Let Life be Like Music! – Carrying out a participatory music project for elderly people with dementia
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Improvisation and collective music-making with a group of elderly people

The Finnish-born population in Sweden is aging. In 2009 the average age of the Sweden Finn women was 61 and of men 59 years. In Stockholm, there are approximately 20 000 Finnish-born citizens, and the amount of Finnish-speaking people in Stockholm is estimated to be around 102 000. In Suomikoti-elderly home (Finn home) in Stockholm, there are rooms for 53 Finnish-born and/or -speaking elderly people. For them their mother tongue is an important part of their feeling of cultural identity.

Many Memories – Many Stories was a creative music improvisation project carried out together with seven residents of Suomikoti-home. Three of the participants were male and four of them were female. The average age of the participants’ was 80 years of age and each of them had a diagnosis of dementia. The aim of the project was to promote the participants’ feeling of collectivity, occupation, engagement and involvement, and therefore the chosen working methods were built on person-centered, multi-sensory and identity reinforcing forms of music-making. During the project that was ended with a collectively composed half-improvised concert, the participants and professional musicians met on the field of performing arts. The concert was performed for the other residents and care-giving staff-members of Suomikoti-home, as well as for the family-members of the participants’.

The project was the final work called Professional Integration Project leading to my graduation from the international NAIP-European Master of Music-program at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm. Prior to the project, I had carried out observation periods at Suomikoti-home and Bo Bergmansgatan Dagverksamhet- day center for elderly people with dementia in Stockholm, collected data on music and dementia through a literature research during my exchange-studies in Prince Claus Conservatoire of Hanze University of Applied Sciences in Groningen, and finally led a preparatory small-scale music project at Solberga Vård och Omsorgsboende-dementia unit in Stockholm.

The aim of Many Moemories, Many Stories – project study was to generate empirical data on what kinds of new cultural working-methods, namely participatory music-making and improvisation activities in a group can be created within and applied to elderly care. The aim was also to provide new information on the demands of multi-disciplinary cross-sector collaboration on musicians for the development of higher artistic and pedagogical music education.

The theme of Kalevala as the point-of-departure

The theme of Kalevala, national epic of Finland gave the project its multi-artistic canvas. The generation of the participants’ has a relationship with the Kalevala-stories both as individual and shared memories, because they all have studied the epic at middle-school age. As a source of artistic inspiration the Kalevala-epic is not only a historical work but instead its thematic legacy lives and reforms even in contemporary arts. In this project the verbal, visual and musical material of the Kalevala-epic was used as a baseline of the music-making activities.

The music workshops were carried out between February 20th and March 21st 2013. The project group included seven elderly participants, an occupational therapist of Suomikoti, assisting care-givers, two music educators (a pianist-singer and a violinist) and me as a project and workshop leader. During the project’s eight sessions, improvisation music was created by using percussion instruments, kantele, piano, body-percussion, words, song and sounds, as well as personal stories. In addition, arrangements of the participants’ favorite music were made and performed. The working-methods were multi-sensory, hence supporting the participants’ different senses – especially aiming to reinforce bodily sensations. Through the diverse use of the Kalevala-theme and reminiscence of Finnish roots and landscapes, the project aimed to support the participants’ sense of cultural identity.

The project was an innovative and different way of promoting the elderly people’s feeling of participation and active engagement though the process of preparing a concert and performing self-made pieces of music. All of the project’s working phases and the final concert were documented on video for later analysis. The participants were
also assisted to answer to questions about the project, and the collaboration partners were interviewed during and after the project with semi-structured thematic interview questions and by using questionnaire forms. The master research study on Many Memories, Many Stories –project also included views on participatory creative music-workshops applied for elderly care by international improvisation artists, music educators and different professionals in the field of elderly care. The study was evaluated by the examination jury of the Royal College of Music and approved by the international faculty of NAIP-European Master of Music program in June 2013. It was rewarded with Kerstin Elliasson-prize for Excellence in Master Research in December 2013.

In this presentation I am describing the process of Many Memories, Many Stories- project, as well as showing selected video material from the workshop sessions and the final concert, and lastly presenting some of the findings of the project, also by referring to the collected feedback data from the participants and collaborators. Such outcomes are increased activity in participation, social team-formation, greater openness to try out new things, increased self-esteem, ownership and pride of the project, as well as improved capacity to remember the project and other participants, to name a few.