

So Many Beauties

music and creativity with people living with dementia





Listening

In a noisy care home or hospital, people can become desensitised to sound, switching themselves off from the sounds of TV, radio, chatter etc.

As a musician in this environment, it's more important for me to show that I am able to listen than to show that I am able to play.

My open ears can encourage people to come forward with musical ideas and conversation. I can role model collective listening by being attentive to the whole group and affirming everyone's contributions.

Before a session starts I try to listen to the sounds in the room, to the different voices as they arrive in the space.

Listening comes first.

Music making can provide the space to listen collectively.





Gathering

A familiar song or piece of music can help to gather people together as a group.

I have built up a set list of familiar songs that I use in sessions - songs that I enjoy and that I know people will be likely to join in with.

I can invite people to join in by using eye contact, facial expressions and body language. I try to make a "musical invitation" to everyone in turn during a song or piece of music. I also affirm people's contributions.

I often start sessions by saying that we're going to share music time together this afternoon and that music isn't music when you're just doing it on your own, it's so much better when you're in it together.

Familiar music can gather people together - what a great ensemble!





Creating space

My aim in sessions is to create a safe space for people to throw creative ideas around, be spontaneous, express themselves in the company of others and to be fully engaged in the present moment through making music together.

I want to invite the group to make up new pieces of music and to write poems and songs together.

I usually start by opening up windows for creativity within familiar songs, leaving space for improvisations with voices or percussion instruments. Once you've built a musical rapport with people through something familiar, it's easier to take them into unfamiliar territory.

It's important to role model creativity yourself if you want people to come on a musical journey with you - taking risks, enjoying being freely expressive and not being bogged down with getting things right.

I have learned that I need to leave more space and do less to allow other people to do more. It's a balance between putting yourself out there and reigning yourself in!



Themes

It can be helpful to pick themes to work around. In the last project, I used the seasons as a starting point, choosing some familiar songs related to each (eg. Spring - red red robin, Summer - you are my sunshine, Autumn - Autumn leaves, Winter - Here we come a wassailing).

We recited well known poems together using call and response and we wrote poems about each season using Gary Glazner's poem recipe which draws on the senses. What does Spring taste, smell, feel, look, sound like?

New themes/ideas can be instigated by members of the group and it is good to respond to these flexibly.

The seasons provided an outline structure for the oratorio but lots of other unrelated ideas came to fruition in the sessions. To capture these ideas, I recorded all the sessions and listened back to them, making notes on all the nuggets of creativity.

Listening back to sessions also helped me to refine what I do by reflecting on and trying to improve my own practise. I was able to pick up on my own particular habits and try to moderate them to leave more space for other people's musical identities to emerge.



A NEW PIECE OF CHORAL MUSIC (ORATORIO) BY HOLLY MARLAND
AND PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA, CELEBRATING CREATIVITY

MANCHESTER CATHEDRAL THURSDAY 6 APRIL 7PM

Ingredients (serving suggestion only!)

Open ears, open heart, open mind

Your creativity, playfulness and authenticity

Respect for everyone and an awareness of whether someone is consenting to participate or not

Your singing voice / instrument / love of music / ideas

Percussion instruments - tuned and untuned

(If using these, make sure you can play them and have explored/enjoyed the range of sounds you can make with them. Unusual and multi-sensory instruments work well and are less babyish than some children's instruments.)

Songs / pieces of music that you enjoy and will be familiar to most people. Possibly grouped in Themes.

Feat music - songs/pieces that demonstrate your skills - people can enjoy listening to you on your own for a while to give them a break if they seem tired during a session

Improvisation - have some simple 'riffs', rhythmic patterns, harmonic progressions up your sleeve. You could take these from existing pieces or create your own. The important thing is that they are simple and have plenty of space. Listen to the group as someone might already be "riffing" and you could create something with their riff.

Well known poems and Gary Glazner's recipe idea or similar

A notebook and some pens to jot down ideas and/or a recording machine (phone usually has voice memo)

Humour

Mirroring

Mirroring (copying) what someone is doing can show that you appreciate what they are doing and that you want to join in with them.

It can affirm someone's contribution and can encourage them to do more.

It is a technique that is widely used in music therapy but it stems from our earliest human interactions.

You can mirror someone's physical gestures and also the sounds they are making. Repeating a sound or gesture creates a sense of dialogue - like a call and response. Try not to loom over someone when mirroring, try to get on the same level of eye contact by kneeling/ lowering yourself if you are able to.

You can go further by really trying to match the particular dynamic, timbre, tempo. Attuning to the fine detail of someone's voice or the sounds they make on percussion instruments generates real synergy and builds musical relationship.

With larger groups I try to attune to the group energy as well as to individuals within the group. As well as mirroring, I try to find ways of profiling what people are doing - I think of this as putting musical inverted commas around what someone is doing.



Developing the music

Mirroring can provide a first point of musical connection from which extend and develop musical ideas. Instead of constantly duplicating someone's gestures and musical phrases, we can invite them to extend their ideas by embellishing and developing our responses through improvisation.

We don't want to make our response so complex that the other person can't jump back into the flow. Improvisation does not need to be complicated. It's usually helpful to simply extend the length of our musical responses and make them open ended - an upward "questioning" phrase invites dialogue more than a closed off grand finale style answer!

We can also let people have the experience of flying on their own. Setting up a very simple repetitive riff or harmonic progression can underpin and support free exploration of the percussion instruments. I've found that people in the more acute stages of dementia respond well to very simple repeated patterns with just 2 or 3 chords and to the sound of the chimes which are quite trance-like.

Endorsing 'our' music

I like to remind the group that we are creating new things and to thank them - individually if they have had a 'solo' moment and always collectively after each song or piece. It's good to try and let the group have space to respond to what they have done before you jump in. At the end of every session I go round and thank each individual in turn, offering them my hand to shake or hold. We did the session together .