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MUSIC FOR SOCIAL IMPACT:

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR
PRACTITIONERS AND THE
FIELD**

A report from the Music for Social Impact
project dissemination event held at
RichMix, London on 1st March 2023



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OVERVIEW

In March 2023, Guildhall School of Music and Drama, The Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA) and London Arts and Health (LAH), came together to present a day exploring ***Music for Social Impact: Future directions for practitioners and the field.***

Hosted as part of a 3-year international AHRC-funded research project titled *Music for Social Impact* (MFSI), this day-long event included presentations, roundtable discussions and networking moments bringing together practitioners, funders, policy makers and researchers. The day included insights shared from representatives of Arts Council England, Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance, Guildhall School of Music and Drama (Guildhall School), Raw Material and Youth Music.

This report foregrounds the rich insights and perspectives from those working in/with/for participatory music practices in a variety of roles, by sharing key insights and discussions spanning a range of topics and considerations for the future direction of participatory music practices.



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ABOUT THE MUSIC FOR SOCIAL IMPACT PROJECT



The Music for Social Impact project was a 3-year international research project exploring musician experiences of working in participatory music practices in Belgium, Colombia, Finland and the UK. Led from Guildhall School of Music & Drama, the project sought to provide an integrative cross-cultural analysis of the field from the perspective of practitioners who deliver the work. This entailed undertaking a systematic in-depth analysis of practitioners, and how their backgrounds, training, and beliefs affect the way they carry out their work and assess and improve its effectiveness.

Broadly the project encompassed 4 data collection phases:

- 1) desk research to scope the context and environment of participatory music practices in each of the four locations,
- 2) a practitioner survey via an open-call in each location (631 responses, 318 complete),
- 3) in-depth semi-structured interviews via Zoom in country languages (21 in Belgium, 23 in Colombia, 20 in Finland and 24 in the UK),
- 4) case studies to observe and participate (where appropriate) in the practice of a small number of interviewees in each location.

MFSI RESEARCH TEAM

Principal investigator

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MFSI generated a variety of outputs including academic articles, videos, reports and events considering topics such as:

- Musicians' perspectives on the social impact of their work
- Routes for cooperation between practitioners, organisations, NGOs and others in Colombia
- Education for socially engaged musicians in Belgium and the UK
- A portfolio or protean career path?: Practitioner values in the context of Finland
- Project outputs are predominantly in English and Spanish and can be accessed via: <https://www.gsmd.ac.uk/mfsi>

MFSI was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/S005285/1) and the International Platform for the Social Impact of Making Music.



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council



ABOUT THE EVENT



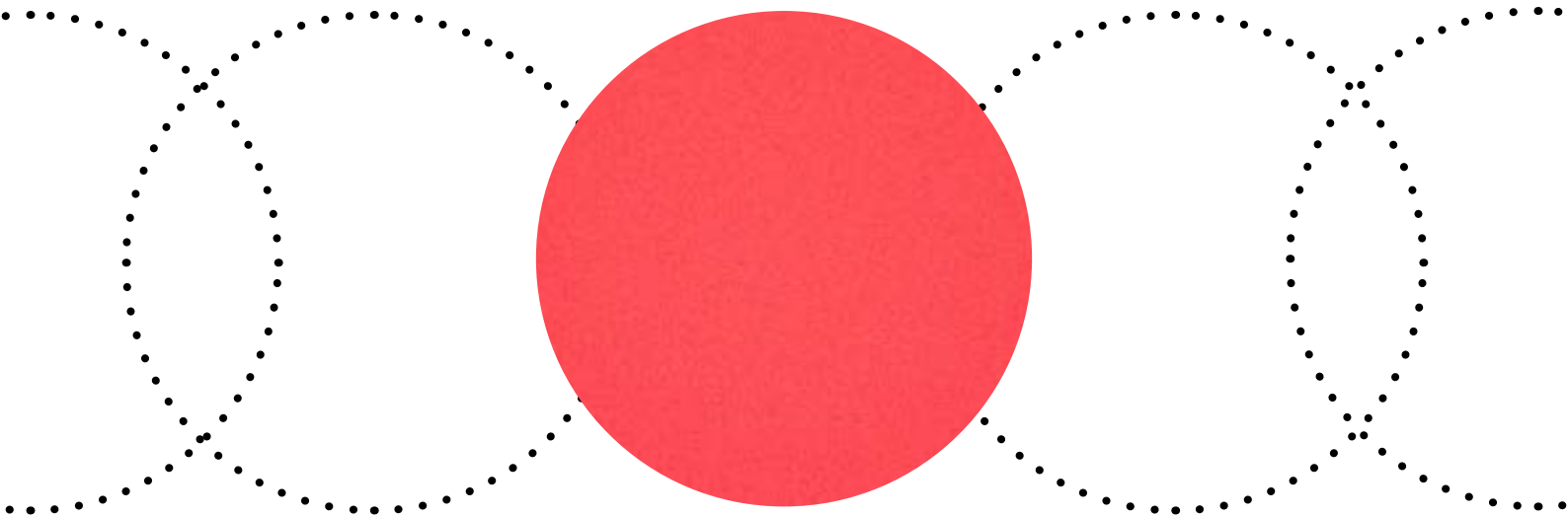
Held as part of a series of MFSI dissemination events, Guildhall School partnered with the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance and London Arts and Health to:

- **share insights from the MFSI research project and invite responses,**
- **bring together a range of participatory music practice stakeholders,**
- **and explore key issues for the field.**

Approximately 50 musicians working with communities and individuals for social, health and/or education outcomes joined the event from across the UK. This included some of those that participated in the MFSI study. We were also joined by two musicians from Canada who signed up as part of a London trip. The group contributed to forward-looking conversations and thinking together on future directions for the field. See the Roundtable discussion section on [page 20](#) of this report for details.

John Sloboda and Jo Gibson presented insights from the MFSI project (see ***Insights from Music for Social Impact: Practitioner's work, context and beliefs*** on [page 8](#) for detail) and panellists Jide Ashimi (Raw Material), Victoria Hume (CHWA), Richard Ings (Arts Council England), Minoti Parikh (independent consultant, CHWA) and Carol Reid (Youth Music), offered reflections from their respective experience and expertise (see ***Panellist responses*** on [page 16](#) for detail). Community musician Sarah Fisher also offered a short body percussion activity, which wonderfully energised the group, bringing us together with a music making moment.

The image on the next page shows visual minutes taken across the day. The visual minutes document key discussion points, zooming in on moments of resonance between the group.



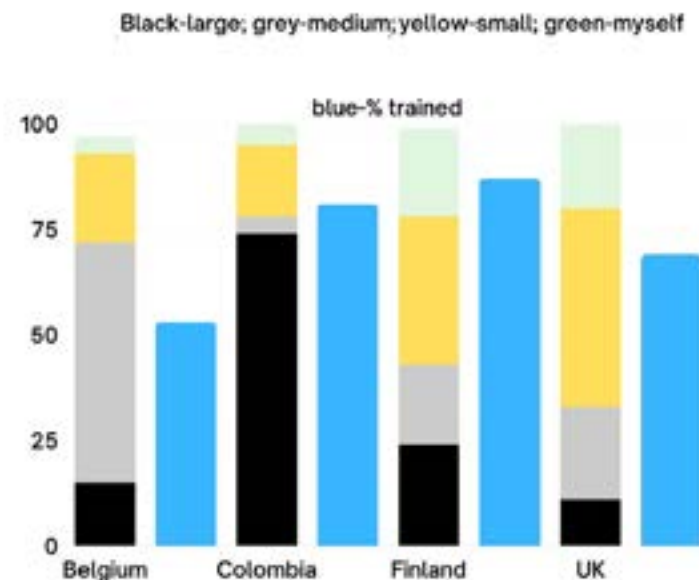
INSIGHTS FROM MUSIC FOR SOCIAL IMPACT: PRACTITIONER'S WORK, CONTEXT AND BELIEFS

The day began with a presentation from John Sloboda who provided an overview and contextualisation of the international research project (see ***Music for Social Impact an Overview of Context*** accessible at <https://www.gsmd.ac.uk/mfsi> for further details), alongside outlining the structure and purpose of the day. He highlighted underlying commonalities in participatory music practices across the research locations including;

- **strong emphasis on work with children and young people,**
- **a broad range of musical genres,**
- **high dependence on public funding,**
- **prioritisation of inclusion and access.**

John also noted differences between locations due to their varied situations and contexts. For example, in Colombia there was significant focus given to post-conflict reconciliation, in Europe there was greater focus on disability and older people, and in the UK practices were often explicitly framed in terms of deficits and needs.

Another point of difference is the size of organisation in which practitioners work. In Colombia, the majority of practice takes place through large organisations (>50 employees), whilst in Belgium most practitioners worked in medium-sized organisations (12-50 employees), and in Finland and the UK most worked in small organisations (<12 employees), alongside several self-starters. Finally, there was slight difference in reported training received for this work. At 53%, Belgium showed the fewest number of practitioners receiving training, and at 87%, Finland shows the highest.



Following John's presentation, Jo Gibson offered further insights from the MFSI project. A video of Jo & John's presentation can be accessed via the [project repository](#). We now offer an overview of the insights shared.

The insights coalesced around four areas:

1. **Disrupt and Reclaim:** How practitioners conceive of the work and what is important to them.
2. **Possibilities and Challenges** of contemporary participatory music practices.
3. **Learning, unlearning and relearning:** preliminary insights around learning pathways for those undertaking the work.
4. **Future directions:** Questions and reflections that flow from areas 1 – 3.

What follows is a snapshot of each area. It is based on what practitioners said about themselves and their practice in the surveys and interviews conducted. In the UK, this includes perspectives from those working in many and varied practices such as community music, music therapy, music education, arts activism, music performance and others. MFSI outputs that give fuller detail, including more practitioner examples and reference to literature, will be signposted at the end of each section.

DISRUPT AND RECLAIM

Across Belgium, Colombia, Finland and the UK practitioners described their work as an attempt to disrupt music practices and pedagogies understood to be exclusionary and elitist.

This connects to notions of the artist as disruptor, and, in the UK, to the field's historic roots in the 1960s - 1970s community arts movement. Consistent with its counter culture heritage, social justice, activism, cultural democracy, and participation are some of the aspirational values of the field. This is often discussed in connection to Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, n.d.), which emphasizes people's right to culture, alongside understandings of music as a universal human capacity (Blacking, 1973; Small, 1998; Elliott & Silverman, 2015). As these practitioners explain:

'...[E]veryone has a human right to be musical. [...] What we're doing is trying to help people realise that they have the capability to be musical if that's something that they wish for. And [that is] because many people are conditioned throughout their lives, at least in the Western world, to not feel musical or to feel extremely self-conscious about being musical' (UK.02)

'[Musicality] belongs to everyone, and it can have something to offer everyone [...] [E]verybody can play, everybody can sing ... More of that everyday music making everywhere: in workplaces, in communities, everyone benefits' (FI.07)

DISRUPTING MEETS RECLAIMING

As practitioners seek to disrupt exclusionary and elitist music making practices that reduce music making to something for the few, they are at the same time attempting to reclaim the right to be musical, alongside recognition of music engagement as part of everyday experience. Therefore, as this practitioner explains, enacting a participatory practice can be,

⋮ *'...an opportunity to challenge the status quo' (UK.08)*

EMPHASIS ON RECLAIMING OR RE-ESTABLISHING HERITAGES AND TRADITIONS IN COLOMBIA

In Colombia, there was greater emphasis on reclaiming heritage and traditions. As this practitioner explains:

⋮ *'My idea is to try to maintain and rescue those traditions that we are unfortunately losing
[...] That this beautiful tradition is not lost' (CO.04)*

Whilst in each location practitioners described their work as an attempt to disrupt and reclaim, this was nuanced in response to the different contexts, situations and imperatives of each location.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Watch [the presentation at the 7th annual SIMMposium, Disrupting and Reclaiming: Qualities and sensibilities of participatory practice for musicians in Belgium, Colombia, Finland and the UK.](#)

POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

This section considers possibilities and challenges as expressed by UK practitioners that participated in the study.

Possibilities included the potential for participatory music practices as sites of doing 'good'. Whilst there will be differences, for many **being together, creating**, and opportunities for **self-expression** and **equity**, were considered as overarching facets of what constitutes good.

- *'... My sense of good, which is a kind of perhaps a slightly different sense of good, it's that human sense of ... these are human beings being together in a creative and productive and equal kind of way' (UK.18)*

Practitioners highlighted the importance of relationship:

- *'Doesn't matter how good your model is or how big your evidence base is, if the relationship isn't right with the person you're working with, it's not going to work' (UK.05)*

Yet current infrastructure and the short-term nature of projects can limit possibilities for relational working as discussed under the section titled [Obstacles and challenges](#).

PRACTITIONER BENEFITS AND GAINS:

Starting with possibilities that came through the study, practitioners highlighted ways in which they can personally benefit and gain through the work:

- *'I didn't know what to do with my musicianship, and I didn't know how to keep going other than to be an [instrumental] teacher. Don't get me wrong, I love [instrumental] teaching, but I wanted to do something else as well [...] and what that [community music practice] has given me is real happiness, actually. It's giving me freedom to just be as a musician and to just be a musical being, which is a very special thing for me' (UK.02)*

Practitioner benefits and gains included opportunities for practitioners to explore and develop their musical self, including skills, experience and understanding. We are mindful not to paint a one-sided picture by discussing benefits as expressed by our survey respondents and interviewees alone. It is more complicated than that. Indeed, the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance addresses this through their *From Surviving to Thriving* report and practice model (2022). Furthermore, there is increasing research that considers the ways in which socially engaged practitioners (Belfiore, 2021) and musicians more broadly (Musgrave, 2022) are harmed through the work. Whilst there are many possibilities of practice, there are also challenges. Through the MFSI study these were mostly mentioned at the level of infrastructure, with implications for practice.

OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

KEY CHALLENGES

- FUNDING
- INADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE
- LACK OF SUPPORT
- MISUNDERSTANDING THE WORK
- SHORT-TERM WORKING

'For the majority of the projects that I have done so far I have had to secure the funding. It's a long and arduous process, and it can be difficult to communicate effectively what the work is via grant language' (UK.25 – survey response)

⋮ *'[P]ermanent and stable professional positions are increasingly rare in the sector. It is not just a matter of funding, but also a problem of being able [to work] in stable conditions, being recognised in the community as a stable entity providing specific resources' (UK.27 – survey response)*

Funding challenges, alongside - or perhaps embroiled in - misunderstandings of the work, (such as the mismatch between requirements to identify outcomes in advance of projects, and the emergent nature of participatory music practices, see the section titled [Hostile working conditions](#)) can prevent important aspects required for doing 'good' as practitioners understand the term.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Watch [the 7th annual SIMMposium, Disrupting and Reclaiming: Qualities and sensibilities of participatory practice for musicians in Belgium, Colombia, Finland and the UK, \(Castro-Cifuentes, Gibson, Karttunen, van Zijl\)](#)

and [Pathways for effective and ethical practice, \(Gibson & Sloboda\)](#)

LEARNING, UNLEARNING, RELEARNING

This brief section shares emerging insights drawing on the voices of UK practitioners. Although preliminary, it was shared at the event by way of opening discussion to consider future directions for practitioner learning and growth.

Since the MFSI project is delivered in connection to Higher Education Institutions including conservatoires, one area that we were curious about, and that surfaced through the research, was pathways to effective and ethical practice.

Whilst there are many musicians working for social change in and through music who honed their craft outside of formal education, almost 3/4s of our sample had studied music within an institution. From this experience, discussion of the need for flexibility as opposed to, or in disruption to, rigid and hierarchical ways of working was emphasised.

⋮ *'[M]y classical training means I approach musical activities more rigidly than those trained in other genres' (UK.23)*

⋮ *'I think it's also hard because we all came out of classical music college as well as university, and we met in a music college. And so, [our classical music experience was geared] towards performance and [we] kind of [were] unlearning that' (UK.09)*

ENACTED THROUGH DOING

- *'The main thing is doing it actually, strangely. People need to learn through experience.*
- *You know, you can train, you can train, you can train, [...] but until you start actually*
- *going into those situations, you won't know' (UK.17)*

As a relational practice, musicians cannot come to know all that will be encountered in advance of the work. Therefore, whilst codes of practice, private study, qualifications and impeccable plans can help, it is in and through the doing that the work is 'made good'; in the messy contexts of people's varying needs, wishes and capacities. However, given barriers touched upon within the *Obstacles and Challenges* section, since such 'doing' often takes place in under-resourced, underfunded and time limited situations, space for learning, relationship building and reflection – which are vitally needed to navigate complexities as they arise through doing – is often inadequate.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Drawing on discussion of the field as an act of disruption and/or reclamation, alongside possibilities and challenges of contemporary practice, and learning and growth pathways, this final section offered questions and provocations for the group to explore across the day.

It included reflection on practitioners and practice as products of normative culture, practising in the context of neoliberalism, and the extent to which instrumentalisation of participatory practices can disempower and disrupt the aims and working of such practices.

The presentation ended with a question for the group to consider: ***As neoliberalism disrupts the disruptors, how can practitioners push back to work towards social and community good/justice/transformation they may seek? What is needed?***

This question was offered alongside the following suggestions:

1. Future participatory music practice research would benefit from collaborative inquiry that involves all stakeholders (including participants) and embraces interdisciplinary working and practice-research.
2. Shifting from emphasis on 'social impact' towards cultural rights and cultural democracy may support this.

PANELLIST RESPONSES

Following the MFSI research presentation, panellists Jide Ashimi (Raw Material), Victoria Hume (CHWA), Richard Ings (Arts Council England), Minoti Parikh (independent consultant, CHWA) and Carol Reid (Youth Music), offered short reflections from their varied experience and expertise. Chaired by Anna Woolf (London Arts and Health), the panel responses coalesced around the following areas:

- Resonance with the term *disruption*
- The workforce: Who's included? Who isn't?
- Shifts in funding approaches and priorities
- Practitioner wellbeing and sustainability

RESONANCE WITH THE TERM DISRUPTION

Several panellists commented on the aptness of *disruption* and *reclamation* as ways of conceptualising the work. As Victoria explained, *'I really recognise that [disrupting and reclaiming] as fundamental to arts and health practices, and in our context, it extends to disrupting health cultures as well as cultural practice'*. And Richard agreed, noting that the word 'disrupt', talks to the subversiveness of creativity: *'When artists work in different settings they challenge the ways in which things are normally done. They challenge the system. Disruption is often seen as a negative thing, but I think it's got a positive aspect. By disrupting, you reveal things to people and can bring them on board through new ways of working'*. Richard went on to talk about the ways in which disruption also describes what can happen between practitioners and those they work with in participatory practices: *'I think co-creation is quite disruptive because it is about ceding power as an institution or as an artist. It's a way of being more equitable in the relationship'*.

Minoti also agreed that conceptualising the work as *disrupting* and *reclaiming* chimes with participatory practice, however she warned of the pitfalls of being unclear and over ambitious with regards to what change looks like: *'I think sometimes because we are so driven by passion, sometimes we over promise and over commit to what that change looks like. And suggesting change as something radically different, does unintentionally add in a lot of pressure to our work, to our practice, which can lead to poor mental health and burnout [...] It's very important for us to take that step back and really clearly define what does change in a given context mean to us as practitioners?'*

THE WORKFORCE: WHO'S INCLUDED? WHO ISN'T?

An important thread that wove throughout the panellist responses was discussion of who is and who isn't included in the workforce. This builds on growing critique of the lack of diversity amongst participatory music practitioners. As Richard stated candidly, *'the workforce is largely white, with very limited representation of practitioners from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, or of those with lived experience of mental or physical ill health'*. Jide enriched this conversation, explaining that **workforce diversity must be beyond tokenism because it is a central component of the work**; *'For me what's come up and having had sight of it [the research presentation] already, is the relational aspect of it... The importance of the relationship participants have with the people they are working with'*. Jide explained that in the context of his work with RawMaterial they have a wide variety of participants. Many of those participants have had their relationships break down and their social networks diminished. Given this, and since participatory practice and mental

health work are relational practices, Jide said we need to consider *'How the practitioner reflects the identity of the person that they are working with and how that's a part of that person's identity development'*. In the main, practitioner backgrounds and experience do not often reflect those they work with. Furthermore, as Victoria highlighted, lack of diversity is perpetuated by the field's infrastructure; *'The weakness of the funding structure means it requires significant investment of practitioner's own social capital and own financial resources which makes it both unsustainable and exclusionary as a way of working'*.

SHIFTS IN FUNDING APPROACHES AND PRIORITIES

Many on the panel agreed with the reporting of obstacles and challenges to practice through the research. **Funding challenges resonated** in particular. As Minoti noted, *'funding was also a top issue that came up through CHWA's report, From Surviving to Thriving'*. Victoria extended this discussion, suggesting, *'There's a disparity between the willingness to partner and the willingness to invest'*. Short-term working was understood to be central to this, referred to by Richard as 'project culture'. And as Jide highlighted, *'we are talking about value'*. Here Jide points to the question of what is funded, and therefore, what is valued and considered valuable; *'I want the value to be considered. The value of what is being provided, the value of the practitioner, the value of the relationship, the value of developing the practitioner – we should have that factored in'*.

In contrast to this, panellists Carol and Richard highlighted **ways in which UK arts and music funding is shifting**. Speaking about Youth Music Carol explained, *'There's been quite a few big shifts in the funding world in the last couple of years since Covid and George Floyd. One of the major things that is happening is a move to participatory grant making – so the whole ethos of "nothing about us without us". And that is integrating people with lived experience in all aspects of grant making'*. Carol went on to highlight that because of their shift to participatory grant making, Youth Music has seen lots of positive changes in practice and are reframing their focus away from impact and towards learning and reflection. Richard echoed this, explaining that Arts Council England's *Let's Create* strategy is making important steps with its strong emphasis on place, alongside addressing social, economic and health inequities.

Speaking as funders, both **Carol and Richard offered advice** to the predominantly practitioner group. Carol explained that before applying for funding, those seeking funding should take time to consider whether the funder is the right fit for them and their project. Carol asked, ***Are your values aligned to the prospective funders?*** She suggested it was important to take the time to check this and to talk to funders before applying. Richard, speaking on behalf of the Arts Council, which is funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, suggested **MPs and council members as key people to speak to** in making the case for greater investment, whether that is from central or local government.

PRACTITIONER WELLBEING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Practitioner wellbeing and sustainability was an area that received significant attention from the panel, with Anna, the panel chair, commenting that *'it is refreshing to see the lens of practitioner sustainability threaded throughout the research'*. Given the relational aspect of participatory music practices as outlined in the presentation, Jide explained that *'the practitioner ends up giving a lot of themselves... so we need to be more conscious about the emotional labour that is entailed in doing the work ... [Furthermore] the level of awareness that is needed in terms of your own wellbeing is really important'*.

Minoti and Victoria highlighted synergies between the MFSI research and their CHWA report *From Surviving to Thriving*, 2022. Their report considered ways in which those working across art forms to support mental health can move towards more sustainable modes of practice. On the challenges for practitioner wellbeing and sustainable practice, Minoti talked about the importance of practitioner confidence. Practitioner lack of confidence can lead to *'underquoting for work, over promising, still agreeing to do it, the inability to say no, saying yes to working in substandard conditions or those we are not equipped for, no courage to say these are my boundaries'*. Minoti went on to advise that practitioners need to think about their needs and boundaries and *'what we can actually achieve given the funds and resources'*. However, there is often the perception that in doing so, practitioner capabilities will be questioned.



[Click Here to access the report](#)

Although much of the panel discussion focussed on practitioners, as the main attending group at the event, Minoti and Victoria drew attention to sustainability as a mutually held responsibility. In their 2022 report, they offered this as recommendations for practitioners, commissioners, researchers and funders. As Minoti explained:

'So if you flip it ... what needs to happen to shift these barriers? ... The need for shared responsibility, for co-production, which in this context we think of as how each of us in the sector has the responsibility to step up and do our bit – funders, commissioners, practitioners, researchers, infrastructure organisations – how each of us has a role to play to build that thriving sustainable culture that we are all hoping to move towards.'

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS:

KEY THEMES

'The conversation appeared highly stimulating and important to all involved. Despite people moving between different tables at times, everyone who joined the table spoke on multiple occasions. [This was] well supported by having a facilitator present to welcome new people on such occasions and giving overviews of where the conversation was currently at' (Roundtable recorder 3).

During the afternoon session, attendees were invited to respond to the research via roundtable discussions. The following areas were offered to open conversation:



Attendees could choose to focus on one area, move between areas or discuss something different as denoted by the 'go your own way' option. The conversations were documented by designated recorders following the Chatham House Rule.¹ Insights from those conversations are offered under the subheadings 1) From disruption to eruption, 2) The toll of disruption and practitioner wellbeing, 3) Working conditions: Power and change, 4) On impact and future directions.

¹ The Chatham House Rule 'guiding spirit is: share the information you receive, but do not reveal the identity of who said it' (Chatham House, 2023). This form was chosen to support trust and engagement given the context of this short one-off gathering with several attendees meeting for the first time. Had we had more time (both for the event and later stages of the MFSI project), our preference would be to credit contributions where acknowledgement was wanted.

FROM DISRUPTION TO ERUPTION

During the morning presentations, which offered key insights from the MFSI research project, we presented ideas from one of the project's cross-cultural comparative journal articles. This article explains that across the research locations, practitioners described their work as an attempt to **disrupt** music practices and pedagogies understood to be exclusionary and elitist (see [page 10](#) of this report for more detail). In the roundtable discussions that followed, the most substantial response to this analysis was a questioning of the appropriateness of 'disruption' as a term to describe music projects with a social and community focus. Some attendees resonated with the term, making comments such as:



- *'To disrupt is to be human, and the challenge now is to be human' (event attendee, 1)*
- *'I am a disruptor; I want to disrupt and change things. I'm fed up with the working conditions, short term projects that don't work' (event attendee, 2)*
- *'Let's disrupt!' (event attendee, 3)*

However, others commented on the term's negative connotations. This included: links between disruption and destruction, namely '*orientation towards the obliteration of what was previously in place*' (Recorder 2) and a questioning of what might be lost through disruption; the potential of disruption to indicate '*closing down, intervening and rejection*' of something (Recorder 3); negative aspects of disruption, such as the '*disruptions to norms, routines and social worlds as enforced by Covid-19 lockdowns*' (Recorder 2); and the potential for the role of disruptor to position the artist as '*outsider*' to the work, which was considered incongruent with relational practice (Recorder 4).

Problematizing the term led attendees to search for ways of '*framing disruption that are more in line with a spirit of building, creating and connecting*. Though the group did not explicitly link back to the question '**What's needed for more disrupting disruption?**' this could perhaps be read as an answer' (Recorder 2).

The action of radical change and/or challenge to the status quo as denoted by disruption, was not the issue per se. The concern lay rather in disconnect between emphasis on connection and creation through participatory music practices, and disruption's implied 'breaking' or 'severance'. Subsequently, many in the group asserted a need to find more generative terminology suggesting:

'The term 'eruption' is more relevant. It connects to the notion of emergence, offering a positive sense of 'disruption' rather than a negative one' (Recorder 3).

Furthermore, it was suggested that 'eruption' has potential to afford different eruptive forms, thus 'lending itself to the positive idea of seeking varied alternatives' (Recorder 3). This resonates with the MFSI cross-cultural comparative working paper that initially stimulated the discussion. In the working paper, the authors consider why 'disruption' continues to be important for practitioners in the field. They suggest;

'... the ongoingness of disruption, might be the point, if we understand it as "a platform to engage in re-imagining what will happen next" (Manu, 2022, xiv). Writing on the philosophy of disruption, Manu describes disruption as a "reinventing the world, building the world we do not yet know and working together to shape the world we do" (Ibid). This resonates with Higgins' philosophical consideration of the community music workshop; "One might say that the instance of the workshop is not known until it is over because it occurs as a disruption. As *event*, the workshop becomes as singular disruptable happening that challenges with intention to transform" (2012, p.146). Disruption might therefore always-already be ongoing and brings us to core qualities and sensibilities of participatory and socially engaged music making. This is because the dispute is not about imposing one emerging, non-hegemonic music culture over a hegemonic one, but to have the possibility of critical reflection/action against exclusionary music systems, which challenges ideas such as the intrinsic goodness of music or notions about the quality and value of specific music cultures over others'.

From Castro-Cifuentes, Gibson, Karttunen, & van Zijl, (2023). *Reclaiming musics, shaping selves & magic moments: Motivations for participatory practice among musicians in Belgium, Colombia, Finland and the UK*.

References in this excerpt:

Higgins, L. (2012). *Community Music in Theory and Practice*. Oxford University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199777839.001.0001>

Manu, A. (2022). *The Philosophy of Disruption: From Transition to Transformational Change*. Emerald Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/9781802628494>

Critical reflection/action was very much present across the roundtable discussions on the topic of disruption, including consideration of 'how this term might be framed in different contexts' and 'tools [whereby those that participate in such practices can] disrupt and reclaim in their own ways' (Recorder 2).

Or as one group put it:

⋮ *If we are trying to disrupt or change, what are we trying to disrupt and change? Who is doing this? Why are they? And, on whose grounds? (Recorder 4)*

We suggest that these are important questions that deserve ongoing attention from all involved in the work through future practice and research, since they speak to core facets – intentions and doings – of music practices and pedagogies that work towards various transformations. Furthermore, ongoing reflection can support individuals and communities towards greater understanding the work (in the fullest sense, contextually, historically, epistemologically and so forth) on their terms, and from that, shape it for the better.

THE TOLL OF DISRUPTION AND PRACTITIONER WELLBEING

⋮ *The theme of care was discussed in a multitude of ways. Connecting to the conversations around being a disruptor, the group discussed the emotional toll that this can bring with it (Roundtable, Recorder 3).*

The discussion around conceiving participatory practice as an act of disruption led attendees to highlight **the toll that the role of disruptor can place** on practitioners, including detrimental impacts to their wellbeing. This resonated with the panel responses on **practitioner wellbeing and sustainability** discussed on [page 19](#) of this report. As one attendee explained, the *'pressure to hold all that energy to resist and sustain the resistance'* is enormous. The group discussed ways in which *'being a disruptor'* placed significant demands on them as practitioners such as; working in settings that were out of sync with their own values, challenging working conditions including unpaid labour, disconnection and working alone, and the disruption that *'funding bodies bring to people's lives'* (Recorder 3) since practitioners' work is often funded on a project by project basis, which means they operate within precarity as they constantly search for ways to continue their work.

One woman described that working structures are *'starved of dialogue and connection'*. This raised issues of sustainability and questions around the extent to which *'music for social impact'* is possible under such conditions, with agreement on the table that musicians need others to connect with to achieve their aims. Another attendee, reported that looking for project funding and sustainability had reduced their agency, as Recorder 3 explains;

⋮ *'Similarly, another woman reflected that despite her amazing opportunities in music and the journey she has had, she felt she 'wasn't in charge of her own life' (Recorder 3).*

—

This discussion of the toll of disruption and ways in which practitioners can be harmed, resonates with growing research and evaluation that considers the ‘systematic exploitation’ of socially engaged artists (Belfiore, 2021), and practitioner wellbeing. One significant example of this is event partner, [CHWA’s recent work on building a sustainable model for those working with creativity in mental health](#).

This also resonates with a MFSI presentation by the project’s Belgium team. This presentation was titled *‘Being Close without Being Close’: Affective Challenges in Participatory Music Projects* and was given at the 7th annual SIMMposium hosted by Guildhall School and the international platform Social Impact of Music Making (SIMM). It highlighted the emotional labour of participatory music practice reported by many practitioners in Belgium, alongside making recommendations for future practice:

‘Musicians working in participatory music projects may come across situations and stories which deeply affect them. Therefore, the support of an organisation, and/or the presence of social workers or health professionals [involved in the project] is key. [...] A network of peers (and social workers or health professionals) with whom a musician meets to reflect on their work is recommended. Affective support (resources and time) should be taken into account when writing and funding project proposals’.

From [Van Zijl & De bisschop \(2022, Dec 12-14\). ‘Being Close without Being Close: Affective Challenges in Participatory Music Projects \[conference presentation\]. SIMMposium #7, Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London, England..](#)

Finally, consideration of practitioner wellbeing led to discussion of the practitioner’s embodied knowledge and the significance of the body for participatory music practice. From this, attendees commented that wellbeing concerns more than issues of the mind alone, it must be thought of more holistically – as wellbeing of the full body. This was pertinent given other conversations surrounding need for practitioners to change themselves, rather than change the world, which was understood to require focus on the ‘self’, ‘undoing’ and requirements to ‘unpack and pull things apart’ in order to ‘decolonise our systems’.

∴ ***‘The first step of transformation must start with the self’ (Recorder 3).***

HOSTILE WORKING CONDITIONS

- There was discussion of the dynamics of power; the endemic devaluation of the arts in the neoliberal world; and the responsibilities of the practitioner in relation to policy makers and others in positions of power. (Roundtable recorder, 5)



Discussion of working conditions peppered most of the roundtable conversations. This section spotlights some key issues.

1. RELATIONSHIP AND CONNECTION ARE AT THE HEART OF PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES. HOWEVER, WORKING CONDITIONS FREQUENTLY INHIBIT THIS.

As recorder 3 noted, *'working conditions based around short term projects do not work with the need to build sustainable strong connections that are rooted in dialogue and exchange. Building partnerships and alliances, deliberately engaging with others...[and] highly valuing those people and those relationships'* is central to the work. However,

- 'We often work alone and that can be really difficult with the support needs that are generated. [...] We need to reclaim the concepts of connectivity and support'* (Recorder 1).

This comment resonated with many attendee expressions of *'feeling siloed'*, alongside gratitude for *'being together in a room'*. This drew attention to a disconnect between *'connection'* and *'relationality'*, which were described as core aims and facets of participatory music practices by those in attendance, and practitioner experiences of isolation and separation. And, it raises the question, to what extent do practitioner working conditions mirror the practice? If not why not, and what might be the potential of doing so?

2. THE ‘HEADACHE OF FUNDING’

Several attendees commented on *‘the headache of funding’* noting; the extensive time and energy this takes as a proportion of their work, *‘further hurdles for individual musicians’* because of eligibility criteria, and ways in which *‘some music projects are only being “taken to” privileged areas where projects can charge’* (recorder 3). Beyond difficulties around securing funding, attendees mentioned ways in which funders and funding models can mismatch with their work. *‘Attendees to the go your own way table described having almost to play the system to demonstrate delivery of the work that the funder wanted or had set, yet were actually delivering the work they wanted and knew communities and groups needed. This was described as almost being an “undercover artist” within the system and potentially where our work might be considered disruptive’* (Recorder 4). This returns us to the toll of disruption placed on practitioners as they interface between funder and intended recipient within hostile environments.

3. MEASURING SUCCESS: THE PROBLEM OF NEEDING TO ‘KNOW’ OUTCOMES IN ADVANCE OF THE WORK

Connected to the ‘headache of funding’ and the problematics of funder-led language, was the problem of needing to identify outcomes in advance of the work. Attendees discussed a mismatch between having to label anticipated outcomes before a project begins and the ways in which participatory creative practices operate. *‘My practice is based on a series of principles, but each time is different – emerging. So, there are lots of unknowns and things that are beyond my control’* (Recorder 5).



Furthermore, the question of what counts as a ‘successful’ outcome was also considered through a discussion of the term ‘excellence’. As Recorder 6 documented, one group asked: *‘Who defines excellence? What is this standard built upon? What are our assumptions about quality? Is excellence assumed to be something achieved by an individual or is it possible to widen out to a community phenomenon?’*

As a final point, others talked about the ability to say ‘no’ to activity and measurement requests that mismatch with their practice. As one group discussed, *‘the ability to say no only comes from developing relationships with funders that “trust” you and your work, giving you more space and freedom’* (Recorder 4). This group also talked about ways to *‘control the narrative’* noting that building up your own data through project evaluations can be one way to achieve this.

• ***‘We often work alone and that can be really difficult with the support needs that are generated. [...] We need to reclaim the concepts of connectivity and support’*** (Recorder 1).

ON IMPACT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Lastly, we offer a collation of comments on impact and future directions made across the afternoon roundtable discussions.



CONFIGURING THE WORK IN TERMS OF 'IMPACT' DOES NOT SIT WELL

There was a shared sense of 'Impact' having been caught up in the neo-liberal instrumentalization of arts practices.

'Impact' as a term/idea proposes that you have to justify the usefulness of the arts, rather than the arts being perceived as having inherent value.

Furthermore, there was the perception that since artists have been so adept at being flexible, they have 'nobbled' themselves by allowing funders to remould their practice.

The ways value, meaning, or impact is understood, experienced, or felt will be plural, unexpected, not completely known by the facilitator – how do we allow space for that? (Recorder, 5)

MAKING CHANGE

As the event sought to consider future directions for practitioners and the field, we draw this report to a close with some comments from across the day that speak to making change and/or offer suggestions for the ongoing growth and development of participatory music

• *In the face of the prevailing environment, we need more people in power to make change. (Recorder 5)*

• *Only by being open to learning more and understanding the context that we are working within can we genuinely build the relationships we need for empowering or emancipatory practices. (Recorder 4)*

• *There is a need to change ourselves rather than change the world. (Recorder 3)*

• *We need to prevent burnout and ask for pay that builds in the time it takes to reflect and change. (Recorder 6)*

• *We need to reclaim a valuable space for marginalised people within the creative industries to build, to create and connect for more powerful positive social change. (Recorder 2)*

• *Changing communities: we need to encourage practitioner communities to change and morph. More women in male-dominated areas. More representation across the board (Recorder 1)*

As a final comment in this section, during the event we were asked 'how will the research be put to work?'. To this end, we welcome you to engage with the ideas discussed in this report by considering them with your practice, communities and stakeholders. We suggest this as an invitation to dialogue with the many perspectives on practice presented. For our part, we continue to share the research outputs through a dedicated project repository. We also recognise there is more to be done, and in the vein of 'nothing about us without us' welcome (indeed look to) future collaborative and participatory research for positive action in the field.

SUMMARY

The Music for Social Impact: Future directions for practitioners and the field

event offered space for the sharing of rich insights and perspectives from those working in/with/for participatory music practices in a variety of roles. This began with the MFSI research team sharing practitioner perspectives from Belgium, Colombia, Finland and the UK with an opening research presentation. During this presentation, participatory music practices were contextualised as acts of disrupting exclusive and elitist music making practices, and reclaiming heritages, rights and traditions. Participatory music making was considered as 'sites of possibility for doing good', yet hostile working conditions often place barriers to this. Therefore, for contemporary practices to flourish, the research began to point towards pathways for growth framed as learning, unlearning and relearning. This sparked rich responses and discussion across the day. Notably concerns around; workforce diversity which must be addressed beyond tokenism, practitioner wellbeing which must be supported for sustainable practice, and ways in which funding needs to, and is, changing via movement to participatory grant making and flexible funding. However, on the whole, there is a lot more to be done. The day pointed to the need for significant shifts in participatory music practice understandings and doings including moving away from impact and intervention-led agendas, conceiving of the work in terms of cultural rights and working towards cultural democracy, and breaking isolation – coming together and collaborating for change.

GET IN TOUCH

Music for Social Impact project website: <https://www.gsmd.ac.uk/mfsi>

Music for Social Impact contact email: research@gsmd.ac.uk

Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance website: <https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/>

London Arts and Health website: <https://londonartsandhealth.org.uk/>

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