



Music for Autism

Vision and aims

The Orchestra of St Johns is a charity, our vision is two-fold: delivering concert programmes of the highest artistic quality, while also seeking innovative ways to share the talents of our musicians with vulnerable people, who might not otherwise have the opportunity to access and engage with classical music. Our musicians have been working with disadvantaged young people with SEN, delivering Music for Autism workshops in special educational needs schools, free of charge, for over 20 years. OSJ engages with over 6,000 young people with SEN per year delivering over 70 full days of workshops in school settings throughout the country.

About OSJ and Music for Autism

OSJ's professional musicians deliver Music for Autism workshops for SEN pupils experiencing: learning difficulties including autism, physical disability, speech and language difficulties. John founded Music for Autism having witnessed the transformational positive impact that music had on his autistic son. OSJ's Founder and Director John Lubbock was awarded an OBE for his charitable work people with autism in 2015. At the heart of our work is the belief that music can be hugely beneficial for improving mental health, decreasing feelings of isolation and increasing levels of wellbeing. OSJ has developed a substantial network of SEN school partners across the UK. The demand for our workshops has increased substantially, due to the impact of the pandemic, isolation periods and home schooling on vulnerable young people.



Music for Autism Workshops

OSJ musicians work with small groups, engaging with up to 100 pupils throughout the school day. We receive briefings from school staff before each workshop, each session is tailored to respond to the unique needs and moods of each group. Music for Autism workshops are performed by: a string quartet, wind quintet, vocal quartet or a singer and accompanist. Our musicians perform a variety of music genres from classical to jazz

and lighter pieces, responding to the moods of the young people in each class. We aim to provide each pupil with the opportunity to engage with live music. School staff accompany the young people participating in our workshops and support them through the experience.

Our unique performances introduce young people with SEN to classical music in an environment designed to make them feel comfortable. Workshops are held in school halls, classrooms and other familiar spaces. Participants are invited to respond freely to the music, expressing themselves with spontaneous dance and movement. Music for Autism is uniquely positioned to offer access to some of the most renowned professional musicians in the UK. Participants have the opportunity to engage with music performed by Tony Award winners, Grammy-nominated classical artists and Pulitzer Prize winners



such as: the eminent soprano Dame Felicity Lott, violinist Tasmin Little and acclaimed cellist Steven Isserlis.

'Sometimes a child really needs to get up and run around, and most people don't understand that – they think they're just behaving badly, which means we can't take the children on trips to traditional concerts. So it's wonderful that this incredible orchestra can come to us.' Paula Manning, Director of Expressive Arts, Phoenix School, London

The Need for Our Work

'...we strive to break down barriers to participation: by opening doors, sowing seeds, nurturing and creating opportunities, often where none seemed conceivable.' John Lubbock OBE, OSJ Director and Founder



Our work responds to a great need identified by SEN schools and parents for greater music provision in school settings; schools are not always in a position to offer this due to funding restrictions and lack of specialist staff. Many of the young people we engage with might not otherwise have had the opportunity to see an instrument being played, to meet a conductor or a professional musician. We believe that music can be hugely beneficial in improving mental health and increasing wellbeing. In recent years, and in the age of social prescribing, awareness has risen of the importance of the arts within the sphere of mental health support services.

The pupils we engage with at SEN schools have diverse complex needs and a vast range of levels of ability and communication skills. Responding to staff briefings we are able to tailor our sessions to meet individual needs of pupils, for example; we may decide to play pianissimo, legato pieces during a session with a severely autistic young person who finds loud sounds distressing. Workshops are people centred, led by the interests shown by young people during sessions; for example, we focus on conducting if a young person is engaged with this activity, we provide scarves to dance with for those who enjoy dancing, and microphones for those who enjoy singing along. We aim to help and inspire these young people to experience the joys of live music. One of our workshop musicians, Derek Paravicini, became a pianist despite his learning difficulties and loss of sight as a child.

'Creative activity has been observed to stimulate an understanding of the process of making, giving rise to a greater sense of responsibility and self-reflection, increased confidence and self-esteem and better mental health.' Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing, report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017 p92

Responding to COVID-19

Due to the cancellation of live performances and events, school closures and restrictions on volunteer visits young people with SEN have experienced further barriers to classical music during the pandemic.



Our delivery responds to the increasingly urgent need for support services working to address loneliness, isolation and to increase levels of wellbeing within the community due to COVID-19. In response to COVID-19 restrictions we expanded our delivery to offer remote workshops and created a virtual resource for SEN schools of workshop videos. SEN school partners have seen a dramatic drop in funds for music provision, teachers and parents consider our workshops to be essential and demand for our free in person workshops exceeds our capacity. The pandemic highlighted how instrumental the arts are to tackling loneliness and isolation in society. There is an urgent need for additional mental health support services during this time. Young Minds stated in the Covid-19 summer 2020 survey report that *'80% of respondents agreed that the coronavirus pandemic had made their mental health worse... This was often related to increased feelings of anxiety, isolation, a loss of coping mechanisms or a loss of motivation.'*¹



'...A little boy who generally exclusively relates to an ipad, lifted his head and listening, waving his arm as you conducted. A profoundly autistic child was so engaged with the music that he stopped making his habitual noises and took centre stage to conduct....The delight on his face was just wonderful to watch.' Tracey Jameson, Assistant Head Teacher, Mabel Pritchard School, Oxford

"...The students get so much out of your concerts and they are a massive talking point for them throughout the year, especially due to current circumstances..." Charles Allison, Teacher of Music and Performing Arts, The Castle School, Newbury, September 2020

Our Impact

We engage with over 6,000 school children (aged 5–18) attending SEN schools per year. Since it was founded Music for Autism has directly touched the lives of tens of thousands of young people with SEN with the joy of classical music. The increase in engagement, response and improved mood/wellbeing due to the music we perform also indirectly impacts thousands of teachers, carers, parents, siblings and peers. Families and schools have reported that workshops facilitate communication skills, greater movement and emotional wellbeing in young participants.

Our work positively impacts the young people we work with, increasing levels of:

- **Confidence:** experiencing live music and interacting in a group setting
- **Emotional wellbeing:** increasing positive mood states



- **Communication skills:** stimulating physical movement, both verbal and non-verbal responses to music



'Every single child and young person responded positively. In over 20 years of working alongside such young people at different events I have never before witnessed something that benefitted each individual child no matter how locked into their own worlds...The children that filed out of the Abbey were calmer and more responsive than they had been as they entered.' - Alice Langtree, Special Needs Consultant, Scripture Union, Member of British Council Disability Advisory Panel

Support Us

As a charity we rely on the philanthropic support of grantmakers and individuals to raise over **£70,000** p/a for our Music for Autism workshops, each workshop costs £1,000 to deliver. Our overheads are low (we do not rent office space) we have a skeletal staff structure and as a charity we ensure that funds directly support core delivery rather than administrative costs. Our concert ticket income, prior to the pandemic, accounted for less than 10% of our total annual operating costs.

'...the music made me feel happy and I enjoyed playing an instrument' – Jonathan, young participant

For further information please contact

Simon Payne, General Administrator

c/o 22 Anna Pavlova Close, Abingdon, OX14 1TE

admin@osj.org.uk 07775 904626

Music for Autism workshop, photography by David Smith

ⁱ <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>