Learning from the innovative community music activities of L'Association Musique Et Situations de Handicap

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Dated
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INTRODUCTION

In February and March 2011 I travelled to France to observe the work of a number of non-profit organisations who are supporting people with a disability to learn and play music. These five weeks were one of the richest and most rewarding learning experiences of my life. The following report outlines the activities that I saw, the discussions that I had with the people I met, and my reflections on the experience as a whole.

I am and will remain indebted to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for enabling me to undertake this wonderful journey. I am also grateful to the many people listed in this report who took time out of their working schedules to talk with me and who made me feel very welcome whenever I met them.

I hope that in this report I have been able to capture the excitement I felt on returning to Perth at the end of my Fellowship, and that the ideas I have shared might encourage music teachers and community music organisations in both Western Australia and beyond to continue sharing their love of music with whoever might come their way.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Description

My plan in undertaking this Churchill Fellowship was to spend five weeks in France alongside the organisation Musique Et Situations de Handicap (MESH), observing the work they are doing to help people with a disability experience and enjoy music. My goal was to learn from MESH and their affiliated organisations so as to inform the work I am doing in Perth with Catch Music and the wider community music network, and to generate ideas for new music initiatives that might benefit people with a disability in Western Australia.

Programme Highlights

The majority of my Fellowship was spent in Paris visiting the staff of MESH and observing their activities, though I did make several regional trips to other organisations across France. I was grateful to spend a lot of time with Adeline de Lépinay, the CEO of MESH, and Jean-François Timmel, the Communications Manager, who were kind enough to share their organisational philosophies and put me in touch with several partner organisations. I was also fortunate to meet the founder of MESH, Magali Viallefond, at two training seminars for music teachers in Paris. Other inspirational groups that I visited included: SIDVEM, an organisation supporting people with a vision impairment to participate in mainstream music education by learning and using music braille; L’Arche, an international association with a progressive approach to disability and community living; and Force Majeure, an organisation that runs music activities with people with a disability to promote the goals of access and inclusion.

Lessons Learnt

The conversations I had and the activities I witnessed during my Fellowship all deeply enriched my understanding of what it means to support people with a disability to experience music. My reflections led me to five broad conclusions. (1) Every music student, regardless of disability, is a unique individual with their own strengths and challenges. (2) It is vital to understand a person’s motivations in approaching music: Do they really want music lessons or do they simply want a musical experience? (3) Realistic expectations will help alleviate the fears that a music teacher may have around what they can achieve with a student. (4) The best way a music teacher can learn to work with people with a disability is to give it a go. (5) The second best way is to hear from other teachers and share stories.

As a result of my research I plan to establish, among other things, a network of Western Australian music teachers who are interested in exploring the topic of music and disability, and in sharing stories of each other’s challenges and successes.
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MAIN BODY

Background

Four years ago while I was working for the Disability Services Commission of Western Australia, it occurred to me that music, and group music-making in particular, might offer a way to help people overcome issues of social isolation and loneliness. I had heard it said that people make friends in three ways: through existing relationships (a friend of a friend); through proximity (by meeting in the same workplace or neighbourhood); or through a shared passion or interest. Music is something that almost everyone loves, so why not harness this potential and organise informal music activities as a way for people with a disability to meet other community members?

In 2007 I helped launch Catch Music – a small non-profit organisation that supports people to pursue their love of music – and since then we have started five “community jam sessions” in different parts of Perth where anyone from the community can come and play music. The sessions have been a remarkable success. Around 15 to 25 people come to each session every week. If they have an instrument, they bring it along; otherwise, they sing or borrow a percussion instrument. Not only have the groups succeeded musically, they have also helped many people form new and interesting relationships. After each session most participants hang around, talking and drinking coffee. Within the groups, many people have formed individual relationships, with small groups of them getting together in their own time to play music and rehearse their songs. The sessions are fulfilling the goal of using music to create opportunities for people to form supportive relationships.

In 2009 I was made aware of a number of organisations in France that were working in the field of music and disability. Having studied music at university in the United Kingdom, I knew that France had a strong music education system and a healthy commitment to community music. Someone recommended an organisation called Musique Et Situations de Handicap (MESH) and the founder of that organisation, a woman named Magali Viallefond. From what I could learn through internet research, Magali had made a considerable contribution to research and practice in France around the issue of music and disability. MESH was 25 years old (in 2009) and it seemed that they had significant experience running musical activities for people with a disability. I also learnt of an umbrella organisation run by MESH called the Reseau National Musique et Handicap which had been formed in 2007 as a network of individuals and organisations that were interested in music and disability. It struck me that such a network could be valuable in Western Australia to galvanise the work being done by several as yet unconnected organisations.

With this information in mind, I applied for a Churchill Fellowship in early 2010 to study the activities of MESH, so as to observe first-hand the activities I had read about, and generate new ideas for what might be achieved in Australia. Having found out that my application was successful, I began planning my Churchill Fellowship. I wrote to MESH and arranged to meet with them in February 2011, and agreed with them that during my first week they would help me identify other organisations in Paris and regional France that I could visit and people that I could interview.
I travelled to France for nine weeks from 9 January to 13 March 2011. I spent the first four weeks on a French language course (I already had intermediate French skills but wanted to consolidate my abilities before the research component of my trip), and then from early February to mid March I spent five weeks carrying out my actual Churchill Fellowship. For these five weeks I was based in Paris, though I made several regional trips to other parts of France. The Fellowship was a wonderful experience and I learnt an enormous amount. The things that I saw and the conversations that I had helped transform my thinking around music and disability, and already, within ten weeks of returning to Perth, they have led me to launch several new initiatives that I believe could benefit the Western Australian community in a significant way.

Musique Et Situations de Handicap (MESH)

As I had planned, the first step that I took in my five-week Fellowship program was to visit the organisation Musique Et Situations de Handicap (MESH) at their office in Margency, in the northern suburbs of Paris. MESH was of great interest to me, as I imagined it to be the sort of organisation that Catch Music could become in another ten years or so. Simply witnessing the organisation itself would be a great learning experience – how it was run, the people involved, their model of operation and funding structure.

On arriving at MESH I was greeted by Adeline de Lépinay, the CEO, and Jean-François Timmel, the Communications Manager, both of whom spoke excellent English. (Although I was prepared to use my limited French, it was always a relief when the people I met spoke English better than I spoke French!) Adeline and Jean-François introduced me to the other employees at MESH – Sandrine Torchy, the training seminar coordinator, and Doriane Simonnet, a work-experience student who was undertaking a four-month internship. Over the next few weeks I met with all four of these people at different times – in the MESH office in Margency, on training programs that they were running for local music teachers, and socially on the weekends in Paris. They were all very kind to me and I greatly appreciate their hospitality and willingness to share their experiences and their thoughts on the work they are doing.

The first thing that struck me about the work that MESH is doing was that it is predominantly geared towards music education. The majority of their activities involve either (a) support to people with a disability who want to learn music, or (b) support to teachers who are teaching music to people with a disability. This is different to the work I am involved with in Perth through Catch Music, which is primarily about bringing people together and helping people play music with whatever musical skills they already have. Catch Music does not offer music teaching and we are not (as yet) integrated in any formal way as part of the West Australian music education system. MESH does organise workshops for individuals to play music, for example in groups of one or two people under the direction of a music facilitator, but as far as I could tell these workshops are organised on an ad hoc basis and do not form part of MESH’s raison d’être at present.

MESH was founded in 1984 by a woman named Magali Viallefond. The idea for MESH grew out of her work teaching and playing music with people with a disability. For the first decade and a half, MESH was a small organisation that operated specifically in Val-d’Oise, a governmental district with a population of 1.2 million in the suburban and semi-rural areas north of Paris. Magali was able to secure support from the Val-d’Oise local government, enabling MESH to grow and become quite active within that region of France. As it grew, MESH faced increasing
demand from more and more people, and from wider geographical areas. Eventually Magali realised that the most efficient and appropriate way to ensure that people with a disability were able to learn music would be to tap into the mainstream education system, in both Val d’Oise and France as a whole. If every music teacher in France was able and willing to accept students with a disability, the number of people who would be able to access music would increase dramatically.

Over the next 25 years, MESH has stuck to this philosophy – that the best way to assist people with a disability to learn music is to work with local music teachers and music schools to ensure that they themselves have the resources and inclination to teach music to people with a disability. In other words, MESH’s core business is to support people with a disability to participate in the mainstream music education system.

In order to understand how this philosophy works in practice, it is important to understand a little about the French music education system. In Australia, if someone wants to learn a musical instrument as a child, they will typically access music tuition in one of two ways: either they will be offered instrumental music lessons in their primary school (usually from peripatetic music teachers: teachers who teach instrumental students in a number of different schools), or they will seek private tuition through an independent music teacher (who may teach from their own home, from the student’s home, or from a communal teaching venue of some sort). In France, these methods of teaching are rare. Most children in France learn a musical instrument at a specialist music school, or what are known as “conservatoires”. Most cities and large towns in France have a conservatoire. Any child who wants to start learning a musical instrument will begin by enrolling in their nearest conservatoire, and will attend music lessons on-site from whoever the relevant musical instrument teacher is for their particular choice of instrument. The conservatoire may also offer other group classes (theory or musicianship) which a student might take in addition to their instrumental lessons.

As a child progresses in his or her musical study, they will continue to learn music at the same conservatoire throughout their childhood. Some conservatoires may have relationships with nearby schools – for example, if a student wants to take music classes as part of their mainstream education, a primary or high school might agree with a nearby conservatoire that a particular student will travel to the conservatoire for their lessons (i.e. the primary or high school will out-source music classes to the conservatoire). If a student makes considerable progress and shows a lot of promise, he or she might transfer to a more prestigious conservatoire, for example the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in Paris.

In terms of music and disability, the important distinction between the Australian and French education systems is that in France music students are likely to learn music as part of an institution, whereas in Australia students are more likely to learn music from an independent teacher. The ramifications of this are subtle but significant. On 11 February 2005 the French National Assembly passed a landmark piece of legislation to ensure that people with a disability experience “true equality in all aspects of life”. As part of this, cultural institutions throughout France were required to ensure that all their activities – including educational activities – were accessible for people with a disability; and one of the specific outcomes was that every music conservatoire would be required to teach music to whoever walked through the door, regardless of whether that person had a physical or intellectual disability. It was incumbent on each
conservatoire to ensure that their music teachers were able and willing to teach music to a person with a disability and that they – as an organisation or institution – were not discriminating. Given that in Australia most students access music education through individual music teachers, it is hard to see how a similar piece of legislation could be applied in Australia. Most private instrumental teachers reserve the right to teach music to whoever they choose, and to demand that a private music teacher accepts any student that turns up to their door would not be the same as requiring institutions to do the same.

This legislation in France has opened up many opportunities for MESH and the work they are doing. Since 2005, more and more people with a disability are approaching their local conservatoire to enquire about learning an instrument, and more and more conservatoires are being confronted by what they see as potentially challenging students. Hence the growing demand for an organisation such as MESH. Over the past five years MESH have positioned themselves as a resource centre to assist conservatoires overcome the barriers or difficulties they face in taking on people with a disability, and as an advocacy centre for people with a disability and their families who are experiencing difficulty finding or being accepted by a conservatoire. There is no other organisation in France that is doing this work so specifically, and as such MESH has become something of a national call centre for people around the country who are struggling with the issue of music education and disability.

There are four main components to the work that MESH is doing:

Firstly, MESH organises training sessions, workshops, professional-development and other activities aimed at musicians and music teachers to encourage them to think more broadly about disability and the possibilities for teaching music to people with a disability. As I will discuss later, this does not necessarily involve substantial training or skills transfer – a lot of the time the main benefit to music teachers is the simple encouragement and understanding that teaching music to a person with a disability is not “rocket science” and in fact does not often require any additional skills at all. Each year MESH organises a series of training seminars (or “formations”) throughout the year, covering a range of different topics aimed at a variety of target audiences (e.g. from music teachers, to musicians, to organisational administrators, to people who are simply interested in the topic). These training seminars are published in a catalogue which can be found online at MESH’s website. The training seminars for 2010-2011 included:

- Welcoming people with a disability in places of musical teaching and performance
- The physical accessibility of public cultural and musical buildings for people with a disability
- The adaption of musical curricula in teaching practice for people with a disability
- The question of instrumentation for a musical activity involving people with a disability
- Music, early childhood and disability
- Music as a game

Secondly, MESH offers advice directly to teachers and students throughout the country. If a person with a disability runs into difficulty finding or accessing a conservatoire through which to learn music, MESH will provide information on local conservatoires, and will help negotiate with the nearest conservatoire to enable the person to attend – for example, by informing the conservatoire of their obligations under the 2005 legislation, by reassuring them of the relative
normalcy of teaching music to someone with a disability (e.g. talking through their fears and concerns), and by offering resources, information and continued assistance throughout the process to enable the person with a disability to attend the conservatoire like any other student. In speaking with the MESH staff it seemed to me that the issues they face in working with music teachers are the same issues that frequently come up in Australia. The music teachers that MESH deals with fall into three categories: there are teachers who simply do not care and do not want to deviate from their usual method of teaching at all (thankfully these teachers are rare!); there are teachers who know they should be willing to teach music to a person with a disability, but who are anxious, worried, and need a lot of encouragement; and there are teachers who really want to teach music, but are perhaps too enthusiastic in their approach and do not necessarily go about it in the right way.

Thirdly, MESH has compiled reference materials to offer specialised information on specific disabilities and the way in which teaching curricula might be adapted to suit a person with particular challenges. Clearly the support required to assist someone with a vision impairment to learn music is going to be different from the support required for a person with a profound intellectual disability. Over the past few years MESH has run training seminars on particular topics, and these seminars have occasionally resulted in the publication of a training manual, an academic article, or a general discussion paper. These resources are available via the MESH website, and MESH uses these resources when communicating with teachers who are about to take on a new student with a particular disability. MESH also has a collection of audio-visual material, including videos of students and their teachers, which make great teaching aids.

Fourth, MESH is responsible for maintaining the nation-wide Reseau National Musique et Handicap. In the early 2000s, MESH was still focused in the Val-d'Oise district, though the demand for activities throughout France was increasing. There were no other organisations in France operating with the same goals, at least not to the same extent. At the same time as increasing their activities to cover the whole of France, MESH decided to consolidate their partnerships with other organisations in the nation who were involved in similar work. In order to do this they convened a working party to establish a Reseau National Musique et Handicap – a national network of individuals and organisations across France who are interested in increasing access to music for people with a disability. Since 2008, 280 organisations have joined the network, including organisations from the arts and cultural sector, educational sector, health sector, and disability services sector. Several individuals have also joined, including some notable musicians and artists. MESH was appointed the inaugural coordinating body, and in 2011 they continue to be responsible for distributing information, organising events and managing the network.

According to Adeline, the MESH CEO, the Reseau National Musique et Handicap has proved to be an effective way for MESH to expand its activities without stepping on other organisations’ toes, and a valuable system for increasing awareness of the need for support for people with a disability to access music throughout the country. One of MESH’s overarching principles is to help people do things themselves – they don’t see themselves as having all the answers, and they don’t have the capacity to do everything by themselves – so the idea of the national network fits well with their goals. It allows everyone, including MESH, to share their knowledge and learn from each other.
In 2003, MESH had approximately 50 people with significant disabilities that it was actively supporting to access music tuition. Now, in 2011, MESH supports approximately 300 people across France. According to Adeline, this is an indication of both the growth of MESH as an organisation (particularly its expansion into other geographical areas of France), and the success of the Reseau National Musique et Handicap.

**MESH training seminars**

During my time in France I was fortunate to attend two training seminars that were being run by MESH as part of their annual program of professional-development activities for music teachers.

The first of these was on “the question of instrumentation for a musical activity involving people with a disability.” This seminar took place at the Conservatoire à Rayonnement Communal de Montmorency on Tuesday 8 February 2011. It was a whole-day workshop, with two facilitators and twelve participants. One of the facilitators for this workshop was Magali Viallefond, and it was great for me to be able to meet her after hearing so much about her. The day started with introductions and a chance for participants to meet each other. Most of the participants were music teachers, though there were a couple of orchestral musicians, and a man from another region of France who was doing work specifically with people with a disability. Aside from this man, none of the other participants had much experience working with people with a disability.

The first half of the day was spent with all of us participating in some practical exercises that had been prepared by the facilitators. The workshop venue was quite spacious and half of the room was laid out with what must have been between fifty and a hundred small musical instruments (mostly percussion). The facilitators asked for three volunteers and these people were directed to choose an instrument and, in their own time, start improvising together. At the end of the improvisation the observing participants were asked to comment on what they saw, heard and felt. The exercise was repeated a second time, but this time Magali imposed constraints on the volunteers, so that the task of improvising together was harder, or at least different. The morning continued in this way with volunteers being asked to improvise under a range of conditions. In some cases the scenarios seemed to be designed to replicate disabilities – for example, people were asked to play the piano with gloves on; or play the drums with ear muffs or a blindfold. Although it sounds simplistic, the exercises worked very well, and not only did they raise issues about the skills required to play particular instruments, they set the scene for a wonderful discussion about the relationship of a musician to their instrument, the ways in which people interact musically, and the very nature of music itself.

The afternoon was spent exploring a selection of musical instruments that most of us had never seen or heard of before. First we were presented with a number of what are called “Sound Sculptures”: metallic sculptures that make a range of melodic and percussive sounds when they are hit, banged, scraped and twanged. The value of these instruments is that they are almost indestructible, and also that they are something of a novelty. The user can interact with them physically in a range of ways that can be fun and entertaining. After this, we were shown videos of several electronic instruments that had been developed to enable people with a limited range of physical movement to play music. One of these instruments was the “Soundbeam”: a device that links an infra-red sensor to a musical midi interface, allowing the user to play musical notes by moving closer to or further away from the device – for example, by moving a motorised wheelchair in and out. We were then taken to a neighbouring room in the conservatoire to see
first-hand an electronic instrument that was still in development. This instrument, called a “Bao-Pao”, is played by waving a conducting rod through an infra-red beam, triggering a pre-set melody in such a way that the user is responsible for speed and volume, but not the actual notes. Having witnessed all these instruments we ended the day with a discussion of how they might be applied in mainstream musical settings. It was agreed that just because these instruments are available does not itself create opportunities for people with a disability to play music. The real challenge comes in helping people to access the instruments (which are often expensive), helping people to learn how to use them, and then having the skills and knowledge to integrate them as part of a wider musical experience or ensemble.

The second training seminar I attended was on “music, early childhood and disability.” This was another all-day workshop that took place on Tuesday 1 March 2011 at the Institut Baguer, a high school for deaf children in Asnières-sur-Seine. There were only seven participants, including myself, and it was led by two facilitators, Anne Bustarret and Hélène Gane.

The purpose of this workshop was to discuss the ways in which someone could help a young child begin their musical education, and in particular how music could benefit a young child with a disability and/or their family. The facilitators shared their experiences of using music in local health clinics and day-care centres, and gave us the principles they believed are important in working in such situations. The discussion was often philosophical. We touched on issues such as music being a reflection of the mother-child bond, and how the sharing of musical melodies in the very early stages of childhood is a profound experience that can shape both the child’s relationship to their mother and the child’s life-long relationship with music. An idea that I found particularly interesting was how music might also be used to strengthen the father-child bond. For example, if a child has a developmental disability, such that he or she is not yet talking or not yet able to communicate by the age of two or three, a father might feel disconnected from the child and not know how to interact with them – in these cases, music could become something that the father could share with the child, helping to build a loving connection. The seminar ended with the facilitators teaching us a handful of songs that could be used with young children: simple melodies with accompanying physical gestures that could be used to initiate interaction between a child and an adult, and to start to build a child’s understanding of musical concepts.

Other Organisations

Although I spent most of my time with the staff and trainers at MESH, I also visited many other individuals and organisations during my Fellowship. I discovered these organisations either through my own research on the internet, through suggestions from colleagues in Australia, or through suggestions from other people I met in France.

One organisation that I found particularly interesting was SIDVEM (an acronym for “Service d’aide à l’Intégration de personnes Déficientes Visuelles dans les lieux d’Enseignement de la Musique”, which translates as “Support service for the integration of people with a vision impairment in places of music teaching.”) This small organisation is based in central Paris on the campus of Institut d’Éducation Sensorielle, a school for children who have a vision impairment. SIDVEM was established five years ago and has already achieved a strong reputation and organisational structure. I met with Marie-Annick Socié, the Director of SIDVEM. The organisation employs two permanent office staff and three part-time staff that travel on an as-needed basis to visit music students in their place of learning. At the moment SIDVEM is
primarily operating in Île-de-France (the regional district that includes Paris and the semi-rural areas around Paris).

The purpose of SIDVEM, in their own words, is “to bring about an equality of access to music, in particular for people with a vision impairment.” It does this by providing support to students and teachers, so that any child with a vision impairment can participate in the same educational activities at a music conservatoire as a child without a vision impairment. The focus of SIDVEM’s activities (as with MESH) is on the integration of children into the formal music education system – i.e. helping a child to learn music at a traditional conservatoire through formal music classes and instrumental tuition.

One of the main things that SIDVEM does is to support students to learn and read music braille. I had heard about music braille before but never had the opportunity to experience it properly. The SIDVEM office had many bookshelves filled with music-braille transcriptions of instrumental pieces and Marie-Annick was kind enough to show me some scores and explain how they work. The international system of music braille is well established. Over the years, conferences with delegates from around the world have established a consist code of notation that is now recognised as standard. Everything that is notated on a typical musical score can be notated on a music braille score: notes, pitch, rhythm, dynamics, tempo markings, phrasing, etc. It was incredible to see these scores and the machine that prints them, and to hear how the whole process works.

I asked about the use of music braille; whether there was a large uptake among students with a vision impairment and whether it was really as effective as traditional notation. According to Marie-Annick, if a child begins to learn to read music braille at an early age, at the same time that a child without a vision impairment would start learning to read traditional notation, it works very well. Music braille can be a highly useful and practical tool in the same way that traditional notation can be a useful and practical tool for people without a vision impairment. It gives a child with a vision impairment all the same educational and performance opportunities that a child without a vision impairment would get from traditional notation. If, however, a music student starts learning music braille later in life, after they have already learnt to play some music, it becomes less valuable (though this is arguably the same as with traditional notation – most people who learn to play music without reading musical notation will never subsequently learn to read music in a way that enhances their playing skills).

The support that SIDVEM provides to students with a vision impairment is designed to enable students to participate in all aspects of a formal music education – from early childhood to tertiary-level studies – in the same way that a child without a vision impairment would. SIDVEM works with teachers in conservatoires to provide them with appropriate resources and help them adjust their pedagogical approach. If a teacher would normally give a child a piece of written musical notation for him or her to read, SIDVEM is able to translate the piece into music braille so the teacher can conduct the same exercise as they would with any other student. Likewise, as a child progresses in their musical development and starts to take music more seriously (for example by taking higher-level classes or sitting exams at a more advanced conservatoire) SIDVEM offers a service whereby they can translate any piece of notation used for a test or examination into music braille, and then translate any response that the student has written in
music braille back into traditional notation, so that the examiners can read the student’s response and mark them alongside the responses of all the other students.

Another organisation that I visited was the Paris community of L’Arche International. Although not a musical organisational, I had heard that several people were running music activities as part of L’Arche’s life-skills workshop in the 15th arrondissement. L’Arche defines itself as a network of people with and without intellectual disabilities sharing life in communities throughout the world. I made two trips to L’Arche to speak with people from both the L’Arche community in Paris and the L’Arche International office.

The first person I spoke to was Anne Chabert d’Hières, a manager within L’Arche International office responsible for communication and training. The two of us had a wonderful conversation about the status of people with a disability in France and the degree to they are included, or otherwise, in mainstream education, employment, recreational activities and other aspects of French daily life. Anne’s view was that the recent legislative changes in 2005 (mentioned above) had help to move things along, but that there was still an overwhelming lack of understanding in the general population’s perception of the challenges faced by people with a disability, and a lack of opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to participate meaningfully as true citizens in society. Our conversation included a discussion on the role of music in a person’s emotional life, and the idea of music as a powerful form of communication between people who do not use spoken language.

The following day I returned to the L’Arche workshop in Paris and was taken on a marvellous tour by Marie Posner of their workshop, recreation and living facilities. The set-up seemed to me to be similar to a number of workshops run by disability services agencies in Perth, with similar strengths and weaknesses. Each weekday the residents (who typically have an intellectual disability) participate in an individually tailored schedule of work and recreation activities, supported by a team of volunteers who live alongside the residents in a few nearby shared living facilities. One of the regular activities that some of the residents enjoy is a weekly music session. Of all the musical activities I saw in France, this session was the closest to the sort of activity we run through Catch Music in Perth, in that it was not focused on music education but rather on encouraging people to participate with whatever musical skills they have. A significant difference, however, is that Catch Music activities take place in public venues with participation from local community members, whereas the musical group at L’Arche in Paris consisted mainly of L’Arche residents. Nonetheless, it was a great experience and I was able to have fantastic chat with the L’Arche volunteers and exchange ideas about how best to support people with a disability to participate in mainstream music activities.

Another organisation that was running similar group music-making activities to Catch Music was called Force Majeure, run by a man named Karl Lemburg. I first met Karl at the MESH training seminar in Montmorency on how to help someone with a disability choose an instrument. Force Majeure is a new organisation based in Corbeil-Essonnes that runs activities for people who are “differently able” - including a choir, music group and literature group – with the goal of putting on performances or shows to change attitudes towards disability in the general public. Karl had just finished a project with eight young people who together had recorded a CD of original music called “Autrement Capable”. The CD sounds terrific and is inspirational. Listening to Karl’s ideas and his philosophical approach to music and disability was one of the highlights of my trip.
There are three other organisations that I visited while I was in France that I wish to mention. The first of these is Cemaforre, which in 2000 became the French national resource centre for promoting access to culture and places of culture for people with a disability or mental health illness. Cemaforre is sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Health and carries out a range of activities such as the development and distribution of information material, implementation of policy and legislation, training activities for arts administrators, and the management of funds to enable arts organisations to improve their accessibility. While I was in Paris, Cemaforre launched a new initiative on 11 February 2011 known as the European Centre for Cultural Accessibility: a website database with information on legislation, teaching resources, financing and grants throughout the European Union in both French and English language.

I also visited an organisation called Association Structures Sonore Bachet and Pédagogie, a small non-profit organisation encompassing all the individuals and organisations throughout France who use the musical instruments and teaching methods known as the “Structures Sonores Baschet” (“Baschet Sound Structures”). These are the instruments that I saw being used during the first MESH training session I attended – large metal sculptures that anyone can play to create music by interacting with them physically; hitting, banging, twanging and scraping them. The sculptures were first conceived by two brothers, Bernard and François Baschet, in the 1950s and 60s, and I was lucky enough to visit their workshop briefly in Saint Michel sur Orge.

The last organisation that I will mention is based in Barcelona, though I was fortunate enough to meet the Program Coordinator, Ingrid Mengod, during my Fellowship. Music Crossroads is an international non-profit organisation that uses music to promote youth empowerment: “bringing musical opportunities and prospects to young people who otherwise would have little chance to succeed.” Although not targeting specifically people with a disability (the majority of its beneficiaries are marginalised rural populations in Eastern Africa), Music Crossroads takes a similar approach to music as we do at Catch Music – using music to serve a broader social purpose. In the case of Music Crossroads the goal is to use music education and group music-making activities as a means for skill development and youth empowerment. They do this through the management of community music centres in local villages throughout Africa, and by running national and international music competitions for musicians to get together and perform their songs.

My observations of these organisations, and the conversations I had with their leaders and with other individuals in France, had a profound impact on my thoughts on music and disability. Not only was I able to speak with people and hear their ideas first-hand, I was given many resource materials to read, watch and listen to. The result of all this learning and the various experiences I had in France has been a shift in the way I now think about community music and the way in which we can support people to enjoy music. In the following section I will outline some of these thoughts and ideas.
General Reflections

Is access to music any different for people with a disability?

One thought that kept coming to me as I was travelling through France, something I had long thought about even in Australia, was the question of whether helping people to enjoy music is any different for people with a disability than for people without a disability. Perhaps people with a disability do not need any more or any less support to enjoy music than people without a disability? Perhaps the entire issue is moot? Although it sounds flippant, this question raises some important points.

For a start, the idea that there are two types of people – people with a disability and people without a disability – is deeply flawed. To group people with a disability together into one category is to make a sweeping generalisation. The truth is that people are vastly different. None of us, with or without a disability, have the same needs and challenges, or experience life in the exactly same way. It would be wrong to even place people on a spectrum. Each one of us is entirely unique, with strengths and weaknesses in a whole range of areas. So instead of talking about helping people with a disability access music, we should talk about helping each individual person in response to whatever particular challenges, desires, personality or physical capabilities they have. We should forget the question of helping people with a disability as a whole and just focus on individual people.

The other point is that our response to music is going to be different as well. Music is a language that we each understand in a different way. A piece of music, or the experience of playing music with other people, can mean something entirely different to different people. Two people might go to the same concert and listen to the same song and have different reactions; or two violinists who both play in the same orchestra might go to a rehearsal and both have different experiences of the conductor, of the mood in the group, or of the quality of the playing. The significance we attach to these things is personal, and who is to say that some people need help to experience music while other people do not? As someone said to me during my trip, suggesting that people with a disability need help to experience music is like suggesting that people with a disability need help to experience a sunset, or a poem, or a family picnic. People’s reactions to these things are what they are. If a person comes to appreciate a family picnic in a different way than another person, due to differences in their communication skills, physical capabilities, or cognitive processing, what does that matter? The same goes for music. If someone enjoys playing their guitar, but doesn’t have the skills to play it in the same way that another person does, what does that matter? They still enjoy it.

Having said this, there are still some useful distinctions to be made, and there is still some merit to the question of how can we help people with a disability access music. For example, although everyone is different and we each face our own unique challenges that are going to affect our relationship to music no matter who we are, it is nonetheless possible to talk about categories of challenges that – as a music teacher or music facilitator – we can be aware of and find ways to overcome. People with a significant vision impairment will for the most part face similar challenges in not being able to read sheet music or see the instrument they are playing. People with fine or gross motor difficulties will not be able to manipulate the keys of a woodwind instrument as easily as someone without these difficulties. People with an intellectual disability
will likely face challenges in understanding abstract musical concepts such as chord structures, tonality and voice-leading (which many musicians find challenging at the best of times!)

Clearly, as these examples show, there is sometimes value in discussing certain members of the population as a group, and value in trying to develop strategies to support these population groups approach music.

Why is it important to support people with a disability to experience music?

Another question that my experiences raised for me was around the benefits of music and music education, and in supporting people with a disability to access music. Regardless of their abilities or disabilities, many people in France and Australia don’t ever experience music-making – they never have the opportunity to learn and instrument, or never have the inclination to give it a go – so why is it so important that people with a disability experience music?

The immediate answer to this question is of course one of equity. If it is true that anyone with a disability who wants to try music already has the means and opportunity to do so, then perhaps this issue is not important. But my hunch is that this isn’t true, and that there are in fact people out there who would be experiencing music, or experiencing it more fully, if they did not have a disability. The experiences of MESH highlight this: following the introduction of the cultural accessibility legislation in 2005 they saw a marked increase in people with a disability attempting to enrol in conservatoires, and an increase in the number of music teachers approaching MESH to seek help. Although it might appear that people with a disability in Australia already have the same opportunities to learn and play music, my guess is that more people would begin to learn an instrument if more supports were available. Also, many people with a disability would likely pursue music to a further degree if other particular supports were available – for example, if there was a service allowing people with a vision impairment to translate music notation into music braille so as to enable them to sit tertiary-level music exams.

Another answer to this question is that for some people with a disability the benefits of music are arguably greater than for the rest of the population. One example is how music can be used as a tool to open up social opportunities. People who don’t have the same opportunities or skills to meet new people and build relationships can often find themselves isolated and lonely. In these cases music can become a tool to meet new people and build friendships. Music can also take on more significance for people who aren’t able to communicate verbally, becoming a means for self-expression and emotional articulation. As I mentioned above, one of the examples given to me while I was in France was how music could be used to help parents connect more deeply with a child with developmental delay.

What does it mean to “experience music”?

The conversations I had with the people I met in France were often philosophical, leading me to question my assumptions about what it means to support people with a disability to experience music. One of the recurring questions that kept coming up for me was, “What does it mean to ‘experience music’”? This question applies on a number of levels. For example, I mentioned before that the music activities I saw in France were mainly related to music education, while the music activities I am familiar with in Perth are related to group music-making, which highlights the distinction between learning and playing music. But the question becomes even more
relevant when you look at the expectations that an individual person has in their relationship to music. When a person says they want to learn music, what do they mean? Are they hoping to learn music in a traditional way so as to become a proficient or advanced musician, or are they only looking to learn basic skills so they can play music with other people? Do they even want to learn skills or are they simply interested in participating in some sort of musical experience? If a person says they want to play the drums in a band, is it the actual act of playing the drums that is important to them, or is it the shared experience of playing music with other people, or simply being able to say that they are in a band?

As a music teacher these questions are fundamental. As I learnt from the staff at MESH, one of the main barriers to people with a disability accessing music education in French conservatoires is the anxiety that individual music teachers have around the perceived impossibility of teaching someone with a disability to play an instrument. Obviously if someone with a significant intellectual disability enrolled in your conservatoire and they (or their parents) said they wanted to start taking music exams and become a professional musician, you would be hesitant. But if the person simply wanted to experience the sounds, movement or vibrations of a musical instrument, perhaps the task wouldn’t be so challenging?

The important thing here is, once again, that everyone is different. Some people with a disability do want to pursue a serious life-long journey with music and want to go the route of traditional music lessons, so the support we offer should enable them to do that. Others are more interested in the camaraderie of group music-making, and our support to these people should be equally appropriate.

If a child decides to take music lessons, the curricula that a music teacher uses, including the type of exercises and the speed at which they are introduced, can be adjusted to suit the child’s goals and capabilities. In France this is one of the services that MESH provides – helping music teachers develop lesson plans and offering new ideas from their experiences with other music teachers. Often this will mean not just developing a new set of music exercises to achieve the same learning goals, but to abandon the idea of a lesson structure altogether.

Another issue concerns the choice of musical instrument. If a child comes to music at an early age and they (or their parents) decide that they will start taking instrumental lessons, there is a decision to be made as to which musical instrument the child will learn. The child or their parents may already have some idea of what they want to learn, but even in these cases care should be taken to work out which instrument will best match the child’s goals and interests. For example, does the instrument have to be a traditional acoustic instrument? Could it instead be an electronic instrument such as the Soundbeam, or perhaps a small percussion instrument – something that may not seem as glamorous to the parents or teacher, but might nonetheless offer the child a way to achieve their goals in approaching music?

Many of these factors – understanding a child’s motivations in learning music, setting appropriate goals, and choosing the right instrument – depend on the music teacher being willing to adjust their usual way of teaching and work with the child as a unique individual. If the teacher comes to the lessons with the same expectations and aspirations as they do for other students, the experience will likely be disappointing. The music teacher should modify their curricula, try different styles of music and teaching, and recommend a different instrument if they
think it will fit better with the student’s goals. A positive, “can do” attitude from the music teacher is arguably the most essential ingredient in supporting any child with a disability to learn music.

*How can we equip ourselves to be better music teachers?*

Of course, even if a music teacher or group music facilitator has the most positive attitude in the world, they could easily find the experience of teaching music to someone with a disability extremely difficult. There must be something we can do to support music teachers when they face such challenges and help them to feel more comfortable.

As a music teacher myself, my experiences in France taught me that the best way to equip yourself to teach music to a person with a disability is either through first-hand experience or by listening to the experiences of other music teachers and facilitators. The most powerful moments in the training sessions I attended during my Fellowship were the times when people shared stories; when other music teachers spoke about the students they had taught, the approaches that had worked for them, and the outcomes they had seen as a result of their efforts. For me, those times were the most helpful.

Given the nature of working with people with disabilities, and the issues raised earlier about how important it is to think of people as individuals, the act of sharing stories is perhaps the best way to shed light on the subject of music and disability. As I said above, MESH has at times convened seminars and conferences to discuss music in relation to particular disabilities, and as a result of these meetings MESH has published a number of guidebooks (for example, Music and Autism). But even these guidebooks give disclaimers saying that all people with a disability are different, and the passages within the guidebooks that are the most interesting and illuminating are the ones where music teachers share stories of having worked with particular students.

The truth is that there will never be a single guidebook to teaching music with people with a disability. The only way to truly learn is to jump in and give it a go. The student themselves will be the best guide, and after a short time you will know enough to keep moving in the right direction. From that point on, your experiences will become richer and richer, and soon you will be the expert. Until the next student, who – even if they have a similar disability – will likely be completely different and require you to shed all your knowledge and start again from scratch. Once you have had these first-hand experiences you can start to help other music teachers in their own efforts by sharing your stories. There may be a teaching strategy that you used which worked well; you might have had a difficult experience that will help prepare another teacher or enable you to empathise with them; or your story of working with a particular student may itself encourage other teachers to be less anxious in taking on future students with a disability.

I am sure that in Western Australia there are many music teachers who have already had considerable experience working with people with a disability. If we could organise a forum in which these music teachers are able to share their stories, it could have a transformative effect not only on the teachers themselves – empowering and encouraging them to continue exploring new ideas with their students – but on the music education system as a whole, leading the way for other music teachers to feel more confident taking on new students, and increasing the opportunities for people with a disability throughout Western Australia to learn music in a supportive and welcoming environment.
CONCLUSIONS

The five weeks that I spent in France for my Churchill Fellowship were one of the richest and most rewarding learning experiences of my life. I met many inspirational people whose passion for supporting people with a disability to experience and enjoy music was infectious. After every meeting I wanted to immediately get back to Perth to start putting the ideas I was learning into practice. I would never have learnt as much by reading about these organisations. Seeing people working in real-life and learning first-hand from my conversations and interactions made all the difference. It was also not unpleasant to spend so many weeks in Paris sampling the pâtisseries, boulangeries and fromageries that I obviously felt obliged to experience.

As mentioned, one of the things that struck me when talking with the organisations I visited was that most of their music-disability activities seemed geared towards helping people with a disability participate in the mainstream music education system, and not towards helping people play music with other musicians. This was not a problem, it was simply different to what I expected and different to the activities I am involved with at home with Catch Music. I nonetheless saw many activities that I hope one day to replicate in Australia, including many practical tips and ideas that I will immediately incorporate into the work I am doing with people with a disability in Perth. The learning experiences were often philosophical, and perhaps more than anything the Fellowship helped deepen my general thinking about what it means to support people to enjoy music.

The most significant part of my trip was the time I spent talking to the staff of MESH and participating in their training seminars. The role that MESH has shaped for itself in positioning itself as a resource centre for music teachers across France was fascinating to me, and helped paint a picture of a similar role that Catch Music, or another music organisation, might play in Western Australia. From an organisational perspective it was useful to see how they have set up their staff and fee structure, and the way they interact with other government and non-government organisations. Although the music-education landscape is different in Australia, I could imagine an organisation playing a similar role in encouraging music teachers to take on more students with a disability and providing them with support and resources to alleviate any challenges and anxieties they face in doing so. There may not be the same scope for legislation to mandate that music teachers accept students with a disability, as in France, but there may be a way to motivate more primary and high schools to offer instrumental lessons to students with a disability who are participating in mainstream education.

Having reflected on my experiences with MESH and with the other people and organisations that I saw, I believe there are some key factors that enable a music teacher or music facilitator to better support a person with a disability to learn music. First and foremost is the need to see each person as a unique individual. Even if two people face similar physical or sensory difficulties, their exact needs, challenges and personality will be different. Likewise, the teacher needs to understand the student’s true motivations in approaching music. Do they really want lessons or is there some other aspect of music that appeals to them? If the person does want lessons, the teacher should help the student think carefully about which instrument he or she wants to learn, and tailor their pedagogical approach, lesson plan, style of teaching, and their own expectations to reflect the capabilities of the student.
Although it sounds trivial to say it, the biggest asset a music teacher can have in teaching a person with a significant disability is a positive, “can do” attitude. Ultimately there is no way to prepare for every challenge that a student may bring, and the best skills and knowledge will only come from first-hand experience. But the next best thing to first-hand experience is to hear from the experiences of others (as I myself found in my conversations with people in France). There is incredible value in sharing stories and in hearing the stories of other music teachers. Although every student is a unique individual and no two teaching situations are the same, the stories that we hear can give us ideas and inspiration that can help us in any number of situations. Even more than the practical ideas themselves, the stories we hear can inspire us to give it a go and take on new students who might previously have not been able to find a music teacher.

Now that I am back in Perth I plan to share these learnings and ideas with as many people as possible. On 24 May 2011 I will be giving a presentation at the University of Western Australia School of Music to bring together all those people in Perth who have an interest in music and disability, during which I will propose the establishment of a network of music teachers to encourage each other, share stories, and organise professional-development activities along the same lines as the training seminars I witnessed in France. I believe there is tremendous scope in Western Australia for such a network. I will also be finalising a “music teacher survey” that will be going out to all the instrumental and vocal music teachers in Western Australia to see how many teachers (a) have significant experience working with people with a disability, (b) would like to receive more information on music, disability and mental health, and would like to participate in training activities, and (c) would be able and willing to take on new students with a disability. Another plan that has already been put in place is the establishment of a music teacher database within Catch Music, so that if a person with a disability contacts us looking for a suitable music teacher, we can refer them to someone that we know has the right experience and positive frame of mind. These ideas are outlined further in the following section.

In sum, the five weeks of my Churchill Fellowship were a wonderful learning experience that has already laid the seeds for several new initiatives in Western Australia. The activities that I saw and the conversations I had have enriched my thinking around music and disability and will lead, I hope, not only to a more rigorous and meaningful approach to my own work as a musician and music teacher, but a broader appreciation of the power of music among all the students, colleagues and musicians that I work with in the future.
RECOMMENDATIONS

To conduct a state-wide survey so as to hear from music teachers in Western Australia who have experience working with people with a disability or would be interested in being involved in future activities to do with music and disability. (A questionnaire for such a survey has already been developed and sent to over 500 instrumental and vocal teachers throughout Perth and rural Western Australia. See attachment 1.)

To start a network of music teachers and music facilitators who are interested in coming together on a regular basis (perhaps once every six months) to discuss their experiences and share stories of what has worked well and what has been challenging, and to participate in professional-development activities on particular topics related to music and disability, similar to the annual program of events offered by MESH in France.

To organise a series of events that enable the integration and cross-pollination of ideas between the music industry and the disability and mental health sectors. (On 24 May 2011 I will be leading a public workshop for people who work in music education, community development and human services, as a way of bringing together potential stakeholders for future events. See attachment 2.)

To start to form relationships with other organisations throughout Australia so as to lay the foundation for more formal nation-wide links in the future. (On 27 May 2011 I will be travelling to Melbourne and meeting with the CEO of Arts Access Australia, the peak national body for disability and the arts.)

To generate a database of music teachers (for example, through the survey mentioned above) who are able and willing to take on new students with a disability, so that Catch Music may become a reference point for any person with a disability in Western Australia looking to find an experienced and appropriate music teacher.

To establish a state-wide resource centre (perhaps within Catch Music or another Western Australian music organisation) that might serve as the coordinating body for the networks outlined above and/or as a focal point for any music teacher seeking assistance or information on working with people with a disability.

To investigate the current use of music braille across Western Australia and assess the need and feasibility for music braille training activities, so that more music teachers are aware of music braille as an option for young children who are starting to learn music.

To liaise with local councils and funding bodies regarding the potential for hosting an interactive exhibition of Baschet Sound Sculptures in Perth, as an initiative to raise awareness of themes surrounding music and disability.

To organise a CD recording project within Catch Music, similar to the project undertaken by Force Majeure in Corbeil-Essonnes, as a way to encourage our participants and share their stories and experiences with music.
ATTACHMENTS

1. Questionnaire for an upcoming “music teacher survey” that I have organised to generate a database of music teachers interested in exploring the subject of music and disability.

2. Flyer for a free public workshop at the University of Western Australia School of Music on the topic of “Music, Disability and the Community” which I will be facilitating on Tuesday 24 May 2011.
Instrumental Music Teacher Survey

The following questions have been designed to help Catch Music put together a list of instrumental music teachers (including singing teachers) who are interested in teaching music to people with a disability or mental health illness in Perth or rural WA. If you are an instrumental music teacher, it would be wonderful if you could take two minutes to complete this survey.

Please use the enclosed replied-paid envelope to return this form, or post it to:
**Catch Music, PO Box 377, Maylands WA 6931**

If you prefer, this questionnaire can instead be completed online at [www.catchmusic.org.au](http://www.catchmusic.org.au)

For more information about this survey please contact Tim Roberton on 0430 589 369 or tim.roberton@catchmusic.org.au

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*We are interested in finding out how many instrumental music teachers in WA have taught music to someone with a disability or mental health illness.*

**Q1.** Have you ever taught instrumental music to a person with a disability or mental health illness?

☐ yes  ☐ no

If so, could you briefly describe the situation and your experiences.

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*We are hoping to create a database of music teachers who have had experience with or who are happy to teach instrumental music to people with a disability or mental health illness.*

**Q2.** Have you ever encountered any of the following among the students you have taught?

☐ physical disability  ☐ visual impairment  ☐ behavioural challenges

☐ intellectual/learning disability  ☐ autism spectrum  ☐ memory loss

☐ mental health illness  ☐ other (please list...)

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**Q3.** Would you be interested in taking on students with a disability or mental health illness in the future?

☐ yes  ☐ no

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**Q4.** Are there any particular concerns you have with teaching instrumental music to a student with a disability or mental health illness?

[please turn over...]
We are currently establishing a resource centre to provide information and to run training activities (professional development) on music and disability/mental health.

Q5. Would you be interested in receiving information about resources or events to help you teach instrumental music to students with a disability or mental health illness?

☐ yes  ☐ no

Q6. Are there any particular issues you would like information on?

If you mentioned above that you would be interested in taking on students with a disability or mental health illness in the future, or that you would like to receive information on resources and events, please provide the following information about yourself so we can keep in touch with you. If you would not like to give us your contact information, please leave these last questions blank.

Your name:

Phone number:

Email address:

Which instrument(s) do you teach?

In which suburb(s) of Perth or rural WA do you teach?

Do you have a current Working With Children Card?  ☐ yes  ☐ no

Are you currently associated with any of the following music teacher associations?

☐ West Australian Music Teachers’ Association (WAMTA)
☐ Suzuki Talent Education Association of Australia (Suzuki WA)
☐ Australian National Council of Orff Schulwerk (ANCOS)
☐ Kodaly Music Education Institute of Australia (KMEIA)
☐ Australian Society for Music Education (ASME)
☐ School of Instrumental Music (SIM)
☐ other (please list...)

Are you happy for us to pass on your details to potential music students?  ☐ yes  ☐ no

Thank you very much for completing this survey. The information you have provided will be a great help to us and to the many people with a disability or mental health illness in WA who are interested in learning music.
Music, Disability and the Community
Tuesday 24th May 2011, 7:00pm to 8:00pm
University of Western Australia, School of Music, Tunley Lecture Theatre

A free public workshop for anyone who works in music education, community development or human services, or who has an interest in increasing access to music for people with a disability or mental health illness.

Over the past three years Catch Music has run inclusive community music groups across Perth with an emphasis on welcoming and including people with a disability or mental health illness. Tim Robertson, founder and former chair of Catch Music, recently spent two months studying the issue of access to music for people with a disability in France as part of a Churchill Fellowship. Inspired by what he saw, Tim is keen to share his research and draw together people in Perth who are interested in inclusive music activities.

Many people in Perth and rural WA are doing fantastic work in community music. We have a vibrant music industry and one of the best music education systems in the world. With a coordinated and intentional approach we could increase access to music even further, ensuring that anyone who wants to learn or play music has the opportunity to do so.

What would a fully inclusive community music program look like?

The aim of this workshop is to explore the possibility of creating a state-wide network of people and organisations who are committed to increasing access to music for people with a disability or mental health illness. The one-hour session will include a presentation by Tim Robertson, an opportunity to raise questions and discuss ideas, and a chance to meet other musicians and professionals working in related fields.

For more information contact Tim Robertson on 0430 589 369 or tim.robertson@catchmusic.org.au

Catch Music Inc ~ www.catchmusic.org.au ~ 0458 228 248 ~ info@catchmusic.org.au