‘Let the music speak for us’

Ursula Crickmay

I am going to talk about why Wigmore Hall first got involved with Music for Life, and the context for the project at Wigmore Hall – we’ve been working jointly since 2005, and for the past 6 years we’ve had responsibility for taking the work forward as the overall manager of the programme, so it has become a really important part of our programme.

Many people here will be familiar with Wigmore Hall – it’s one of the leading concert halls internationally for chamber music and song, where many of the world’s most sought-after musicians perform, as well as being somewhere that fosters the careers of talented young artists. We present over 400 concerts in a season, which are regularly broadcast worldwide, and we also have an award winning record label Wigmore Hall Live which also retails worldwide.

We run between 4-500 Learning events each year working with people from babies through to school students, teachers, young musicians, young professionals and our regular concert audience. We work in community settings from family centres to schools to hospitals.

In our work, we look for ‘ways in’ to chamber music which are relevant to the context and to the people taking part. We sometimes deliver projects which are connected to specific pieces of repertoire, or connected to ‘chamber music and song’ more broadly, or sometimes built around the skills of specific artists in our concert programme who are open to engaging with a wider community. In nursery schools for instance, we are usually ‘resident’ for around 6 months, leading a mixture of percussion and singing activities, taking in chamber ensembles with us to perform, and integrating our players into the ‘free-play’ environment of the nursery. We’re making music part of the children’s everyday lives, something that they engage in actively as they are exploring and learning about their world, as well as giving them the experience of hearing and working with professional musicians.

Sometimes in the Learning programme, it looks like we are challenging what chamber music is all about – what it sounds like, who makes it, where it happens. We work not only with music from the traditional chamber music canon, but also often with improvised music,
often creating new music, and often working in collaboration across genres and across artforms. But the concerts, on stage every day at Wigmore Hall, are very much at the centre of our programme and are the inspiration for all of our work. Drawing people into this precious, vibrant, exhilarating world of music is what our programme is about. In fact, it’s what Wigmore Hall is about. In the Learning programme, we tend to focus on people who are less likely to walk through the doors for a conventional evening concert. But enabling people to share in the music, to enrich their lives, to learn about music, and about themselves and the world through music – these are experiences that I look forward to in evening concerts and schools workshops alike.

So perhaps it’s not surprising that on first encountering Music for Life, I experienced it as chamber music. What I noticed was that the musicians communicated with one-another with a sophistication which reflected both a high level of musical proficiency as chamber musicians – they were improvising coherent music seemingly out of thin air – but their emotional connectedness was also strikingly apparent. And this meant that they weren’t just communicating with one another, but with each of the individuals in the room – some of whom had dementia, and some of whom were members of care staff.

In other contexts, we can struggle to find ways to link the work of ‘Wigmore Hall’ – spiritual home of 19th-century Vienna – to the people with whom we are trying to engage – like the toddlers I mentioned earlier for instance. Or at least, it can be hard to convince people that all of those ingredients are going to add up to something worthwhile. In Music for Life, we find that the connection between musicians, their environment, and the people they are working with – is at the centre of the work, and that the content of the workshop, the music, appears from that connection. I think this is part of what the many people living with dementia who have been part of Music for Life workshops are able to give our musicians. Their presence – embodying years of experience and knowledge, but with the words to articulate this history and identity disappearing or gone – this has opened up the possibility of this emotional connection made vivid in the music.

So on first encountering the project, I was interested in how the particular skills that these musicians had could enrich other areas of our work at Wigmore Hall, but I was also interested in how the particular quality of this work, truly ‘person-centred’, could inform our
thinking and challenge us to connect more broadly. It reminded me personally, that pre-conceived ideas of what chamber music ‘was’ – what it sounded like, who was interested in it – were not useful, and not relevant to the music itself. It reminded me that the vital thing is the connection, the shared creation of meaning through music: happening in a concert between composer, performer and audience; or in a workshop between musicians and other people improvising together, or making music together. This moment of connection, or musical ‘flow’ is what gives music its power to move us, to speak to us, or speak for us, and to help us make sense of our lives.

As to why Wigmore Hall would work with people living with dementia, my simple response is, ‘why not?’ Why should we choose to exclude people living with dementia? Padraic described our tendency to compartmentalise people, to put people living with dementia in a category of their own, separate from ourselves. Music doesn’t respect the categories we apply, and Music for Life provides this model, a constant reminder of why we are richer if we seek to connect rather than exclude.

So, just to conclude our presentation about Music for Life, I wanted to describe a little about my work which has been mostly about the sustainability and development of the overall programme since it has been at Wigmore Hall.

Until Wigmore Hall took on the overall management of the project in 2008, Music for Life had been an independent project, developed primarily within Jewish Care settings. The project had some significant strengths in terms of its innovative practice, but also some challenges in terms of its capacity to develop. It had no funding beyond project commissioning, so it was hard to find an ongoing way to invest in or build the team, and Linda had to deal with all aspects of the project management, so there was a limit to how many projects could take place and to how the team could develop in that context.

Having persuaded the Wigmore Hall management and trustees that this was a good new venture to take on, we had to look at our team, our partnerships, and at fundraising. We needed to find a way for the project to be more sustainable – in terms of management capacity and funding – and also more resilient – less dependent on a very small group of people without whom the project could not continue.
Through a partnership with Dementia UK – an organisation specialising in training in dementia care amongst other things – we built a new team of ‘dementia facilitators’ who could replicate the work of the dementia care trainers within Jewish Care and take that aspect of the work out to new settings. Jewish Care have recently become our ‘lead care and development partner’, consolidating their long-term commitment to the project, and we also now work with a number of other care providers, commissioners and care homes.

We now have a mixed funding model, with some work largely commissioned, as per the Jewish Care projects, others part-commissioned, as in our work with Westminster Adult Services, and the remainder of the funding we need raised through trusts and foundations and some individual supporters.

This more diversified funding model has improved our sustainability, but also allowed us to dedicate time each year to invest in developing the project. Part of this has been the vital work of developing the core members of our musician team through musician development days. During workshops, we ask our musicians to take risks, to be open emotionally and musically to the group – and to sustain this openness into the reflective debrief which is a core aspect of the work. I admire the courage of the musicians: their courage to take on the slow pace that the work demands, their courage to do less not more, leaving space as well as time for a response, their courage to offer forward musical ideas with conviction, not knowing how they might be received. In order to achieve this, it has been important to build trust and a sense of ‘team’ amongst the players, to give them the space to work safely together so that they might take risks secure in the knowledge that the other players will support them.

Music for Life remains a highly resourced, expensive project. Fundraising and securing commissions continues to be a challenge for the project. To this end, we have to continue to look carefully at how we expand, diversify and how we build our evidence base.

The last of these is a particular focus for us at the moment. We have welcomed the opportunity to work with Rineke and her team on their insightful research focused on the musicians’ role in the work. Now we have commissioned some research ourselves from
University College London which looks at the outcomes of the work for care staff – addressing the long-term impact of the project and contrasting this to more straightforward, but nevertheless high quality work which is focused solely on the immediate experience of music making. We look forward to sharing the results of this later this year.

We have diversified in a number of ways – welcoming people living with dementia to Wigmore Hall for specially designed concerts and recently to a complete workshop series designed for people living with dementia together with their family carers. We disseminate the work through training, with open training days taking place at Wigmore Hall each year, and recently also through an accredited training programme together with the University of Roehampton.

The work has gently expanded with 10 projects coming up in the current year. But we are also looking at extending our geographical reach with new work in development with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, combining musician training and workshop delivery to build a sustainable new base for the project in Birmingham and the West Midlands area in the future.

And it is a great privilege for us, that the work has been addressed so carefully in the research which is published today, and very exciting for us to see how this research has provided the foundation for the new training taking place in Groningen and The Hague. To see it take on this new life in the Netherlands is inspiring, and especially today, when many of the people involved in the work in both the UK and the Netherlands, as well as further afield, have come together: we look forward to sharing our experiences as the work continues to grow and develop.