

A musical awakening

Communicating with dementia sufferers can be tough, but an innovative music project, specifically tailored towards elderly people in the late stages of the illness, is producing remarkable results

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY NINA LARGE

The care home residents slowly take up their positions in the room, like characters in a play waiting for curtain-up. Lina nervously clutches her handbag and shows everyone with smiles, while Enid's warm laugh precedes her entry. And then Iris arrives, her bewildered and sad eyes stinging with pain and loss. These are individuals whose lives would never have been thrust so close together had their debilitating condition not forced them to live in a dementia care home.

All are about to have their first experience of Music for Life, an interactive music project run jointly by London's Wigmore Hall and the charity Dementia UK. This is the first of eight weekly sessions, where each resident will make music and have music made for them. But it's not just about entertainment – the project's three talented musicians will be hoping to make a real difference to the well-being of people affected by dementia.

There are currently over 750,000 people with dementia in the UK, which could well



personal sound:
a resident is invited
to improvise

double over the next 30 years. Dozens of charities and societies exist to support people in the early stages, but once the illness has seriously set in, communicating with patients can be exceptionally difficult.

Music for Life, however, is unusual in that it works with people in the later stages of dementia when their speech and ability to communicate may have all but gone. And with the disappearance of their sense of individuality and character, it's all too easy to pigeonhole dementia sufferers. The



uplifting:
As Lina becomes
happier, the music
reflects her spirits

charity attempts to redress that. 'We try to look beyond the label and reconnect with the person who is still there somewhere,' says Tony, the flautist and lead musician for this project. 'This is not a traditional music workshop; it is not about building enthusiasm for music, it is about seeking a personal response from each resident taking part.'

That's partly achieved by the way the sessions are managed. The eight residents and five carers sit in a circle with three musicians among them. In the middle on a low table sit percussion instruments: drums, maracas, xylophones and hand chimes. But before any music is played, the musicians sit and talk to the residents as equals, gaining their trust.

Soon after, the session begins. A single meandering line starts on the flute, taken up



recognition:
Dora responds on
hearing her name

by the violin and cello, a soothing, simple tune that gets repeated later on as a musical bookend. Some residents look up expectantly, while others are visibly worried about things. Tony asks each person their name and in return the musicians greet them with a short improvisation based around their response. Catherine's Scottish accent prompts them to strike up a Celtic jig, Enid is decisive and a drumbeat quickly picks this up. One frail-looking lady in a wheelchair is unable to say her name at all, so Kate, the violinist, looks at her and sings 'Dora, he-llo Do-ra' on a simple two note phrase. It's hard to say whether she realises her name is being sung, but as the creases of her face begin to brighten, it does seem, on some level, that she knows they are directly addressing her—and recognising her.

In fact, improvisation is right at the heart of Music for Life's success and is what marks it out from other music charities that might prefer to use something a little more planned.

'With improvisation, you have the freedom to change the mood'

'Playing beautiful pieces of repertoire is one thing, but with improvisation, you have the freedom to change the mood and adapt to what is around you,' says Sarah, who plays the cello for the sessions. 'They become part of it

in a way that they wouldn't be part of a Schumann quartet.'

Elizabeth McCall, head of learning for Wigmore Hall agrees. 'By doing this, Wigmore Hall are basically taking chamber music to people who just won't access it,' she says. 'Like all chamber music it requires each member to bring their own voice to it and be confident in what they are bringing.'

After the resident introductions, the musicians encourage each person to have a turn at playing a piece of music with percussion. As each resident starts to engage with their instrument, the three musicians join in, weaving music together, basing their contributions on the mood and reactions of each participant.

For those who can no longer speak, music gives them the ability and opportunity to make all sorts of meaningful connections. Bernard, for instance, doesn't want an instrument, but is fascinated by the conductor's baton that Tony passes to him. He picks it up and examines it, his eyes lighting up. As he starts to wave it, the musicians follow his lead at different tempos and volumes as he gains confidence. A delighted look appears on his face. For a short moment Bernard is in control, something he has had little chance to feel since living with dementia. What's more, he's been in control of a beautiful sound that has clearly given him immense pride.

While, of course, it's heartening to see Bernard accomplishing so much, the activity has required concentration and mental skills that will deteriorate as his condition advances. 'We have to work completely in the moment,' says Tony. 'Even if you try and set a structure beforehand it can go in a totally opposite direction. If someone suddenly starts responding to a piece that's going on at the >



guiding hand:
Bernard starts to
enjoy using the
conducting baton

HEALING MUSIC



The story of how Music for Life was founded to help those with dementia

SET UP IN 1993 by Linda Rose, a former teacher and educational advisor, Music For Life was created from a notion that there was a sector of the ageing population that could be helped through music. This idea, which increasingly became focused on dementia, attracted Wigmore Hall, which got involved in 2005. With its combined forces, the project was able to offer a three-year dementia-awareness training programme to equip professional musicians with the specialist skills needed to work in the field. Wigmore Hall now manages the projects in conjunction with Dementia UK and they have 25 musicians and over nine projects a year.

Work takes place in residential homes, hospitals and special day care centres, with projects that enlist musicians from the London Symphony Orchestra, the Philharmonia, and the City of London Sinfonia, as well as community musicians.

The Netherlands-based Lifelong Learning in Music and the Arts (LLMA) has been studying the Music for Life process in the hope of taking the concept to Holland.

other side of the room, you might need to curtail a piece quite quickly in order to catch a different moment with someone else.'

The music's effect stretches far beyond the present, however, and has helped unlock past experiences. In a separate project, a man started to beat a clear and precise rhythm on the drum. It eventually came to light that he had worked with Morse code during World War II, something that the staff had never known. In fact, many of the residents carry very little personal history with them when they arrive at the care home – their previous 60 or more years may well be a mystery to everyone. 'The music brings out different sides to the residents and helps staff to understand them in a new light,' says Julia Burton-Jones from Dementia UK. 'The more we know the person, the more sensitive their care will be. Staff are often amazed at the positive impact of the sessions and it reinforces the importance of their own relationships with them.'

Lina comes from Bulgaria and has five children, although none of them are in touch. Beyond that, no one knows anything about her, but her change throughout the eight weekly sessions is noticeable. There are times when she appears to fret, but when it comes to her turn with the music, she is engaged and alive. Refusing the baton, she prefers to conduct with her hands and her whole body, putting in a huge amount of energy. 'When I hear music, I am in another life – it makes me want to fly,' she cries, as she gestures upwards, before appearing exhausted by her exertion. The care home staff are convinced

that using music is a great way of helping Lina's extreme mood swings – and it is still proving to be a great benefit to her.

Crucially, though, each session is designed to allow people to be themselves, even if they might be depressed or sad. Iris is one such resident whose grief at losing both her husband and son is clearly debilitating. Before the Music for Life sessions, she spent her days in her night clothes, eating her meals alone in her room. 'When you're working with people

'When I hear music, I am in another life – it makes me want to fly'

with dementia, you know that they're often not in the same world as you – for Iris, she was in a very sad place, constantly dealing with grief,' says Kate, the violinist. As the sessions go on, she slowly starts emerging as the musicians adapt their playing to her changing mood. Gentle, minor keys are transformed into happier sounds, and Iris starts to put aside her sadness and remember her family with fondness. Since the sessions, her depression has significantly lifted and she is now joining in with other residents more socially.

Although this sort of work should not be confused with music therapy, there are some parallels. All the same, the musician's role is an intense one. 'We have to understand

what we are doing and how much we should allow ourselves to get involved,' says Kate. An essential part of this is the weekly reflective meetings, which follow after each music session. It's a chance for care home staff, musicians and project managers to talk through any progress and reflect on the changes in the residents that may have occurred during the week.

As dementia continues on its devastating path, Music for Life can offer a sanctuary. It can find the value in each person and impart a sense of dignity. And it never gives up the hope of finding a glimmer of that person who may be lost within. n

The names of all the care home residents have been changed. For more information on Music For Life visit www.dementiauk.org