

Music as Therapy International: Project Georgia **Report for Sponsors**



Background

Georgia is a country scarred by conflict. Most recently, in 2008, Russian troops crossed the border into South Ossetia, causing thousands of people to flee their homes. Three years later, many of these people still live in very basic settlements around Tbilisi and elsewhere, unable to return and equally unable to find homes and work in an unfamiliar urban environment. More broadly, ongoing social and political upheaval has led to social problems and scant support for some of the most country's most disenfranchised people. In Tbilisi unemployment is high and poverty, with attendant emotional distress, physical deprivation and mental health problems, is a fact of life for many. Though strong communities and families are still a feature of Georgian society and a vital source of informal support, some families struggle to provide the care their children need. This is particularly true where children are disabled or display challenging behaviour as a result of emotional distress, or when the parents themselves have mental health or substance abuse issues. For this reason, Georgian residential schools cater not only for orphans but also for children whose parents are unable to look after them; these children are often very vulnerable, with traumatic histories and complex needs.

For three weeks in Oct-Nov 2011, in partnership with *Music as Therapy International*, I and a fellow UK Music Therapist, Alastair Robertson, spent time at a residential school in Tbilisi, Georgia, where we worked with staff and children, sharing therapeutic music-making skills with staff and building a sustainable project that will enable them to enrich their work with vulnerable children and adults.

Music as Therapy International and the Project Team

Over the past fourteen years, UK registered charity *Music as Therapy International* has enabled around 3000 disadvantaged children and adults with a range of disabilities and mental health problems compounded by the effects of poverty, war, neglect and abuse, to experience the benefits of interactive music-making. *Music as Therapy in Georgia* is a



partnership between the charity and two music therapists, Alastair Robertson and I, who are both based in Edinburgh. We had both spent time involved in music therapy projects in Tbilisi in the past, Alastair with the NHS and I as a volunteer in various Tbilisi NGOs. We were able to bring our local knowledge and contacts to the project, as well as an enthusiasm about Georgian music and culture.

Skill-Sharing at the School

We worked at Public School No. 200, a residential school in Georgia's capital. Ten members of staff, nine care staff and one teacher, showed an interest in the training and we were able to include all of them in the project. Each day we ran therapeutic music-making sessions with six groups of children, working with thirty children in all. One or two members of staff were assigned to each group, at first simply participating in sessions, but as the weeks went on taking more responsibility and leading

activities. Each day ended with a training session for all staff, during which we communicated basic therapeutic principles, discussed and watched videos of the sessions, and made plans for future work – as well as making sure to end each day by singing a song together. The school's English teacher Darina Gulaziani was able to attend these training sessions to translate for us and she did a great job of communicating the essential themes emerging from lively and enthusiastic discussions. During the final sessions, though Alastair and I were present, school staff took the lead. This meant that we were able to offer feedback and answer any questions so that staff felt as ready as possible to continue the project after our departure.

During the training, we discussed and experimented with two basic principles. These emerged from our interactions with children and staff. The first of these was the importance of being child-led – listening and responding. We saw that in order to work therapeutically with children, staff needed to make a tricky shift in perspective from their usual teaching roles towards a less directive approach. Secondly, we explored ways to create a safe space for the children, to enable them to explore with confidence. Many of the things we discussed in relation to this were simple and practical, such as making sure sessions happen at the same time and place each week and that there are no interruptions. We also talked about the importance of considering all children in the group. This can be difficult if one child is very noisy, running around, or is silent and refusing to participate. We discussed ways of being sure to involve all the children, recognising them as individuals, and the staff were very creative and sensitive in their suggestions about interactions and activities that might benefit particular children.



Case Study

One group was put together on the basis that all six children lacked confidence and tended to avoid speaking and participating in activities. We wanted to encourage these children to explore their voices, to feel safe enough to try participate in therapeutic music sessions and to develop confidence. During the first session, an activity developed where we passed an invisible object around the room. The person holding the 'object' would make a vocal sound before passing it on. The staff member in this group, Keso, mimed that she was holding a cat and miaowed. For others in the group the object became a monster, or a book. Children were engaged and laughing and each was free to participate in his or her own way. In the next session this activity developed again so that while the sound-object was passed around, all group members made continuous, supporting vocal sounds; in this way a free improvisation structured with chorus and soloists started to develop. By the final session, Keso encouraged the children themselves to take the lead, asking one boy to take the lyre to each group member in turn and play together with them, a role taken by an adult in earlier sessions. Working in this way was particularly appropriate for these timid children, drawing out their creativity and sense of fun and helping them develop the confidence to initiate interactions and to take leadership roles. We are excited to see how work with this group, and all the groups, will develop over time.

Plans for the Future

Staff involved in the project will continue to run weekly sessions with the same groups of children. They will have monthly peer supervision sessions to discuss the ongoing work. We will speak once a month with Darina, so that she can ask us any questions on behalf of the group and feed back to them. We have requested that after three months staff members send us a video of one of their sessions, so that we can provide supervision from a distance. To provide more direct support and address any challenges staff are likely to encounter within the first 6 months, it is anticipated that a music therapist will return to the school in the late spring. After this we will continue to explore ways . thatto offer support to staff as they develop their skills, as well as identifying and addressing any issues that arise. In addition, we will continue to develop contacts with other organisations in Tbilisi and beyond. Over time we hope that the work at the school can act as a model of good practice that could inspire other organisations to incorporate therapeutic music-making in their work.



Developing a Network

Although we focused on direct work with children and staff at the school, we were also interested to develop a network of interest more widely. To this end, we held a Therapeutic Music Day for professionals from various organisations in Tbilisi. This event took place at the offices of a Georgian NGO called *Charity Humanitarian Centre "Abkhazeti"* (CHCA) on the final Saturday of our visit. It gave us the chance to hear from people already using music as a tool for working with vulnerable adults and children, and to introduce some basic principles to all. At the end of the day we compiled a list of

people who had attended – psychologists, musicians, and staff from organisations such as Save the Children, the Tbilisi State Conservatoire and CHCA itself. We created an email group so that they can stay in touch with each other and hope to build on the connections made during the day as we develop the project in the future.

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