

TALES OF THE YOUNG PERSONS ORCHESTRA



Introduction

Tales of the Young Person's Orchestra (TYPO) was a community music project designed to familiarise children in special education to Western classical music. The Project was funded by The Radcliffe Trust and by an individual donor.

TYPO was grounded on a reciprocal workshop strategy whereby participants explored the sound worlds, themes and characteristic instruments of classical music while also drawing on the nuances of their individual musical engagement. The music was not conventionally *taught to* the participants, but *put at the service* of their expressive, communicational and sensory needs and preferences. The final outcome, a performance, a recording, a sound collage, or a combination of all, was the result of a process of mutual discovery.

“This has been a truly life-changing and life-affirming project to be involved in. The dramatic change in not only the students in each setting, but in the SÓN musicians involved too, is incredibly powerful to witness.”

- Robin Browning, Artistic Director - SÓN Orchestra

Our Partners

TYPO saw supported creative music-making take place in three Special Educational Needs settings in Southampton:

- **The Avenue (Rosewood Free School)** - (19-25yrs with PMLD and SLD)
- **Springwell School** - (4-11yrs with children within Autism Spectrum)
- **Mary Rose School** - (2-16yrs with mixed SEN/D, SLD and PMLD setting)

Following a collaborative model, which we have developed and consolidated over the years, we explored an innovative partnership between SoCo Music Project and the Southampton-based SÓN Orchestra in association with Turner Sims. SoCo's experienced Music Leader and composer Ignacio Agrimbau (MA, PhD) and musicians from SÓN designed an inclusive music-making programme that is responsive to the possibilities, talent and preferences of the students. Our flexible approach was grounded on an understanding of the unique communicational, sensory and emotional needs of the children that will represent a source of potential and creative exploration.



Our Participants

This project saw supported creative music-making take place in three Special Educational Needs settings in Southampton during the Spring Term:

ROSEWOOD/THE AVENUE

The Avenue is the name that has recently been given to the semi-independent unit that is attached to Rosewood Free School, and it is officially part of the premises of the Rose Road day centre. There are two classes, all within the 19-25 years age range. We worked with three students from Avenue 2 and two from Avenue 1. The Avenue 2 students have Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD). They have language comprehension skills and are able to communicate either using some speech, or electronic communication boards. They are very good friends, work together extremely well, have done a lot of music in the past, and can describe what they like or what they want to do. They are all wheelchair users and have quite limited mobility. Yet they can play the right instruments in the right position. The students from Avenue 1 absolutely love music, but their engagement with others is more dependent on 1:1 support. They do not use speech and have limited understanding. One of them can play scales on a keyboard and composes tunes and patterns by ear. Engagement needs to follow a different pace, and they are more likely to do the same things for longer periods of time. Their moods can change quite fast if they are feeling uncomfortable.

“A great experience dissecting a well known classical piece and having the students re-arrange it so that it became a piece they could own.”

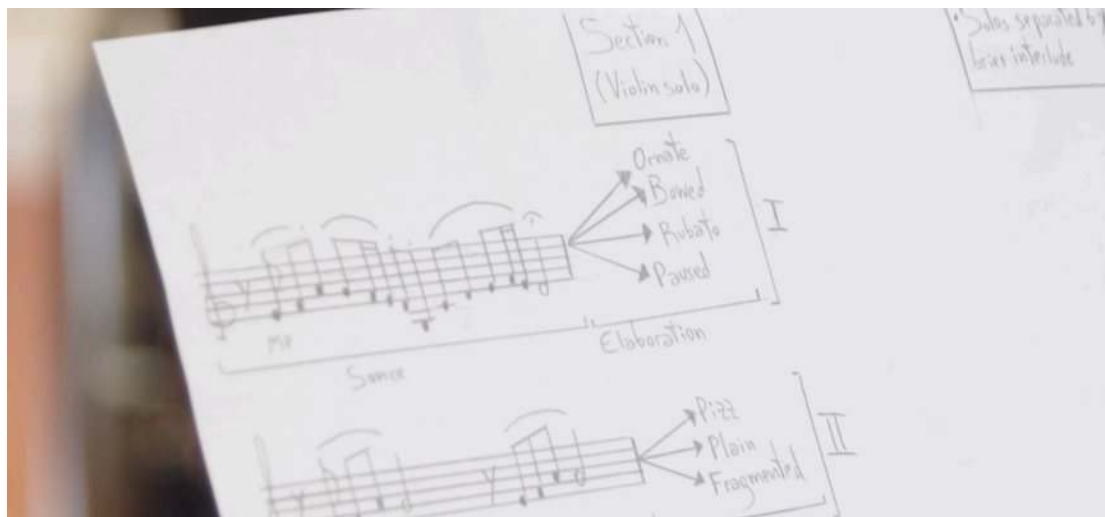
- Adrian Cleverley, Trombonist - SÓN Orchestra


SPRINGWELL SCHOOL

Springwell is the largest primary special school in Europe. The majority of students are fully mobile, and there is a very large proportion of children whose condition relates, or is clearly within, autism spectrum disorders (ASD). We worked with children from 5 different classes. They can all understand speech, two can speak fluidly, two can use some language, and another one is non-verbal. Three of them can handle new situations more or less well, and can sit down and listen to descriptions or prompts with relatively ease, and two can become a bit anxious and they can need quite a bit of support. Association is quite critical at Springwell, as it is important for these students to go clearly from the known to the unknown. So our starting point needed to explore their individual pieces, perform some music for them, and then bring in the Beethoven variations gradually.

MARY ROSE ACADEMY

Mary Rose provides for a wide spectrum of ages and abilities, but our participants will all come from one of the 'sensory' classes, aged around 11-13. The term 'sensory class' is usually used to refer to students with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). All of our participants have very limited mobility, some also very complex medical needs. They all have some familiarity with the actions and sounds of music sessions, but some will have limited situational awareness. A few students are closer to the SLD spectrum and can make binary choices, and one is decidedly within SLD.





“The group dynamic was very well handled, engaging every student and keeping, what it felt like, the right balance between learning and making music fun and accessible.”

- Anca Campanie, Violinist - SÓN Orchestra

Our Principles

Classical music contents were based on two core sources of material. A specific or type of repertoire that the visiting musicians choose to represent their instrument, and a composition which is part of (some of) the SÓN musicians' repertoire.

In this project, Beethoven's 6th *Pastoral* symphony, which is currently part of SÓN's repertoire, was used as a flexible source. This piece not only provided a diverse source of tunes, rhythms, instrumental colours and moods, but also a descriptive framework which was used as a canvas to associate and combine the classical contents with the musical interests of the students.

The final result was not a learned performance of an adaptation of the *Pastoral* symphony, but a re-assemblage of it in light of the listening experience and musical interests of – and decisions made by participants. Whereas in some cases the re-elaboration of contents can lead to new fixed compositions, in other cases the outcome remain processual: the contents of Beethoven's composition were used as flexible performance materials which were reshaped as they were performed in the context of interaction with students.

Finally, even though there were elements of story-telling included in the workshop process, the title 'Tales of the Young Person's Orchestra' does not allude to the composition of fictional or real stories in relation to the music, but the experiential arc through which students explored and redefined classical music along the lines of their own discovery. Thus each individual narrative of musical engagement constitutes a 'tale of the orchestra'.

Our Delivery

A key aspect of this project is that the unique skills, knowledge and creativity that the SÓN musicians brought to the workshops were a part of a process of mutual discovery, as they will also learn about some of the familiar ways in which the learners make music, and their musical preferences.

Our workshop model followed a progression from early exchanges between facilitators and participants to the gradual assemblage of collaboratively devised performance materials and types of musical interaction. This process was different in each setting. Our model had three parts:

1 ESTABLISHING RECIPROCITY

Participants and visiting musicians shared their artistry. The participants performed, either through a warm-up activity, a familiar interaction routine, or a workshopped piece, their music to the visiting musicians. The musicians introduced their instruments individually, choosing any part of the repertoire (this also led to interactions with the participants). The participants were then introduced to key fragments of the *Pastoral* (birdsong, country dance, storm etc.) in advance, and then visiting musicians, as an ensemble, performed arrangements of short segments (thematic sections, compact elaborative sequences).

This was followed by a stage of early association, in which particular inputs from students, as a group or individually, were combined with, or elaborated in relation to the contents of the symphony. At the end of this stage, participants had been introduced to the key instrumental families of the classical orchestra and selections of the *Pastoral*. Visiting musicians had an overview of the different ways in which the students make music, as well as their preferences. Finally, at this point we had done some rough experimentation combining music made by the participants with the repertoire and creative practice brought by the musicians.

2 COLLABORATIVE RECREATION

Much of the nitty-gritty of workshopping occurred here, and it built on the preferences and results explored in the early association. It was at this point that our performance/piece started to unfold as a set of subsequent episodes (Springwell), a less sectionalised, more collectively assembled piece (Rosewood/The Avenue), or a set of types of semi-improvised musical interactions (Mary Rose). We had a clearer idea of what bits of material from the symphony we are going to elaborate, and in relation to what type of participant input we will be elaborating them. For example, some students expressed a clear preference to play whistles and overtone flutes to create a birdsong piece, so we could take materials from the end of 2nd movement as a flexible starting point for elaboration or a participant engaged in music-making by kicking a drum from their wheelchair, we were able to develop a feedback system in which each kick triggers a loud, short gesture from the 4th movement.

Elaboration involved different stages of decision-making, which was done in different ways depending on the communicational needs of the participants. At this stage, decisions concerned what materials are used (choosing from a range of options), how the materials are played and modified, and when they are used. We encouraged decisions in relation to all instruments during the sessions that were attended by just one musician.

“Above all I think it was the feeling of it as a joint contribution that made it such a pleasure.”

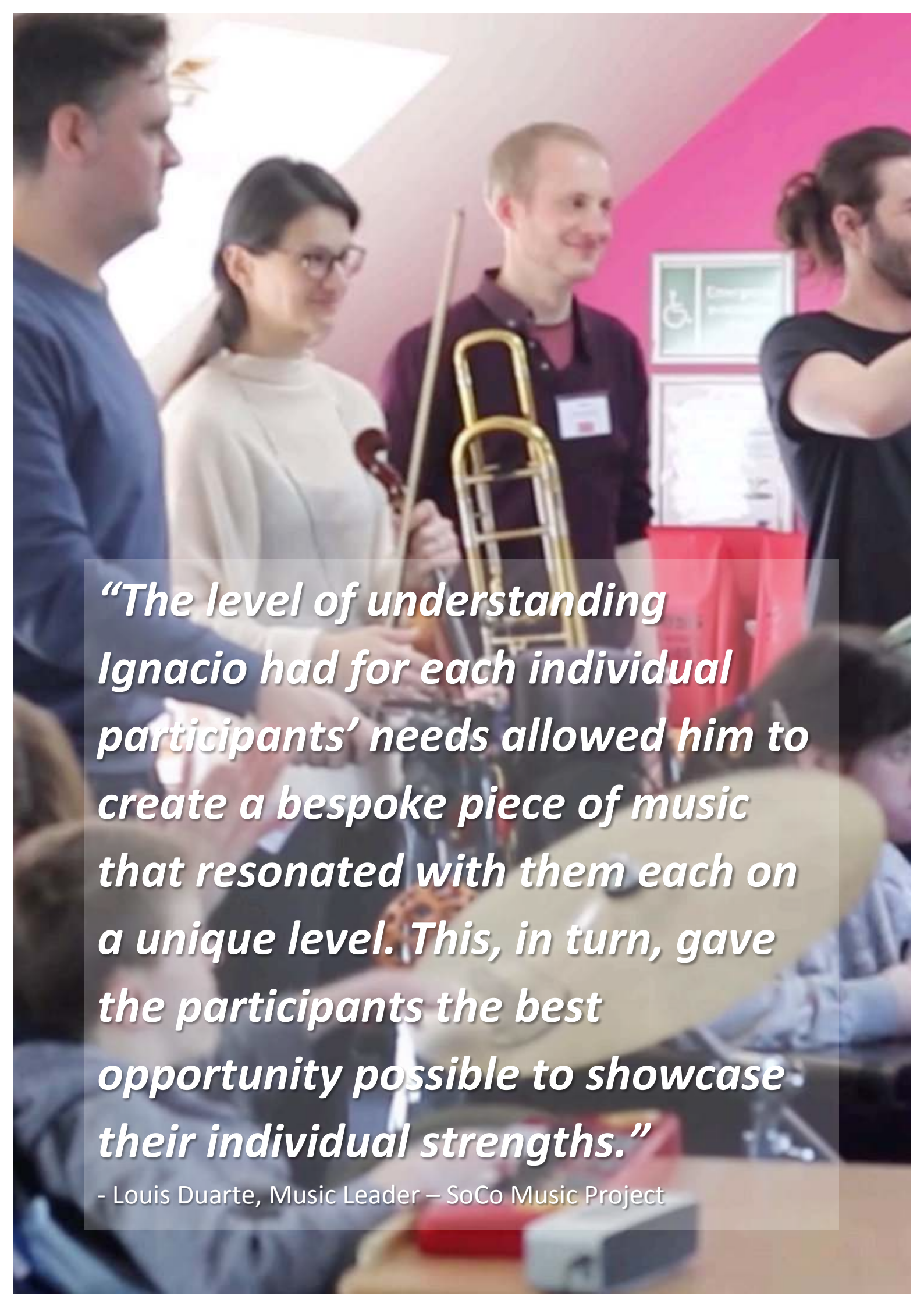
- Andrew Knights, Oboist - SÓN Orchestra

3 EXPRESSION FAMILIARITY

Following a strong foundation of musical interaction-types and elaborations with our participants we were able to start reinforcing our confidence and familiarity with the sound worlds of each piece in three ways. Firstly, we confirmed the contents of each individual piece, section or feedback system (in each setting). Secondly, we were able to enable decision-making processes that determined the overall structure of the performances.

Finally, we went through a set order of sections/pieces/ interactions which we were then able to document and share in performance within the settings. To achieve this we used graphic scores and multi-sensory narrative to document and reinforce the overall structure of the piece.



A group of people are gathered in a room with pink walls. In the center, a man in a dark purple polo shirt holds a trumpet. To his left, a woman in a white turtleneck holds a violin. Other people are visible in the background, some looking towards the center. A sign with a wheelchair icon and the text 'Emergency' is visible on the wall.

“The level of understanding Ignacio had for each individual participants’ needs allowed him to create a bespoke piece of music that resonated with them each on a unique level. This, in turn, gave the participants the best opportunity possible to showcase their individual strengths.”

- Louis Duarte, Music Leader – SoCo Music Project

Impact

The project has had a very strong impact on our collaborators at the settings as well as at the SÓN orchestra.

SPRINGWELL SCHOOL

The project was a new and inspiring experience to school participants in two ways. Firstly, it promoted a form of facilitation that is focused on the children's learning through creative engagement with practical music-making. Secondly, the presence of professional musicians attracted the attention of members of staff and students alike. By the end of the project, the school's music coordinator had made a request to the school's senior administration team to have these type of sessions permanently.

MARY ROSE

The project built on a growing collaboration between SoCo and the school. Teachers and members of senior administration have highlighted the effectiveness with which our workshop approach have reached out and spoken for the needs and preferences of their more vulnerable learners. SoCo's facilitator was invited to deliver CPD sessions at the school following a series of sessions which were attended by members of the school administrative team. After the final performance, the school's head-teacher initiated discussions with SoCo to start a permanent collaboration, potentially funded by the school.

“Working alongside Ignacio and the other musicians, it helped me overcome my anxieties of making up different motifs and rhythmic variety, and the children themselves were so welcoming and open to ideas I feel we as a unit developed each other.”

- Claire Wright, Percussionist - SÓN Orchestra

ROSEWOOD/THE AVENUE

The project provided a unique chance to re-engage with a group of older learners which whom we had worked in the past, but also to start collaborations with The Avenue independently from our past work at Rosewood. The positive results and feedback that the project achieved has led to new proposals for independent funding possibilities for creative projects involving the older learners.

SÓN ORCHESTRA

Participation in this project is part of the orchestra's growing learning and participation activities. The experience was highly valued by the practitioners involved, as well as by the director, Robin Browning. It has introduced them to a wide range of practices and workshop methods, as well as the type of unconditionally open and adaptable music making championed by Community Music.

