

Spitalfields Music & Queen Mary, University of London

Making community through music in Spitalfields, London

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Summary report from a research project funded by Creativeworks London

Background to Spitalfields Music

Spitalfields Music was established in 1976 with the vision to change lives and aspirations through music in London's East End. The organisation runs two festivals a year and a year-round Learning & Participation programme with a vision to be a 'positive catalyst of achievement' for the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and beyond.

Projects bring together people from the local community with world-class artists in live music experiences, through both professional and educational projects, with a mission to focus on music and its power to bring people together and change perspectives.

The geographical area has been subject to major changes in both demography and physical infrastructure. The history of Spitalfields' development can be read through various contrasting perspectives and it is often seen as an area of conservation as well as development; of hyper-capitalism as well as a home to the radical left (Jacobs, 1999). The borough of Tower Hamlets has long been an area in flux with high levels of population mobility and high levels of in-migration. It has also been associated with many radical ideas within social history including: the late 1800s poverty maps of Charles Booth; the rise of Marxism; health and welfare reforms; the Settlement Movement; new approaches to social housing; and more recently the living wage movement and a new model of library provision for the 21st century (the Ideas Store model). The area is now characterised in particular by its hyper-diversity in economic and social demography. The average salary of those who work in the borough is £78,000 but one fifth of households in Tower Hamlets have an annual income of less than £15,000; 41% of the borough's population were born outside the UK and 90 different languages are spoken in Tower Hamlets schools (Tower Hamlets Fairness Commission, 2013).

As a cultural actor, Spitalfields Music is an implicit part of the story of sometimes-controversial and on-going regeneration and gentrification in London's East End. However, Spitalfield Music's work is a form of charitable activity, improving the quality of musical experiences for all those living in the area. The organisation has been developing a new approach to working with its Neighbourhood Schools and many of its existing projects deploy a 360 degree approach to engagement which includes young people, local parents, teachers, artists and management working side by side. Spitalfields Music was testing this through the Takeover Festival, delivered within and with schools in Tower Hamlets from 2013-14, and featured in this report.

As Clare Lovett, Director of Learning & Participation wrote for *The Roundhouse: Call to Create*, a national network blog:

Our daily preoccupation is how we use music as a catalyst for engagement with our local communities. We do this through working with artists who are inspired by dialogue between place, people and their own artistic practice. Takeover plays with this concept, placing young people at the centre, combining them with our world-class artists, staff and parents to re-examine what 'great art for everyone' might be. Our provocation is that great art can and is being made by 7 – 8 year olds and that artists, when supported by a cultural institution steeped in partnership working, to innovate and invigorate their professional artistic practice. This is achieved through actively building in critical reflective practice, enabling our artists to take even greater creative risks.

Research funding from Creativeworks London provided an opportunity to interrogate this developing model and to start the process of exploring how to measure the short, mid and long term impact of the work.

Research background and methodology

Researchers at Queen Mary University of London studied this work with the aim of interrogating how Spitalfields Music are developing community engagement and a connection to place through music. They aimed to explore the impact of the work in the community, to highlight learning for the organisation as well as the wider community-oriented arts sector. The study focused on the impact of Spitalfields Music projects on participants in the Takeover Festivals held at two primary schools during 2013 and 2014. Takeover enables Year 3 pupils to create, programme and produce their own festival to be experienced by their entire school, families and the general public. Research data was collected through interviews with participants, artists, teachers and members of the Spitalfields Music team, focus groups with children and observations of the workshops and performances.

There has been some previous research about the ways in which performing music and participating in festivals can engender a sense of place (Duffy, 2000). A sense of attachment to place can be enhanced by community participation that helps to strengthen social relationships (Manzo and Perkins, 2006). Tapping into the emotional bonds of place can help members of a community articulate and act upon their emotions. Furthermore, processes of collective action work better when emotional ties to places and their inhabitants are cultivated (Manzo and Perkins, 2006).

Participation in creative activities ranging from music to art and embodied practices such as craft making can be linked to the creation of a sense of place as well as a range of social gains (Newman et al, 2003). Via an artistic practice, the space and practice of production link the creator to understand the world through their material relations with it, for example as David Gautlett (2011) argues 'making is connecting'. In this way, we can link the practice of making or creative practice with a sense of place and the creation of community – both individually as the creator relates their subjective self to the world through their material creations, and also as communities or clusters of makers within the world and within a particular place.

Music in particular is not placeless, but is tightly bound with politics of place and a struggle for identity and belonging. The production of place through music is found in different geographical places, times, and across a range of musical genres (Leyshon et al, 1998). This literature provided useful background to thinking about the work being done by Spitalfields Music.

The Takeover Festivals

The aim of Takeover was to work beyond the curriculum to explore different kinds of learning, social interactions and non-linguistic communication, and from this, foster new learning styles, identify hidden talents, and better understand the role of creativity within the classroom. In addition, Takeover aimed to help parents develop greater insight into the benefits of arts projects to support learning, raise aspirations and build teams. The Takeover project is currently in its third year of facilitating festivals within East London schools (during 2015).

The project is a way of creating a natural space for dialogue between young people, artists and communities, spotlighting the benefits of creative learning, which go far beyond the national curriculum.

There have been 3 core principles that run through each festival

- Quality: the combination of excellent music making and planning
- Partnerships: 360 degree engagement with children, teachers, parents, support staff, artists and staff from Spitalfields Music
- Enriching artistic practice: for our team of artists and teachers

The projects involved in the research

- Two one-form entry primary schools in Tower Hamlets (Shapla and Kobi Nazrul Primary Schools)
- Directly engaging 60 children, 35 parents, 4 teachers and teaching support staff, 2 parent liaison officers and 2 head teachers
- To deliver two festivals which worked across each school involving 360 young people
- These festival days were attended by 75 parents and guests
- The projects involved 6 artists, 12 supporting artists including apprentices from Spitalfields Music Trainee Music Leader Scheme and Royal Academy of Music Open Academy students, as well as 2 production staff
- The projects created 24 sessions (comprising a total of 72 hours) across the two schools delivering a mix of half day and day-long creative workshops, incorporating 6 project observations and preparation meetings (comprising a further 18 hours of activity)
- The research team undertook 18 focus groups, a number of research observation sessions and 14 one to one interviews.

Report findings and summary

The research highlighted that the Takeover Festival held at Kobi Nazrul was, on balance, more successful in engaging the school community through music making activities than the one at Shapla. This is in part because the project had sufficient time and momentum to develop a sense of community amongst the parents. The school allowed more time to work with the parents and make a direct link between them and the festival taking place in the school. While time is critical, however, the success of the Takeover might also be due to the emphasis put on community-building by the artists involved. At least one of the artists, Rus Nygård-Pearson, had a very clear vision of the importance of community-building and he carried this into the work. As he put it: *“I think the work you do in a project is actually about developing a community in a room. And if you can show people that you can develop a group really quickly so that everyone trusts each other, then that is a skill you can transfer beyond the walls of a session and show people the potential that the world isn’t necessarily quite as hostile a place as we think, that it isn’t quite as difficult and challenging and there are discoveries to be made all the time about people and things that you see day in and day out. I think that through creative work and pushing yourself into new creative endeavours you can kind of enforce that outside, at home and in your neighbourhood”*.

Kobi Nazrul was **an excellent case study in demonstrating the role of the artist as an agent for social change**. The approach that the artists took to their activities in both music making and in creating visual arts and crafts was successful in bringing parents (who generally exist on the margins of the school community) together in the school. **The immersive, theatrical**

element of the work within the school building itself was also able to trigger a stronger sense of memory and place for the audience as well as the participants through the extraordinary experience that the festival provided in contrast to everyday lives and realities.

The relative success of the community music project rested partly upon the strategic vision of the organisation delivering it, but also on the role of the artist leaders to successfully interpret their brief and create meaningful experiences for their participants. As we documented in relation to the Takeover Festivals, clear communication of the community engagement goals from the parent organisation to the artist leader was essential if the project was to fulfil its community-oriented as well as artistic goals and create a beneficial legacy for participants.

Spitalfields Music sought to balance inclusivity without sacrificing a high standard of excellence and this was a constant priority in the work of the team leading these projects. In this work, the focus was on **process rather than performance**, with an expectation that an experienced musician, and a clear set of goals for the outcome as communicated by Spitalfields Music, would create a high standard performance. **In this regard, the key to maintaining Spitalfields Music's success was to carefully select experienced artists with whom they work regularly, who have experience of working with diverse communities and who are invested in the shared goals of the organisation.**

It was important that there was already a **relationship of trust with community partners and this enabled Spitalfields Music's artists to have the freedom to take creative risks** in the Takeover Festivals, for example the freedom to take over an entire school building for a day. This creative freedom engenders a job satisfaction that ensures artists work hard to deliver professional quality inclusive performances, unique to place, which can strengthen community relationships and build reputation for the organisation as well as for their own career portfolios.

In summary, Takeover provides a model for:

- Balancing the dualism of excellence versus inclusivity in a community setting.
- Building strong relationships between artists and teachers.
- Strengthening community ties through building in parental engagement activities as an integral part of community music projects.

Through the festivals, a sense of pride for the young people that were involved was created. It helped to support them to explore their identities within the school, their social groupings and beyond. As one young musician told us after his performance: *"I was singing all the songs to my sister and she wouldn't let me stop. In the performance, I sang a solo ... I said to my brother that when I grow up I'm going to be a songwriter!"*

For teachers it was a way of seeing their class from a different perspective. One teacher said that she appreciated how the festival allowed the children to:

"come up with their own words for their songs and actually how complex some of those words were ... it really made it clear to me that those children have it in them to come up with really complex language and it's quite abstract. Words like that are very poetic, very abstract for children, it's not the literal meaning but they understood it ... whenever I teach poetry again I will take on board what the music leader was doing and put that into my lessons ... it was actually the least confident or the quietest ones that were very enthusiastic and [who] came up with some of those amazing sentences."

The festivals also improved the confidence of some of the children involved and as one teacher told us: *“confidence has really blossomed, [there is] more engagement, I can see the children actually singing whilst they’re doing their work. But I think it’s that enthusiasm and that confidence has really come through”.*

The projects helped to draw **the learning into the family and to support education within the family** and one respondent told us that: *“The parents are a lot more involved in the children’s learning”.*

Since the project has been delivered and evaluated, Spitalfields Music has reported that it has seen the following areas of improvements in its approach to working with schools:

- Enriching partnerships – working smarter through informed targeting of resources and expertise.
- Changing teachers’ approaches to creative learning in their everyday practice and broadening the aspirations for their pupils.
- Drawing the learning into the family and supporting education within the family.
- Improving a sense of school community and confidence for pupils.

Next Steps

It is Spitalfields Music’s long-term ambition to encourage other cultural organisations to see how they might deliver this way of working in their own towns, villages and cities, generating national conversations about innovation and best practice in high-quality creative learning. In addition, the organisation is seeking publishing and conference opportunities to share the findings of this piece of research. These have included:

- Institute of Education – Community Arts Conference (November 2014)
- Barbican Guildhall – Reflective Practitioner Conference (March 2015)
- National Student Community Arts Conference (July 2015)

End Note

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