

Nordoff Robbins Music Therapy

Nordoff Robbins is the UK's largest music therapy charity dedicated to bringing high quality music therapy to as many people as possible. We use music to enrich the lives of people with life-limiting illnesses, disabilities and feelings of isolation. Our music therapists are expertly trained to tune into each movement, reaction and expression of the individuals they work with to discover how music can enrich their lives. This could be to unlock memories, to communicate where words have failed, to socially connect with family and friends, or build confidence and self-esteem. We provide a range of different sessions for children and adults of all ages in our bases across the UK including London, Manchester, Newcastle and Scotland – from one-to-one music therapy to shared sessions for groups of different sizes and formats. All these sessions are free. We also work in partnership with over 200 organisations to bring music therapy to as many vulnerable people who could benefit from it as possible. These include schools, care homes, hospices, hospitals, mental health services and brain injury units.

Music therapy is a registered profession regulated by the HCPC, and its cognitive, emotional, physical and social benefits have been well-established over the profession's history since the 1950s.

One of our much-valued partnerships is with the Mountbatten Group supporting people living with or affected by death, dying and bereavement

across the Isle of Wight and Hampshire. We began providing a music therapy service at Mountbatten Hospice, Isle of Wight, in 2016 and this was extended to Mountbatten Hospice, Southampton, in 2018. Music therapy sessions are provided individually and in groups to inpatients, day patients, children, young people and adults externally referred into the hospices' psychology service, bereaved family members and carers, and the Mountbatten Hospice community. Our provision at each hospice also includes a community choir comprised of patients, relatives, staff, volunteers and members of the local community. The Isle of Wight choir being longer established has been particularly impactful, attracting 70-80 singers each week, and has been demonstrated through a qualitative research project to have given participants a stronger sense of connectedness, improved physical health, improved mental and emotional wellbeing, a sense of purpose and a changed perception of the hospice.* Music therapy groups are also run for people with dementia and young adults with life-limiting illnesses.

Our music therapist at Mountbatten Isle of Wight, Fraser Simpson, is currently part of an international research study examining music therapy in hospice settings sponsored by Exeter University supported by an AHRC research grant, entitled Care for Music: An ethnography of music in later life and end-of-life settings (www.careformusic.org).

*Ambrose, A (2017) Hospice in Harmony. University of Southampton.

Above and beyond

In 2019 Nordoff Robbins conducted an evaluation of the service at Mountbatten Isle of Wight with 129 participants amongst service users, families/carers and staff. The evaluation report showed that Nordoff Robbins music therapy was seen to have a positive impact in four key areas:

- enabling people to engage in music by 98% of respondents.
- quality of life and well-being by 96% of respondents
- interaction, communication and/or relationships by 95% of respondents
- working environment in partner organisation by 99% of respondents

The following results were identified in the area of 'quality of life & wellbeing' in examining music therapy's impact on service-users:

- 100 % for supporting relaxation, improving mood and relieving stress
- 100% for enhancing quality of life, improves sense of wellbeing, supports independence and opportunities for choice
- 99% for increasing motivation, enthusiasm to interact and participate
- 98 % for providing emotional support, outlet for self-expression, helps regulate emotions
- 97 % for providing a distraction from everyday life experience, relief from pain
- 91% for reducing symptoms, reduces depression or anger

Here are two personal stories of people who have benefited from the music therapy service at Mountbatten Isle of Wight.

Vignette 1: Joy's story

Singing in the Mountbatten Community Choir helped Joy to feel herself again, after her beloved husband Andrew passed away. Joy, who has been singing with the choir for several months, described the positive impact it has had on her:

“I lost Andrew on Easter Sunday this year. We'd been married 43 years, we were best friends and I couldn't imagine not having him with me. When he passed away at Mountbatten Hospice it was devastating.

However, joining the hospice choir has been my life saver. I look forward to it every week. When I'm singing I get a special feeling – it's as though Andrew is standing right beside me. It's the only time that this happens.

Everything in life is difficult now, but when I'm concentrating on singing I forget everything else and it takes me to a different place. The songs we sing are uplifting and I go away contented and peaceful. Often I am awake at night, but after choir I sleep well. It's like a kind of anaesthetic.

Singing is so enjoyable but it's more than that. The choir is like a kind of counselling. When I am singing my heart wells up and all the deep anxieties, the stresses and strains I've been carrying around all week all come out when I

sing and are lifted away. At choir I feel like I come out of my bubble – I feel like a person again. It does me the world of good and Andrew would want me to be enjoying myself. It's a blessing!"

The story is also available via this link:

<https://www.nordoff-robbins.org.uk/stories/joys-story/>

Vignette 2: Richard's story

Richard, 82, has early stage dementia as well as Tourette Syndrome and lives at home and is looked after by his wife. Richard has reduced mobility due to scoliosis, which makes it hard for him to get out and about. He has limited opportunities for activity, occupation and social interaction. His increasing care needs are placing a strain on both himself and his wife. His isolation and poor health leave him with little agency or creative choice.

Richard has been taking part in music therapy sessions for two years. Initially attending a group for people with dementia, he had the opportunity to continue his life-long love of music-making by singing and playing instruments. The improvisatory nature of the music-making allowed Richard significant moments of creative development and imagination that enabled his musical expression to blossom. Richard also liked to use a drum stick to 'conduct' the music therapist playing at the piano, becoming animated in the control and connection he experienced in this role.

When the country went into lockdown in March 2020, Richard's music therapy sessions continued online, and this has provided an opportunity for Richard's wife to join him in the sessions. She said:

“Richard has always enjoyed music, he can get lost in some classical orchestral music, deeply involved in it. Music is like a switch, his mood changes almost instantly, first his foot starts tapping and then his grumpiness just disappears, he seems to forget it. When he is singing he doesn't twitch [a symptom of his Tourette Syndrome]. Music seems to be a key that closes the dementia fogging and unlocks or loosens some clarity, he is certainly better for it.

“He really enjoys his times with Fraser, he was quite uncertain at first but soon he seemed to develop a unique sort of relationship, I think it's because he can be himself during these sessions, and doesn't have to struggle to hide his Alzheimer's, perhaps music breaks down barriers. His confidence has improved as well. I am amazed at how happy he looks when conducting. Some music brought him to tears, some songs made him cry, it seems to waken his emotions.”

Here are some further comments taken from the above mentioned 2019 evaluation report, providing evidence of the impact of our work on participants' mental health and wellbeing:

“Suddenly experiencing a life changing condition and no longer able to carry on with my normal way of life I needed an outlet to help me to adjust. Music Therapy has helped me immensely to come to terms with my new way of life

by giving me something to look forward to each week and helps to take my mind off how I feel.”

“It’s been an exploratory musical journey that has also helped me explore and address personal difficulties. My Music Therapy referral has been a great emotional support in helping me be able to function generally after losing my Dad in June.”

“I worked at the hospice for some nineteen years and am recently retired. In my opinion music therapy brings so much to staff and patients, a very positive experience that can be shared. Music very easily changes our moods, brings memories to the fore, gives an experience that we may never have had, how wonderful for those, in the later stages of life, can experience the wonders of music be it learning to play an instrument, singing or just listening...”

A short video about one patient’s experience in music therapy can also be viewed here:

<https://www.mountbatten.org.uk/news/music-therapy-working-wonders>

The development of the hospice’s community choir has been a particularly noteworthy phenomenon. We will focus in particular detail on the choir in the following sections but would like to highlight here its central role within the music therapy service provided by Nordoff Robbins.

The choir has served to ‘open the doors’ of the hospice to all and reveal it as a friendly and welcoming place, changing the concept of death and dying by opening conversations, and reducing the isolation felt by many bereaved and dying people. It makes a valuable contribution to Mountbatten Group’s 2020 Strategy* of challenging the stigma associated with hospices and changing public perceptions around death, dying and bereavement.

There are extensive benefits of drawing normally segregated people (ie staff from different departments within the hospice, patients, members of the public) together in a common purpose where differences do not matter.

The choir is also an arena where many people sharing common experience can offer and gain mutual support. The joy and physicality of singing has provided a welcome outlet for many in contrast to the difficulties faced in their life experiences. Members commented in the 2019 evaluation report:

“Music for myself and my husband has completely changed our lives. I have breathing problems and I am sure it ‘helps me to breathe’. We get out and interact socially, meet people and have made friends. We both feel that we now ‘depend’ on this music time and would be lost without it, it means that much to us both. I would give our musical director called Fraser a medal if I could, he is so very patient and kind, and brings out the best in all of us.”

“I joined the choir from the beginning and I really enjoy singing with the other choir members. I have certainly learnt a lot as I had not sung in a choir before. I think it has increased my powers of concentration and recall when

remembering words and parts. It has been an opportunity to experience music and join in with others. This is a very powerful experience we have surprised ourselves and gained lots of confidence. The most important thing to say is how much fun it is, and how much I enjoy participating. I really look forward to going and always feel great afterwards.”

“Being a member of the Hospice Community Choir is helping me through a very sad time in my life. Having lost my husband earlier this year. Everyone is so welcoming. There is a feeling of togetherness and when we are singing all the mental stress and pain I feel a lot of the time through my loss just lifts. I am sure everyone there has their own story and you can tell that everyone there really feels that it is a very important time of the week.”

“Being part of the choir has added more depth and wellbeing to my life. I lost 4 very close members of my family to cancer, my brother the youngest member suffered a great deal, without the hospice it would have been unbearable. Coming to the choir at the hospice has helped me to come to terms with his passing and enabled me to laugh again and look forward to the future. I hope the choir will continue, it’s good to see us all grow in confidence and to come to terms with our losses.”

“Singing in the hospice choir is helping a dear friend to work through a period of deep depression and enabling that person to support bringing another person into the choir. It’s a safe place to be as you are.”

“Participation in music of any genre is good for well-being. From never being in a choir and having just lost my wife to cancer (starting at a very low ebb), the experience has changed my life for the better.”

*Mountbatten.org.uk, (2020) Mountbatten Group Strategy. [online] Available at:

<https://www.mountbatten.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=7943a049-282c-44ae-b4fc-bae9b78a0202> [Accessed 24 May 2021].

Making an impact during the pandemic

When the pandemic hit in March 2020 the onsite music therapy services were initially suspended, and those aspects of the work that could be delivered online were transferred to Zoom.

The problem of latency (sound delay) when working online is a significant one for music therapy – it makes it almost impossible to make music in time together, which is the cornerstone of the work. The situation required a creative approach by the music therapist who tried out and discovered other ways of working that could be of benefit to service users, which included:

- Songwriting
- Music appreciation sessions and musical ‘discovery’ projects – group members introducing their musical passions and new discoveries to each other

- Singing together with users muted (only the music therapist is heard)

In this way, at Mountbatten Isle of Wight, a pre-pandemic open group, a group for young adults with life-limiting illnesses, a dementia group and the community choir were successfully taken online. Over the course of 2020 starting from 26th March up until 21st May 2021, 292 sessions were delivered in the partnership of which 165 took place online. An average of 36 people attended the online choir each week and an average of 14 people attended the other groups. Alongside the online work we were also able to resume 1:1 sessions onsite from September 2020.

Our music therapist has written about the challenges and the successes of the online choir in his article here:

<https://careformusic.org/2021/01/11/why-do-we-sing-2/>

Although members could not hear each other sing and felt the musical limitations of that situation, there was something important that was not lost, which was the sense of community that is such a vital part of the choir experience. It offered relief from the social isolation experienced almost universally during the pandemic. As one member said:

“Thank you so much for sustaining our choir throughout lockdown and beyond. It has been such a joy and tonic to positive well-being to sing together on Wednesday evenings and in a strange way I have felt I’ve got to know choir members even better even though we’ve been apart.”

Giving members the opportunity to share and reflect during the choir session brought a new intimacy between members and the realisation that the Zoom choir is not merely a watered-down version of the 'real thing', but brings its own unique enrichment.

The novelty of taking the choir online (the Mountbatten choir being among the very first choirs to do so when the pandemic hit) was featured on the hospice website and attracted the interest of the local Isle of Wight press:

<https://www.mountbatten.org.uk/News/thats-what-friends-are-for>

<https://www.islandecho.co.uk/mountbatten-community-choir-launches-online-practice/?PageSpeed=noscript>

The situation gave rise to an unexpected benefit that the choir was able to invite and welcome members of the pre-lockdown choir at Mountbatten Hampshire in Southampton to its online sessions, enabling members of the two communities to get to know one another in a way that would otherwise not have happened.

Innovative ways of working

How is the impact sustained over at least two consecutive years? This might include data, testimonials, feedback or other types of evidence. (for the pandemic category, please describe how you have found innovative ways of providing or growing services)

A song-writing project undertaken with the above-mentioned group of young adults with life-limiting illnesses was begun in the early weeks of 2021 over Zoom. The finished song, written by the group members with the support and guidance of their music therapist was entitled One Day Soon, a song of hope that expressed the isolation experienced during the pandemic and the growing optimism of return to normal life.

Kate Newitt, a member of the young adults' group who worked together on One Day Soon, said: "For anyone living with a disease or disability, coronavirus has been another hurdle in life to conquer, but this time we were all in it together. We started many new indoor projects during lockdown but what I looked forward to so much was the Wednesday groups on Zoom. It was lovely to have the human interaction and meant we felt less isolated and still like a team. When hearing that restrictions would start to be eased, we all thought it would be a perfect time to write a song, representing hope. It was great teamwork as we could all connect together and understand each other's feelings. We hope you all enjoy the catchy lyrics as much as we did creating them!"

When the song was played to members of the community choir, it struck a chord of common experience, and the choir decided to make a virtual recording of the song. For the singers this project – the learning and recording of the song – was an exhilarating experience bringing a shared sense of purpose that for many had been sadly missed during the months of lockdown. Choir members commented:

“Our Wednesday nights during the last 12 months have been a great help with the isolation we have all suffered, but this piece of work has brought us all closer together, and the younger members of Mountbatten have developed a great song which they should be very proud of. It will always be an event that will stay with me.”

“Taking part in the recent video project provided a very welcome sense of purpose and belonging. I detected amongst my choir friends a glimpse of the old ‘esprit de corps’ that makes the Mountbatten Community Choir so special to us.”

“I think the young people just caught the mood of most people at the moment longing to get out of lockdown which must be especially trying for them. It was an honour to put voices to their words.”

“Such a privilege to sing a song of joy and hope. We had such fun doing the recording.”

“It was a much-needed boost to us all.”

“Such a great opportunity to share music and create friendships.”

“I really enjoyed every minute [of the recording], I felt as if I had had a night out with a lot of friends, ended on a high.”

“It was a great night. A good laugh and lovely to be able to feel that we were all doing something ‘together’ although apart.”

“It felt like a family gathered around the piano when we all stayed to listen and encourage each other as we sang and recorded our parts... we are all healed in some way when we sing together, and this experience was another tonic.”

The song was released through Mountbatten’s media channels to mark the anniversary of the first lockdown (23 March) and was reported in the local press. The One Day Soon project was an outstanding achievement for all involved and additionally brought together different service user groups from the hospice communities that in normal circumstances would have remained apart. The limitations of online working were transcended, and music undeterred did its work of connecting, uplifting, enlivening, and enabling.

Nigel Hartley, CEO of Mountbatten Group, said: “With the gradual easing of lockdown we have all got hope in our hearts. The pandemic has been tough for everyone, especially for those who live with an illness. Reflecting on the last year as we mark the anniversary of the first lock down is important and we should all take a moment to remember those who have lost their lives to COVID and other illnesses as a result of the pandemic. The song ‘One Day Soon’ is like a beacon of light at the end of a dark tunnel and gives me a sense of better days to come. It’s a fantastic effort by the choir members hailing from both sides of the Solent and it makes me ‘proud to be Mountbatten’.”

Nordoff Robbins' aim of 'musicalising' the communities of our Partner Organisations, bringing to them all that music can afford, and thereby enabling them to take such pride in themselves could not be better illustrated than by this story of innovation, creativity and transformation.

The full story including the song itself can be viewed here:

<https://www.mountbatten.org.uk/News/mountbatten-choir-one-day-soon-a-song-of-hope-for-the-national-day-of-reflection>