocation with a nested qualitative component (interviews with health professionals and musicians involved). The intervention involved eight weeks of live tailored music, and the outcome measure was the Cohen Mansfield Agitation Inventory. The results showed that there was no clear statistical effect, however attendance was a significant factor: of the seven participants only a few people attended all of the sessions (some only two or three times). Also, many unexpected issues came up, such as difficulties getting participants in the room with musicians, and not having enough chairs on the ward.

Despite the difficulties encountered, Overy supports the medical paradigm and randomised controlled trials as the best way of validating musical experience. As an accomplished researcher, it was interesting to hear her give such an honest account of the challenges that arose during this interdisciplinary project. One of her presentation slides highlighted the huge web of connections and collaborations necessary for the project to take place. As principle investigator, she initially placed herself at the centre of the map but acknowledged that perhaps the local care team or even the patient should take the central role. It was significant that after five years they are now considering another pilot to refine the protocol.

The other sessions on the second day focused on children and music, and Dawn Rose presented her recently published case study (Rose, Jones Bartoli & Heaton, 2018) showing how learning an instrument can benefit a child with learning and behavioural problems. This was followed by a session on musicians' wellbeing, with presentations exploring the effects of mindfulness on musicians (Anne-Marie Czajkowski), the role of leisure activities in the wellbeing of musicians (Nellinne Ranaweera), and the wellbeing effects derived from playing in brass bands (Victoria Williamson and Michael Bonshor). The last session focused on musical interventions, where Rizo Veloso described the use of carers' perspectives and semi-structured interviews to shed light on why music-based interventions might be effective for people with dementia. I also presented my own research exploring a collaborative music therapy and dance movement therapy group for older adults with dementia living in the community. This study involved developing a treatment manual based on a systematic review of current evidence (Lyons, Karkou, Roe, Meekums & Richards, 2018) and data collected included quantitative, qualitative and arts-based information.

The day finished with a panel-led discussion (led by Freya Bailes, Laura Festa, Katie Overy, Simon Procter and Karen Burland; see Photograph 1) that presented an opportunity to reflect on the conference and also to think ahead to the future. Some themes arising from discussion included the need to distinguish between wellbeing and everyday life, and whether music is always a good thing for

health. Social prescribing was mentioned, an initiative that provides GPs with a non-medical referral option that can operate alongside existing treatments to improve health and wellbeing for patients. Social prescribing extends music and arts to sports and films, and it was debated whether music is exclusively beneficial. Simon Procter, Director of Music Services for Nordoff Robbins, provided a useful sociological perspective, emphasising how the situational context helps determine the benefits of what music can offer. Music having social value was discussed, as was the importance of putting the patient (rather than the investigator) at the centre of the research. The nature of interdisciplinary work, and one's willingness to admit ignorance in a number of areas, was described as a necessity of working in this field. The panel also reflected on the difficulties of designing research that appeals to numerous stakeholders and audiences, some of whom have quite specific interests. There emerged a consensus that the focus now should be on like-minded people forging new alliances. Future collaborations between researchers experienced with funding bids and practitioners with experience of patient needs, or even the patients themselves, would be desirable.



**Photograph 1:** Panel discussion (From left: Freya Bailes, Laura Festa, Katie Overy, Simon Procter, Karen Burland)

## SUMMARY

This conference was a great opportunity to discuss the multi-faceted benefits of musical engagement, and how it can have a positive impact on wellbeing throughout the lifespan. It was useful to hear about emerging policies from the field of arts and health, such as social prescribing, but there remained a real passion from a diverse range of people to share evidence of how music presents unique possibilities to touch lives in deep and meaningful ways. An exciting prospect for the future was the launch of a new alliance between Nordoff Robbins and the University of Leeds. *Music for Healthy Lives* is a new research and practice network committed to providing further evidence on how music contributes to healthy lives, to promote and connect music practitioners to healthcare providers, and to increase cooperation and collaboration between the members of the network. For more information please see the new website <https://musicforhealthylives.org>

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