



Stepping into the Spotlight: Collaborative Efforts towards Musical Participation

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Abstract

This article presents findings from qualitative research which aimed to capture the experience and views of people who were supporting fourteen learners with intellectual disabilities (aged 12-18) to perform with a professional orchestra. Findings have been analysed in two stages. The first analysis, published elsewhere (Rickson 2012), focused on supporters' experiences of organising and preparing for the performance. The supporters believed that through practising and performing an orchestral work the diverse musicians had the potential to challenge stereotyped portrayals of disability, change attitudes and foster the ongoing inclusion of people with diverse abilities. However, while the learners' responses during preparatory workshops were described as interesting, meaningful and creative, there seemed to be a general perception that they were vulnerable and in need of protection from potentially unsympathetic audiences. This dichotomy was examined in post-performance interviews with supporters and audience members. Findings, presented here, show that the narrative of vulnerability and 'overcoming' persisted. Nevertheless, interviewees remained convinced of the artistic value of the work and believed the learners had the potential to attract wider audiences to their performances. Further opportunities for young people with intellectual

disabilities to be involved in community arts projects alongside non-disabled musicians may result.

Keywords: music; inclusion; intellectual disability; learning disability; young people; adolescents; school; orchestra; disability culture

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Introduction

This paper presents findings from a critical ethnographic study which focussed on a project to promote the participation of learners with intellectual disabilities in an orchestral performance. The project involved collaboration between staff at Te Kōkī New Zealand School of Music, which is a tertiary institution where the composer, soprano, and I had tenure; StarJam, a charitable community music organisation that offers children and young people with disabilities opportunities to build

confidence and 'character' through musical performance; and Wellington Vector Orchestra, a professional city orchestra in Wellington, New Zealand.

StarJam supports young people with disabilities to attend regular workshops to develop specific skills in singing, playing the guitar, drumming, or dance. The culmination of the workshops is a combined end-of-year variety show. StarJam had not previously offered orchestral workshops but the chief executive officer (CEO) was excited by the

possibility when the composer introduced her to *Open Waters* (Prock 2004). *Open Waters* is a seventeen-minute orchestral piece which has been composed specifically to invite the mutual participation of non-disabled and disabled children. While the score includes suggestions for players, the composer's intention is to provide a musical frame with maximum space for improvisation and for creative engagement with the piece. The collaboration between the music school, StarJam, and the city orchestra was formed with the intention that *Open Waters* would be performed during one of StarJam's relatively high-profile, public shows.

A group of fourteen learners from a special unit at a local all-boys high school were invited by StarJam administrators to attend five weekly orchestra workshops, held at the music school and facilitated by StarJam's tutors. The learners had severe intellectual disabilities according to the New Zealand Ministry of Education criteria. At their workshops, although they engaged in various musical activities, their primary task was to listen and respond to a recording of *Open Waters*. Workshop facilitators gave them access to a range of creative materials and enabled them to play a wide selection of simple percussion instruments, to dance and to incorporate visual materials into their expressions. The learners also created costumes and props with their teachers at school. In addition to the workshops they were involved in two rehearsals on the day of the performance, one of which was with the orchestra.

The critical ethnographic study was undertaken to capture the experience and views of people who were supporting the learners. Initial interviews undertaken with supporters while they were organising and preparing for the performance, revealed that various philosophical and practical barriers prevented the original vision for the project being realised (Rickson 2012). Specifically, StarJam's commitment to providing support for people with disabilities only, meant there was no opportunity for disabled and non-disabled young people to work together on the project. The vision to have the orchestra and learners on the same level as the audience, overtly interacting with them, was also compromised by their aim to give young people with disabilities the opportunity to experience more traditional sorts of stage performances. A further concession was necessary when it was noted that even the largest theatres could not adequately accommodate the team's wish to have the orchestra and learners on stage together; so the orchestra played from the pit.

Nevertheless, the team was still excited about the project. They observed that the learners were offering valid, interesting, meaningful, creative and artistic responses, unhindered by cultural norms.

On the other hand, they consistently agreed that the audience would be likely to be made up of predominantly of family, friends and supporters of the performers. Further, they proposed that the learners' responses might be valued in a different way, with 'disability' creating a caveat for their performance. If participants genuinely believed the performance had such exciting prospects, why would they anticipate that 1) despite significant public advertising it would not attract a wider audience, 2) audiences would not have high expectations of the performance and 3) different 'values' would come into play?

Post-performance interviews with supporters and audience members examined this dichotomy, and the findings are presented in this paper.

Background and literature review

Many governments within the developed world and people with intellectual disabilities themselves, agree that they should be supported to participate fully in their local schools and communities. Yet people with intellectual disabilities are often isolated from their wider communities; they have fewer friendships and less opportunity to be involved in community activities and many are not encouraged to make choices or to develop autonomy (Bray & Gates 2007; Curtis & Mercado 2004). They are potentially lonely, spending most time with family members, peers who also have developmental difficulties or care workers, and hanging out in public places rather than in more intimate situations with friends (Bray & Gates 2007; Curtis & Mercado 2004; Foley 2013).

The way people *experience* their environment is also important (Carroll-Lind & Rees 2009; Gabel 2005). Community participation involves being in typical community spaces with typical people and feeling as if one belongs there (Bray & Gates 2007). However, while people with intellectual disabilities might be more present in their local communities, this has not necessarily led to their development of a sense of belonging (Curtis & Mercado 2004). As with many marginalised groups, equal opportunities might be available to them in theory, but they might not be able to take advantage of opportunities in the same way as non-disabled peers (Sen 1999). For example, many people with disabilities continue to have to negotiate a range of barriers in order to participate in arts endeavours (Creative New Zealand 2007). Providing the appropriate environmental support, taking account of particular circumstances and cultural contexts, is crucial to enable them to understand what is possible, engage with activities that are meaningful and be successful in their endeavours. The attitudes of community members

and the ways in which they offer support and enable access are therefore crucial to the successful inclusion of disabled people in their communities.

Groups of people who share the interests of people with disabilities and understand the challenges that they face with regard to participation, are in a good position to facilitate inclusion (O'Brien & O'Brien 1993). As people work towards a shared common goal, they create symbolic community boundaries which are constantly renegotiated due to the convergence of numerous social factors (Azzopardi 2011; Lubet 2009). The orchestral project presented in this paper involved members of various communities (school, orchestra, university and StarJam) coming together. They developed a new community as they worked towards a common goal to present a musical creation to an interested audience who would in turn, as they participated as listeners, commentators and supporters, also become part of their community. In addition to the positive outcomes experienced during the workshop processes, a primary intention of the project was to celebrate diversity by highlighting the potential for the learners to engage with and feel as if they belonged in the professional orchestra, albeit for a moment in time.

Drawing on the premise that community participation and belonging are central to the concept of health, community music therapists actively explore relationships between various groups and their communities (Ansdell 2002; Pavlicevic & Ansdell 2004; Ruud 2010; Stige, Ansdell, Elefant & Pavlicevic 2010; Stige & Aarø 2012). Individuals become unwell, not only because of bodily dysfunction, but also because they are badly treated, ignored or misunderstood. Community music therapy is therefore not only directed toward individuals or groups of individuals, but towards changing the systems that they interact with; i.e. larger cultural, institutional, and social contexts are taken into consideration. Many community music therapy projects, such as the one described in this paper, involve activities that would not traditionally be labelled as therapy. Within the community music therapy framework, music is regarded as a social resource or form of social capital which can be used to build networks and communities, increase solidarity and facilitate social change (Ansdell 2002; Pavlicevic & Ansdell 2004; Procter 2004; Ruud 2010). In an early example, Stige (2004) supported a group of young people to play with their local brass band. An important aspect of that work involved the use of performance to break down the barriers that segregated the young people, with the aim of changing community attitudes and practices.

Ruud (2010) suggests “the essence of community music therapy lies in the use of music to negotiate the space between private and public, the client and the institution/other staff, or the client and the community”. In Ruud’s view, performance is an essential part of community music therapy. However in this context he understands performance to mean “musicking in a public space within or outside of institutions” (Ruud 2010, chapter 8, section 2, para 7, location 1764). Musicologist Christopher Small (1998) suggested the term ‘musicking’ explaining that

“The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between the organised sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning, but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they make, or stand as a metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance might imagine them to be; relationships between person and person; between individual and society; between humanity and the natural world and perhaps even the supernatural world” (Small 1998: 13).

Music therapy can be viewed as the musical performance of the self-in-culture, as participants experience self-in-action and self-in-community, through musicking (Ansdell 2003: 157).

Small (1998) recognised that the context of a performance and our personal relationship with the music being performed, influences the way we hear and interpret that performance. Certain expectations are generated when the ultimate act in a musical process is a public performance. Audiences attend anticipating not only a particular ‘type’ of performance, but a particular ‘standard’ of performance and they are likely to assess the performance accordingly. Those closely involved with the current project believed the audience would be made up primarily of family and friends. While they anticipated the work would be highly valued by them, they were unsure about the potential for the work to be positively received by wider audiences. Orchestra subscribers, who would normally receive notice of all orchestral events, did not receive notice of this performance. This suggests that orchestra administrators did not anticipate that the performance would be of interest to their community. It seemed they were unsure about whether the performance and by association, the performers, would belong in the wider public domain. The regular orchestral audience might have anticipated an experience that mirrored more typical performances by symphony orchestras

and/or they might have held certain expectations of performances by learners with intellectual disability. Thus, within some traditions of music therapy, which emphasise process over product, a performance might have been seen as counterproductive. A reflexive approach is therefore essential. Ansdell (2006) suggests it can be helpful to consider that music therapy encompasses a range of practices that can take place within an individual-community continuum from private confidential music therapy to performance-based community music. Performing can provide access to symbolic resources and can enable disadvantaged people to have a voice, to become visible and to be recognised as community members (Ruud 2010).

Conversations are now emerging about how the concepts of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ are embodied in musical forms. Straus (2006: 114) for example, argues that music, like other cultural products, “may be understood both to reflect and to assist in constructing disability” as it does with concepts of race, gender, and sexual orientation. He notes that disability has played a central role in Western Art music from the early nineteenth century, firstly, with composers often having personal experience of disability and secondly, within the aesthetics of music itself. There has always been a central ‘norm’ in the way music has been assessed. Straus has argued that “[musical] works with problems, with formal deformations, for example, are often considered the most interesting ones, prized for the distinctiveness conferred on them by their artistic disabilities” (Straus 2006: 175). Tonal problems present unrest and imbalance; dissonance requires resolution and as Edgar Allen Poe has claimed, “there is no exquisite beauty without some strangeness in the proportion” (cited in Straus 2006: 175). However, while it seems that it is accepted that some ‘strangeness in proportions’ provides aesthetic benefit to the music, within Western Art music judgements regarding the position of the musical ‘norm’ and a strong focus on musical ‘talent’, appears to have been problematic.

It seems clear then that the view that the *Open Waters* performance might not be of interest or ‘good enough’ for audiences beyond parents, friends and other supporters has its roots, at least in part, in traditions of Western Art music. The Western view that music making is for people who have a particular talent, formal training or extensive experience in playing or singing, has led many people, regardless of how able-bodied they might be, to believe they do not have the skills, or the ‘right’ to participate in music making. This understanding of what music making should be has

led Lubet to suggest that many people, deprived of practical musical experience, are

“too impaired even to attempt to learn music in ‘mainstream’ programmes [...] [and] for students with major physical or sensory impairments, the prospects for active participation in any sort of music programme are, with few exceptions, very grim indeed” (Lubet 2009: 730).

This seems unacceptable given the increasing recognition that the ability and desire to make music is an intrinsic human capacity (Trevarthen 2000, 2002, 2005; Trevarthen & Malloch 2001). It is now evident that everyone is able to respond to and participate in some way, in musical activity – and that they have the right to freely do so (Arts Council England 1999; United Nations 2014). Participation in music has the potential to energise, to empower and to promote agency. It is a form of social capital, a resource for building social networks and thus for enabling participants to connect and to create, negotiate and develop shared musical meaning (Rolvsjord 2010; Ruud 2010; Stige, Ansdell, Elefant & Pavlicevic 2010). The process of music making is therefore considered to be beneficial in its own right, perhaps more important than the products, or artefacts that are generated in the process. Nevertheless, performing music in a public context can also lead to positive recognition and symbolic resources which can be highly regarded within communities (Ansdell 2005; O’Grady & McFerran 2012; Ruud 2010). Furthermore, engagement with the arts is known to influence values, beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes (Arts Council England 1999; Belfiore & Bennett 2008; Curtis & Mercado 2004).

Methodology

This critical ethnography draws on the philosophy of critical idealism, pioneered by Bhaskar (Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson & Norrie 1998). Critical idealism acknowledges the postmodern argument that making absolute claims about subjective understandings can be dangerous, yet accepts that there is a reality beyond individuals that can be expressed through the notion of tendencies. Critical realist ethnography therefore uses ethnographic data to highlight social structures, demonstrate how relationships might be oppressive and to consider alternative pathways for action. Findings are used to uncover the relationship between agency and structure, rather than to ideographically illuminate the understandings and actions of individuals (Porter 2002: 65). This research considers the conceptual relationship between the social constructs of disability and Western Art music and

the ways in which they might impact on learners' inclusion in a musical performance.

In this project, supporters aimed to provide the appropriate physical, psychological and musical support that would enable the learners involved to develop the understanding, motivation and skills they would need to participate in the orchestra performance. Successful participation involves the development of mutual understanding, acceptance and respect. Therefore, the ways in which the performance of *Open Waters* would be perceived by supporters, the orchestra and the wider audience, would be of relevance when considering whether the event was truly inclusive.

My personal position

I am a music therapist and a university academic. I have a particular interest in supporting the musical inclusion of marginalised people who desire to participate in musical activity. Over a period of twenty years, I practised music therapy in special education settings, highly influenced, initially at least, by traditional humanistic models of music therapy which involve learners being treated individually or in small groups in private settings within the schools. During this period I also raised my now adult daughter who was born profoundly deaf, yet, was educated in mainstream settings. I became increasingly uncomfortable with the disempowering nature of the 'expert' approach which took relatively little account of learners' wider contexts. As the concepts of inclusive education and community music therapy increasingly offered critical philosophies and opportunities for activist approaches, I became a strong proponent of these. This has led to a natural turn towards participatory, emancipatory and critical research approaches.

Open Waters was a community music project; the composer was my university colleague. He introduced the project to me, recognising that I would value the opportunity to support the learners to participate in music while highlighting their political agenda to demonstrate artistic ability in a forum rarely available to them. The learners came from a special unit at an all-boys high school, and had already been recruited to the project through StarJam. StarJam also employed the workshop facilitators, who were university music students, to support the rehearsal and performance process. I was a participant observer working alongside the learners at rehearsals and I engaged in critical ethnography to highlight the issues relating to the participation agenda. The aim of a critical ethnography is to move beyond descriptive 'storytelling' and to consider participants' experiences within larger structural systems (Madison 2005; Thomas 1993).

In my reflective journal I recorded my observations and interpretations of the verbal and artistic expressions of the learners, the workshop facilitators and my own experience of being involved. On commencing the project, I believed that the act of rehearsing and performing would give us the opportunity for emancipation through artistic expression. The opportunity to perform with the orchestra in a public forum further afforded the learners the opportunity to challenge exclusionary attitudes. The artistic work would exist as form of dissemination, potentially affecting influential members of the disability and orchestral communities it was designed to inform.

For stage one of this study, I gained informed consent to interview a purposive sample of supporters including the composer, conductor, soprano, workshop facilitators (2), teachers (2), a parent, and the CEO of StarJam. In the initial interviews, several interviewees voiced their belief that the audience would be made up of family and friends who would come to support the performers. I was intrigued to find out whether the audience would indeed be made up of family and friends and to consider the socio-cultural background to their prediction. I therefore sought to follow this up in subsequent interviews and because I had never intended to perform on stage, positioned myself as a participant observer amongst the audience, recording my observations and interpretations of that experience in my journal. I recognise that the research has been influenced by the interaction between me and the other participants and between the data and the theories I drew on.

Methods

Ethnography has its roots in anthropology and sociology, and has traditionally involved a process of watching and describing people in cultures and societies. Suter (2000) notes however that participant observation becomes problematic when particular topics of inquiry do not provide ample opportunities for observation. Ethnography is now considered to be more than observational research. "[It] not only involves observing and participating but also listening, talking, asking questions, taking part in debates and discussions and sometimes leading them" (O'Reilly 2009: 78).

In this case, data were drawn from participant observations (recorded in my field log) and from personal reflections and interpretations (recorded in my reflective journal), as well as interviews with eleven key informants (two workshop facilitators, two teachers, a parent, two audience members, the CEO of StarJam, the composer, the soprano soloist and the orchestra conductor). All participants, except one of the workshop facilitators, were

interviewed twice (once before and once after the concert). While participant observations and purposive interviews were the primary sources of data, they were supplemented with focus group data generated from a panel discussion (as explained below).

The *Open Waters* performance took place on the eve of a music therapy conference in Wellington, and conference registrants were provided with information about the concert several weeks prior to these events. Approximately twenty registrants had been in the *Open Waters* audience. At the conference, a panel made up of the composer, soprano, workshop facilitator, and CEO of StarJam gave their perceptions of the event and any conference registrants who had been in the audience were invited to contribute to the discussion. Several conference registrants participated in the discussion and gave informed consent for their contribution to be used as data for this research.

This paper is based on an analysis of post-performance interviews including the panel presentation which served as a focus group. Focus groups generate rich data through the dynamic interaction of participants and are increasingly used in ethnographic research (O'Reilly 2009; Suter 2000). On the other hand they are limited by the ways in which participants influence each other during the process. Further, a focus group which involves people talking after an event may seem somewhat incongruent with ethnographic approaches in which researchers try not to distance the discourse from the cultural context. The immediacy of experience is important for remembering detail and capturing emotional content. Nevertheless when presented with the broad rather than prescriptive topic 'to discuss the experience of being at the concert' participants were stimulated to participate in vigorous conversations and helpful data were generated.

Data analysis

All data were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis, a common general approach to analysing qualitative data that involves exploration, coding and categorising the data to uncover emerging themes (Schwandt 2007). Essential meanings were teased out as the data were reduced, reorganised and combined and findings were checked with participants. In a similar process to that outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), my analysis involved:

- typing field log and journal data and transcribing interviews and focus group data verbatim;

- immersing myself in the data, reading and re-reading for familiarisation;
- generating initial codes, some of which came directly from the data and others from my interpretation of the data;
- searching for themes, by sorting and linking codes while considering the symbolic and cultural meaning of the discourse (initially into potential themes, then arranging and rearranging to generate meaning);
- reviewing and refining themes;
- defining and naming themes and subthemes;
- returning the findings to the participants for verification; and
- writing the report.

Ethical statement

This research examined a unique and high profile project. All participants were aware of the possibility that they would be identified and gave informed consent for data to be included in the research. Key informants including the composer, conductor, soloist, and CEO of StarJam gave permission for their real names and the name of the StarJam organisation to be included in this report. The names of other participants have been changed. The research received the approval of Massey University Human Ethics Committee (HEC: Southern B Application 11/63).

Findings

Interviewees suggested that the learners were involved in a very "special experience". They received the appropriate types and levels of support necessary to enable them to participate with the orchestra. Their performance enabled "education and connection with wider communities". Nevertheless the theme of 'vulnerability' which emerged in earlier findings (Rickson 2012) persisted.

A very special experience

Interviewees variously suggested the *Open Waters* project had given the learners "the opportunity to do something they never dreamt would be possible", "a very different experience", and "a high level musical experience of great artistic benefit" to them. Performing with a professional orchestra was considered to be out of the ordinary for any amateur musician, and interviewees generally considered that having the diverse groups

engaged in mutual musical expression was a special experience for all involved.

Appropriate support to enable participation

The potential for successful participation was supported by the positive attitudes of those directly involved, their interactions and by the music itself. The composition provided a frame to facilitate responsiveness and allow the learners to engage creatively with the piece. It provided a stimulus, yet the limited restrictions from the score or instruction suggested a 'blank canvas' from which the learners could work, develop and perform naturally as individuals. Their responses were described as "free", "engaging", "fascinating", "charismatic", "creative", "representative", "performative", and "visceral". They were engaged in an organic process that they found meaningful.

"We encouraged them [people with disabilities] to think about narrative, or what was going on during the work and how they interpreted that. And so they came up, some of them, with quite vivid ideas as to what was going on. And we sort of encouraged them to interact with the music too, whether that be actually playing instruments such as the ocean drum... or some of them responded quite in a gestural manner and so we let them go with that and develop that. [...] They became quite involved in terms of movement and sort of dance. [...] The title of the work, given its suggestion of water was quite fortunate I think in that it gave them a programmatic sort of template; a starting point from which they developed their ideas, which by and large involved water themes. [...] One of the students came up with the idea of a jellyfish... and interpreted the music in that manner" (James, workshop facilitator; group interview).

Participants agreed that the most important thing about the project was for the learners to have fun and to be able to express what they were feeling through the performance. Nevertheless they wanted the overall musical product to be sounding as "good as it could be" and by performance night had been comfortable that the openness of the piece and the learners' creative responses, enthusiasm and dedication to the project would lead to a valid and interesting performance.

"At what point is performance actually learning and developing skills to play music? [...] [It just starts us] having conversations about what a performance is and what it means to perform to an audience and is that really the word to describe what actually is going on, you know?" (Barbara, audience member; group interview).

In contrast to the invitation for creative improvisation, *Open Waters* included a relatively

strictly scored part for the vocal soloist who was on stage with the learners. While she had carefully considered the potential that might exist for her to improvise and interact with them, she felt that her training as a classical performer "set her up" to be as true to the composer's intention as she might, regardless of what was happening on stage. She felt naturally drawn to present what she described as a "high art" performance.

"I was restricted to doing what I had to do... the normal thing... I actually needed to watch the conductor and I had to put it out of my head that in some imaginary or ideal world I might be able to interact with the kids. Because actually I've got to focus all of my energy into producing the sort of sound that I produce, in time, in tune, you know; the right rhythm and all that sort of stuff" (Jenny, soprano; interview).

Thus Jenny gave a more traditional orchestral performance and the learners responded positively to that. They were very engaged by her presence, affected yet unperturbed by the formality of the occasion. One young man who was asked to meet Jenny to bring her to the stage, took her by the hand and led her to the rest of the group, not only willingly, but also with a great deal of responsibility and caring.

"He grabbed my hand, squeezed it very warmly, and then later said he hoped that I wasn't going to get stage fright, or be too hot – he was terribly concerned for me and very, very, warm and caring. [It was] really, really, lovely. And then he took about five bows alongside me at the end" (Jenny, soprano; group interview).

Education and connection with wider communities

The learners were particularly animated when reacting to the live orchestra. One became so enthusiastic during the performance he spontaneously

"stood before the orchestra and was conducting a mirror image of the conductor; [and] his movements were beautiful" (Workshop facilitator; group interview).

Two of the learners who were really lacking in confidence came to the front of the stage towards the end of the show

"thrilled [and] quite excited by the end!" (Teacher; interview).

"There is a sense of joy with some of our students because they're not inhibited. They feel something, they say it... they show it on their faces. I think that is a really good thing for the

audience to see, they can see that joy and enthusiasm” (Sally, teacher; interview).

Enabling the learners to develop their own responses using a variety of expressive elements including movement and dance, costume making and music, gave them a sense of ownership that was palpable and which drew the audience into their process.

“I thought that was their performance; they’d listened to the music, [decided] what it meant to them and expressed it through dance which was something that they obviously felt very comfortable with” (Tom, audience member; Interview).

“You felt that it was organically kind of happening on stage and that kind of allows you to feel comfortable with being a part of it and that your applause – or screaming, yelling whatever else – was actually going to be a contribution to the performance. [...] It was one of the most enjoyable experiences I’ve had at a concert because it was so organic and improvised that it felt quite releasing to the audience too” (Tom, audience member; interview).

I was just amazed at how much was going on. It was multi-layered and complex, and I found myself watching someone for a while, and just seeing how they were interpreting and responding. And at first thinking ‘oh there’s not too much happening there, what’s happening for this person’ and then looking more deeply, it made me look more deeply time and time again, and not just make an assumption about what was being created here, because just when you thought ‘there’s not much happening here... oh yes there is! You know – a sudden shift or sudden change or sudden response, sudden – beauty. That it kind of defied and reconstructed our notions of performance in all sorts of ways. It’s difficult to (articulate), unless you were there I think... The complexity and the layers were multi-, and I think that’s part of the richness for it. [...] It was phenomenally rich. And I want to go back a number of times as a result, because I think there’s a lot more to be read and gained (Joanne, audience member; group interview).

Somers (2008) argues that theatre and other forms of drama, when shaped, targeted and delivered in particular ways, can excite change in both participants and audience. Yet audiences are not a mass group. When they are invited to participate, their varying identities as performers, their status and agendas and the diverse meanings they make of the musicking become more apparent (Miles 2009). Cathy, a parent, talked of sitting beside or near people she knew from the “world of disability”, a Māori family and the grandparents of one of the

performers. She was aware of the music affecting the Māori family, who joined the singing and offered a waiata (Māori song) of appreciation and pride at the conclusion of the performance and of the “natural” responses of the grandparents.

“The grandparents were just giggling and tittering about their grandchild, not the child with a disability but the grandchild... and just delighting in the way that grandparents are allowed to do, about their grandchildren. A mix of pride and (laughs) you know – embarrassment... which was lovely!” (Cathy, parent; interview).

Participants believed the project had potentially generated a “significant and deep connection between everyone involved” which was “very gratifying”. They believed it showed the community that projects such as this are “not only possible but really exciting, worthwhile and meaningful for all the participants”. While the potential exists for the performance environment to be perceived as exploitive, in this case the learners were, in many ways, seemingly unconcerned about whether their performance might be “good enough”. They were simply being themselves, and their genuine performativity was impressive and moving.

“It’s nice for our boys, who are sometimes seen as ‘deficient’ as it were, to be seen in a light where they are adding rather than detracting, you know, so that’s a really positive thing” (Sally, teacher; interview).

Learners with intellectual disabilities are vulnerable

Musicking enables people to express their understandings of the world and their places in it; it becomes a process in which social relations (between individuals, individuals and society, society and humanity) are played out (Small 1998). Thus musicking is closely connected to issues of identity and politics, with meanings of inequality and exclusion being played out in the process. As Sally’s quote above indicates, the learners are not always accepted and included. Interviewees suggested that those who do not *know* them tend to focus on their deficits and are not able to appreciate that they have “overcome some major challenges” to perform on stage. Despite their overall enthusiasm for the performance, there was still a tendency for some people to view the learners as vulnerable adolescents, in need of protection from being patronised or embarrassed.

As predicted from the preliminary interviews, the audience for the concert was primarily made up of friends, family and other supporters, whose

attendance seemed variously motivated by altruism or intrigue. Further, the teachers advised they would have been reluctant to encourage their learners to perform if they had anticipated an unfamiliar audience. They suggested it was important for the audience to have some knowledge of the learners, to be sympathetic and to be able to judge the performance accordingly. Their concern was to protect the learners from being patronised or embarrassed.

“I think we are always quite careful with how the public perceives our students... I think that we appreciate that [for] this particular concert... the audience members would be very sympathetic. You know, they understand that it's a [charitable organisation]... they accept that people will be performing in different ways, with different abilities and then I think they'll be an audience of acceptance. So... would we just do it for any old thing? No we wouldn't; because we'd want to protect our boys' sense of self. We're always emphasising that they're teenagers and we want to do things that are age-appropriate, [and] so we don't want to put them in a position where it could be embarrassing or demeaning” (Sophie, teacher; interview).

A parent also thought that having a safe place to perform was important. Cathy's son is nearly sixteen. While she was conscious that he and some of the other older boys were becoming aware of their differences she, like the teachers, believed that in the context of this performance the learners sensed others were viewing them positively. Over the years she has seen her son perform in many situations that have emphasised his difference and have therefore been incredibly painful for her and she anticipated the performance would generate familiar distress.

“I thought I'd go along and ball my eyes out. [...] But I didn't because it wasn't right to feel like that when these kids were so proud! You could see the enjoyment they were getting and the pride they had, and you could see that they were feeling that 'they're looking at me in a good way'. People look at you a lot when you've got disabilities and not in a good way... yet here was the 'Woolworths pick n mix of humanity', gorgeous kids, some with very obvious impairments. It didn't matter you know; they were just doing what they could. [...] It just reaffirmed my belief that music is so necessary” (Cathy, parent; interview).

Cathy noticed that a lot of people she invited did not come to the performance, while those who did come were surprised by its high quality. One particular person who knew the family well was reluctant to come to the concert, or indeed to

engage in any activity that, in their mind, might highlight her son's difference.

“So that's always going to be the dilemma, that people will either be excited by it or repulsed, actually, I think. [...] [Some] snapped the tickets up; they snapped the opportunity up, because it was different. And they were surprised. They expected to come judging it by the deficit but... they said 'they were really good!' And then it was 'and when you consider that', so first of all they saw the good, first of all they saw the talent and the energy, and then they said, 'and then you've got to consider that these are kids who, who overcome impairments to do it'” (Cathy, parent; interview).

Discussion

Everyone's musical experience is valid
(Small 1998: 13)

Many people aspire to be able to participate in music; especially in nonthreatening environments. The *Open Waters* project focused on connecting existing orchestral, school, charity and tertiary groups to form a unique musical community, aware of the challenges disabled learners face with regard to participation and eager to see them engage in meaningful music activity. The musicians were diverse: Some were trained and worked in one of the most formal Western musical traditions, the symphony orchestra, while others had little or no formal musical training and minimal experience in performing. Nevertheless the musical environment was motivating and the learners felt safe enough to take advantage of new opportunities to be expressive, to connect and communicate with audiences.

Music encouraged the learners to be performative and creative in ways that they might not just normally be; that is, the music itself created space for creativity to happen. *Open Waters* provided a stimulus, yet the lack of restrictions from score or instruction enabled the learners to perform naturally and confidently, to freely develop and express “charismatic, engaging, and interesting” creative ideas. The personalities of the learners influenced the music and the music influenced the learners. Music helped them not only to express their reality, but to create it too (Stewart 2004). Whether the ideas were meaningful to listeners outside of the group might be considered in many ways to be irrelevant. The experience of playing together was powerful and affirming.

On the other hand, musical performance involves playing out social roles, such as leading, following and so on; articulating and presenting ideas, emotional communication and symbolic

representation; engaging with musical narrative, i.e. “being inside the music” or “conversing with the music”; working outside of musical narrative i.e. focusing on the concerns of audience members and enjoying being overtly on display (Davidson 2004). In taking on all of these roles collectively or individually at various times during the performance, the learners were able not only to make emotional connections with other musicians; they were also able to connect with audience members and to engage them in reciprocal interaction. Audience members at various times chose to look at the whole stage or particular details, directing their attention to specific performers for example. They were able to communicate interest and pleasure and they noticed and monitored each other’s responses, occasionally making eye contact. When performances have high levels of audience participation, they tend to disrupt habitual listening patterns and invite various forms of interaction including more active listening (Miles 2009). By engaging their audience so convincingly, the learners in this project were able to reinforce the general belief that music making can promote social interaction and lead a sense of relatedness, belonging and community.

Music allows for communication and socialisation because it encourages intense personal and subjective individual experiences to merge with cultural collectives (DeNora 2002). The learners ‘owned’ their performance and were able to convey messages of assertion and pride through their music and creative performance. While there is evidence of learners ‘performing’ it seemed that rather than ‘being on show’ there was genuine audience appreciation for their performativity. Music has the capacity to represent the performers’ way of being; the learners’ identities were brought to the fore, developed and altered through repetitive, though organic, rehearsal. Their performance was therefore authoritative; they were accepted, valued and empowered, as audience members were ‘drawn in’ and became surprised by what they encountered.

Participation in a music performance involves performers communicating to themselves and others, “this is who we are” (Small 1998: 134). Performativity is influenced, however, by the performance space and the involvement of others, especially with regard to how others perceive the performance (Lloyd 1999; Loxley 2006). Perhaps, as team members suggested prior to the performance, ‘disability’ did create a caveat for the performance. The majority of audience members would have viewed the performance through the lens of family, friends, or supporters of the learners. On the other hand, interviews with three ‘outsiders’ who attended the concert suggest audience members were genuinely moved by the creativity,

expression and artistry demonstrated by the learners.

Vaillancourt (2012: 175) suggests performances can be more powerful coming from the “non-traditional, unusual and unexpected musicians” who are often clients of music therapists. The meaning of the *Open Waters* performance emerged through the unique relationships that developed between the learners, the relationships that they developed with the orchestra members and the audience. The learners were very affected by the onstage presence of the soloist for example, even though she felt the need to maintain a performance persona which contrasted with their contribution. This suggests they may have offered very different expressions if they had been able to work in the same space and to interact on a more physical level with the orchestra.

While the performance seems to have brought performers and audience members considerable pleasure, questions remain about whether this was a successful example of an inclusive musical event. Genuine inclusion has a strong focus on the promotion of ‘ordinariness’ and ‘belonging’, remembering that learners are *people*, not a disability (Purdue, Ballard & MacArthur 2001). Having the opportunity to play with a professional orchestra and the associated experience of being treated as celebrity performers was considered to be special. With *only* disabled learners involved, the project potentially highlighted difference in undesirable ways. It might for example have been viewed by some people as a compensatory event which would serve to offset the negative effects of disability.

Moreover, community members expressed considerable concern about how the performance might be perceived by wider audiences. On the one hand the learners’ performance was considered to have intrinsic artistic value; yet informants have mediated their valuing by drawing on the concept of disability. That is, for some, the performance was thought to be valuable considering it was by learners with intellectual disabilities who had to overcome a lot of challenges to produce such a performance. From this perspective too, the project would not be viewed as an example of successful inclusion. Bogdan and Taylor (2001) suggest that successful inclusion will have been achieved only when spontaneous natural acceptance has replaced the concepts of normalisation and inclusion.

It would be natural to anticipate that any group of artists will experience a level of anxiety or nerves prior to a stage performance with a professional orchestra. It is therefore interesting to note that the composer did not envisage that the piece would be performed in such a traditional manner. His original intention was to have the

learners and the orchestra working together on the same level as the audience and overtly interacting with them. This would have been quite a different scenario to the traditional stage performance that eventuated and would likely have lessened the perception that the young people were 'on show', and therefore vulnerable to criticism or ridicule.

Nevertheless, the project functioned as a political challenge and an opportunity to focus on the learners' potential, particularly within an arts framework. Music and other arts practices are potentially 'normalising' since there are major issues generally about how final products are valued by audiences. Reiss and Pringle (2002) suggest for example that it might not be possible or even desirable to measure the value of art (Reiss & Pringle 2002: 218). In the artistic frame impairment can be viewed as an aesthetic (Gable 2005); and the honesty of an 'inclusive aesthetic' can "provide a more accurate reflection of the wonderful spectrum of human existence, not merely a selective or superficial one" (Powell 2010: 198). Rather than detracting, the learners' contribution was perceived as adding value to the performance: Their relatively uninhibited responses were exciting and refreshing; they seemingly influenced audience members to develop *their* self-awareness as well as a collective sense of community; potentially challenged the traditional ways that people conceive of an orchestra and might have contributed to their developing skills and confidence towards self-advocacy.

Audience members who participated in this research were not all musicians or music therapists. On the other hand, all interviewees were likely to have had an interest in music and the inclusion of people with diverse needs. The perceptions of supporters and audience members might therefore have been biased towards a successful performance. There may have been others in the audience who did not appreciate the performance at all and who may have ridiculed it. In this respect, the supporters' concern that the learners were vulnerable and in need of protection may have been valid. The challenge is to have new audiences who can approach new aesthetic opportunities unimpeded by their assumptions regarding the way the experience 'should' look or sound.

Community musicians, music teachers and music therapists can begin to address this challenge by engaging in on-going collaborations involving diverse musicians. Significant potential exists among these groups for providing support for disabled people by providing musical resources (such as writing or choosing pieces which 'hold' their improvised and innovative contributions), practical resources to enable them to take part (organising venues, workshops, materials) and

personal resources to empower them to participate. But perhaps even more importantly, it will be necessary to promote the idea that music is a human resource and that everyone has a right to actively participate in music activity. Nobody 'owns' music and nobody has a right to say how it 'should' be. Questions regarding what 'good' music might be and who can be allowed to make it, have resulted in a large majority of the population being excluded from participation in musical activity. Even in the post-modern environment, where the boundaries of high and low are not so readily accepted, large numbers of people, not only those who experience physical, cognitive, sensory, or other impairment, are disempowered and effectively musically 'disabled'. Disability activist James Charlton (2000) argues we have an obligation to try to improve the lives of people who have disabilities even when it might seem difficult or impossible.

Summary

The learners involved in this project were supported to participate in a high profile musical event during which they performed with a professional orchestra. While it seems that the social constructs of 'disability' and 'Western Art music' had an impact on audience attendance and appreciation for the work, those who were involved valued the innovative and creative expressions the learners were able to bring to the performance. Their totally honest performance had the potential to disrupt the traditional ways that people conceive of an orchestra, challenge stereotypical portrayals of disability and change attitudes. Specifically, their performativity seemed to influence a generally pervasive view that they were a vulnerable population in need of protection. Audience appreciation for the event suggests they were able to gain social capital which would potentially empower them to continue to interact with increasing confidence with their wider communities. Communities will be greatly enriched when all members are invited to participate fully in their activities.

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Suggested citation:

Rickson, D. (2014). Stepping into the spotlight: Collaborative efforts towards musical participation. *Approaches: Music Therapy & Special Music Education*, 6(2), 99-112. Retrieved from <http://approaches.primarymusic.gr>