

How a partnership that forms a Saturday music centre creates a sense of community with a strong sense of purpose

In this article I will describe how Saffron Centre for Young Musicians (SCYM) has developed as a strong community for young musicians over its ten years. I'll talk about the reasons it opened and the community it has become, and although I believe it to be unique in the partnership that forms it, there are of course many excellent music centres who are working in partnership and serving young musicians, and there are a great many similarities in approach. My main intention is to explain how and why we do it, and why I think it is important work.

Is it radical to form a music centre for young people out of a partnership with a state secondary school, an international concert hall and a county music service? If 'radical' means that you're changing the current situation or status quo then yes, I believe it is. SCYM has changed what community music looks like in the local area (North Essex) and offers a place for young people who love music and being sociable to go on Saturday mornings. It's not auditioned or selective in any way but has high ambitions for the children who attend, as well as for itself. SCYM is founded on the principle that all children deserve the best music education possible, and that *playing* music is for everyone. Some of its musical aims and offers change each year as they are decided by the children who attend and as we hold young people at the centre of what we do, we know that they all have different social and musical ambitions and needs. The Centre adapts its offer according to what they would like to do.

What does it mean for young people?

SCYM's philosophy has always been in part to normalise the act of playing music together and raise the perceived value of doing this. We believe that everything that music brings to people is more important than the result. As there is no common standard that children need to have reached before joining, all arrive at different stages of learning and experience and children from 4 to 18 can join. Financial barriers are diminished as the partnership with Greater Essex Music Education Hub ensures that financial support is available for children in low-income households.

Examples of what we do:

Andreas comes to SCYM aged 4 with his parents and they all take part in a Kodaly method class, enjoying the games and ear training as well as establishing friendships (parents and children). When he's 5 he moves, with his friends to another musicianship class, to develop what he has learned as well as spend a term trying the violin and then the recorder. Aged 5 or 6 Andreas can choose which instrument he'd like to play, and then move into a whole morning of music. This means that he will sing in a choir, play in a beginner ensemble, and join a class

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in which he will listen to and talk about music, improvise, and compose. He may have a lesson at SCYM or with a private teacher in the community or at school. As Andreas grows older, he can choose what he plays in, and can also add to his day, DJ, music tech, composition, jazz, chamber music and singing. During his time at SCYM he might take part in a masterclass with an artist performing at Saffron Hall or join a folk workshop run by the National Youth Folk Ensemble. Over the years all children have enjoyed side by side orchestral days and coaching with the Halle orchestra, Britten Sinfonia, and London Philharmonic Orchestra brass. Eamonn Dougan, Sarah O' Flynn, Nicola Benedetti, Wynton Marsalis, Tom Poster, and Elena Urioste have given their time when performing at the Hall to meet and work with older musicians. We have found that older teenagers find particularly inspiring the early career musician who may not be much older than them. Earlier this year SCYM drummers performed in a community opera called *Uprising!* written by Jonathan Dove and performed alongside members of Royal Scottish National Orchestra in Saffron Hall.

How is this achieved?

- Keeping young people and music at the centre of what we do, all the time.
- Behind the scenes is a very supportive and connected partner group who represent the Saffron Hall, Saffron Walden County High School, and Greater Essex Music Education Hub. Members' professional specialisms and viewpoints when scrutinising the bigger decisions about the Centre helps me plan realistically. We often find ways that plans for the Centre can benefit the wider community of local schools and audiences as support doesn't just go one way.
- Understanding, co-operating with, and respecting the existing local youth music provision and networks for young people.
- Teachers and organisers at the Centre need to enjoy informality. We don't have to work too hard to keep the teaching relationships non-hierarchical. Older children tell me that they appreciate this freedom and feel able to speak and express their thoughts more easily than in a formal setting.
- Openness, in-person communication and co-operation is key. The leadership at the Centre talk to newcomers as soon as they arrive to find out what *their* music is, what they would like the Centre to offer them, and what their aspirations and ambitions are for their time here. Finding out how music can help them in times of stress (exams) is a useful conversation. A pre-emptive chat hopes to head off the email that says 'they need to give up music because they've got GCSEs'. We want to reveal how playing music can offset stress and pressure.

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- Playing in smaller ensembles fosters community and friendships by cultivating co-operative work, and a requires a less directive approach from teachers.
- Quality assurance, leading to trust in the teaching standard. Tutors are mentored and observed for quality assurance, as well as thorough interview and safer recruitment practices, supported by the Music Service safeguarding lead. Tutors are self-employed, however there is an expectation that I will at the very least observe their rehearsals, but with that I take on responsibility for ensuring that the standard is of a high quality therefore feedback and appraisal is necessary.
- Active informal partnership work. We are supported by local amateur groups in funding lessons for endangered instruments and orchestral workshops. There is financial support for those on low incomes, assessed by EMS ensures everyone has access to the Centre, regardless of household income.
- Short, informal, and frequent performances share and celebrate musical achievement for groups and soloists. Children say that they enjoy the more casual approach to public performance, even if the concert is in Saffron Hall.

Conclusion

There is of course still a great deal to do and to change both in the Centre and in the wider community. In the short term we can commit to learning more from young people, other arts and youth organisations and co-operate more with different genre-based community music groups. We also have a duty to establish youth led projects and understand more deeply what young people want from coming to the Centre.

This is important work because the value of the social and personal benefit to young people in playing music together is significant and I believe it needs to be seen and participated in within communities. It should be an option for all young people not just relatively few. One of our ambitions is that those who see togetherness in music in their childhood will become adults who choose to play music and in turn pass this appreciation on to their families, become audience members, and advocate for an arts and music education. They may choose to become professional musicians, and for those at SCYM the regular interaction with inspiring artists and performances at Saffron Hall can only sharpen their understanding and ambition. The message is, if you're young you can join in and connect with others through music and be active! Music will be a great friend in your life, but it gives the most when we do it together.

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