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The Arts in Prison

Performance Matters:

The Case for Including Performance in Prison Music Projects

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In 1968, Johnny Cash performed live at Folsom State Prison in California. The Subsequent release of the live recording meant the event lodged itself into cultural memory and Cash's prison concerts are still commonly referenced when the idea of music in prisons is mentioned. My research, however, does not concern professionals performing to an audience of prisoners; it is to do with prisoners creating and performing their own music in prison, as part of a prison music project. Around the country, organisations provide musical activities in prisons as part of rehabilitation, educational courses, or other areas of activity provision. In recent years, however, access has been more restricted, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to include performance as part of these projects. This article presents the case for reversing this trend. It will discuss various ways in which performance can both be valuable for the prisoner participants and contribute to prison goals, and then discuss the benefits of having a varied audience, arguing that performance is not an optional extra but a key part of a prison music project.

It is important to clarify what is meant here by 'performance'. Music can be 'performative' in many ways—a group music session, for example, is to some extent performative in that players perform in front of one another. But for the purposes of this article, 'performance' is treated in a more straightforward way: an organised musical event in front of an audience. Performance, here, simply means the 'big reveal'—the point at which the musical works are played live by the participants to people who have not yet been involved in the process.

The Research Setting

The data for this paper come from research conducted for my doctoral project. Fieldwork took place over 14 months across 2015-16, during which I observed the work of the Irene Taylor Trust (ITT) in one prison.[1] The ITT have been working in prisons for over 20 years, providing participatory music projects for groups of prisoners. They predominantly facilitate two types of project in prisons: the Music in Prisons (MiP) week, during which a group of around 10 prisoners come together with three professional musicians to write and record new songs; and Musician in Residence (MiR) sessions, whereby a smaller group of prisoners attend once weekly music classes of a few hours with one professional musician to write new music together. The prison in which the research took place is anonymised; it is a category-C, adult male training prison housing over 1,300 men across two sites. The ITT projects ran as part of the addiction recovery services and were facilitated by staff from an addiction recovery organisation (ARO).[2] I observed three MiP weeks and 20 MiR sessions, often joining in as an additional musician; I then interviewed 29 participants (all those willing who were still in the prison), two ITT musicians and four ARO staff to get their reflections on the programmes.[3]

The ITT have a well-crafted format for MiP weeks: three days of song-writing, a day of recording so the participants can have CDs of their work, and a performance on the Friday as the culmination of the week. Historically, this final performance has been to a large audience of other prisoners, prison staff and participants' families or friends from outside; more recently, according to ITT musicians, this has become harder to facilitate. On my first day of fieldwork, it transpired that permission for the performance had been refused by the governor. The understanding of the ARO staff was that this was due to fears of public perception if the tabloid media found out prisoners were 'having fun'. Both ARO staff and ITT musicians were frustrated but discussed what to do instead to end the week. It was decided for all three MiP weeks I

1. The research was conducted as an independent study; the views here are my own and not necessarily those of the ITT.
2. The addiction recovery organisation changed during my fieldwork. To give details would risk undermining anonymity; as there was very little structural or personnel change, both organisations are referred to synonymously as an ARO.
3. All research participants are referred to using pseudonyms.

observed that the 'performance' at the end would be a 'live run-through' consisting of ARO staff watching the participants play through their songs with the windows and doors open so other prisoners could overhear from a distance. Prisoner participants were made aware of this, and the ITT musicians made efforts to instil the same level of dedication towards the 'live run-through' as there would be for a full performance.

The MiR sessions, in contrast, did not have any explicit performance goal. There were several reasons for this: the hope that MiR participants would at some point do an MiP week where they would experience a performance (or 'live run-through'), the recognition that there are benefits of involvement in musical activity which does not culminate in a performance, and the logistical difficulties of setting up a performance. Regardless, many MiR participants suggested they would value having a performance. One prisoner had spent almost a year trying to organise an event which would enable the participants to showcase their work. His efforts were unsuccessful, indicating again the difficulties of putting on a performance in prison. This article aims to provide evidence to bolster what is already felt by participants: that performance is a valuable event for a prison to put on.

Performance may be a normal part of musical life, but prison is, of course, not a normal setting.

Performance as a Musical Norm

Regular performance events are the norm for most musical societies, organisations and ensembles. Performance traditions vary enormously between cultures but performing to others in some form is deeply engrained in musical activity, so much so that few musicologists have even attempted to account for the phenomenon. Stephanie Pitts' research into participatory music activities around the UK—asking why people get involved in music at all—contains a tacit assumption that musical activity includes a performance event.[4] Ruth Finnegan, in a seminal work investigating the everyday musical life of an average UK town (Milton Keynes) in the 1980s, wrote: 'The idea of special performance events plays a central part in most local musical groups and activities.'[5] Amateur musical activities, she found, were usually explained as being preparation for a performance, but the performance event itself 'was not regarded as needing explanation.'[6]

Performance, then, is a normal part of musical life around the country. That is not to say that there is no value in other forms of music-making. Musical activities where performance is not the focus are growing in prominence: community music organisations, for example, focus on the joy of music-making as a group, and the individual and societal change that can come as a result. Even when performance is assumed at some stage, most musicians can still find 'satisfaction in playing for themselves, listening, practising, or just 'jamming together',[7] as MiR participants found in their regular music sessions.

However, the MiP performances were not refused permission in order to enhance these positive aspects of music-making; rather, the restrictions on performance removed an integral part of the process. The MiP weeks, in particular, are designed to include a performance, and its absence stood out to most participants as well as to ITT and ARO staff. Many prisoner participants, oblivious to the norms of the ITT and the hopes of ARO staff, suggested to me that a performance would be beneficial or, as Josh (MiP participant) said, that 'just to play to a handful of people seems a bit pointless. Or a bit wasted.' Others suggested that it would have been good to include families or other prisoners in the audience. There was a clear sense that many participants would find it valuable, and highly sensible, to perform to a large, mixed audience.

Performance Encourages Personal Development

Performance may be a normal part of musical life, but prison is, of course, not a normal setting. The ITT projects in prison are intended to be helpful for prisoners and the prison, to contribute to personal development in a way that aids rehabilitation and reduces reoffending rates. The inclusion of a performance can increase the capacity of the projects to foster individual and social change.

There is a plethora of research into the benefits of music-making.[8] The transformative effect of music is evidenced by changes in participants' behaviour and attitudes towards other people, and by their own

4. Pitts, S. (2005) *Valuing Musical Participation* Sheffield: Ashgate.
5. Finnegan, R. (1989) *The Midden Musicians: Music-making in an English town Cambridge*: Cambridge University Press p143.
6. Ibid. p158.
7. Ibid. p143.
8. For a recent and comprehensive review of the research, see Crossick, G. & Kaszynska, P. (2016) 'Understanding the value of arts and culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project' Swindon: Arts and Humanities Research Council.

testimonies about their experiences.[9] In a prison context, music has been found to increase prisoner safety by providing an expressive emotional outlet, improve engagement in other rehabilitative activities, and help develop personal capacities which, in turn, are known to promote desistance.[10] Performing to others can support this personal development. This is most clearly demonstrated when considering teamwork as a benefit of music projects, but can also be seen in other personal traits.

Teamwork is a commonly-cited benefit of being involved in group music activities, and there are suggestions that music is a particularly good medium for bringing people together because the harmonious nature of music can be imitated in the relationships between the players.[11] This idea has some merit, and certainly prisoners found themselves appreciating the other members of the band as they realised the role each instrument played in the music as a whole. But during MiP weeks there was also something more concrete going on: the knowledge that they would be playing to an audience, even a small one, was the impetus needed for them to put aside differences or competition and work together. In short, they learnt to work as a team because the performance required it—their desire to play well overcame personal differences. Scott, one of the ITT musicians, reflected during his interview that the MiP weeks are often 'about getting from A to B [and] in that process we learn to work as a team, we learn to manage…to resolve issues.' Scott indicates that it is in the process of working towards a joint aim that some interpersonal issues can be worked out. Several prisoners reflected similarly that the 'live run-through', small as the audience was, put pressure on in a good way, meaning that they had a focus which was more important than relational issues. A distinct end point is an important factor in that.

George, the prisoner who had hoped (unsuccessfully) to organise a performance event for MiR participants, shared why he thought performance was important:

> *it brings people together, because the team…that are actually performing, they're gonna have to work together.*

George understood that having a performance event in front of others created necessity. But he also proposed that performance brings out the 'team' dynamic in a way that other aspects of music-making may not. He continued,

> *on that day especially [they will] give each other some…confidence boosts, you know…like encouragement.*

This encouragement was evident in the 'live run-throughs' at the end of MiP weeks during my research—the group would applaud each other, high five or fist bump one another at the end of a good solo and congratulate each other at the end of a song. The cooperation had evolved into genuine affability. Performance, then, is important for teamwork because the combination of necessity (*we won't do well if we don't work together*) and sentiment (*wow, that was amazing*), inspired the development of cooperative skills and also gave an opportunity to utilise them.

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As well as teamwork and cooperation, there are numerous personal capacities developed through the music projects which can be encouraged further by performing. Traits such as perseverance, self-confidence, a sense of achievement or overcoming fear of failure are all necessary for prisoners, who are aware they will face difficult circumstances upon release. Such traits require a goal—one cannot persevere, for example, towards nothing. When there was not a performance to be worked towards, musical learning became that goal, but a performance has the advantage of being definite and time-sensitive. The performance also gave them the immediate reward for their effort, increasing the sense of having achieved something worthwhile. They may have had feelings of nervousness, but prisoners'

9. My doctoral thesis (forthcoming) will address the notion of 'effectiveness' in more detail, suggesting it is a more problematic concept than is often acknowledged.
10. See Cox, A. and Gelsthorpe L. (2008) 'Beats & Bars. Music in prisons: An evaluation' London: The Irene Taylor Trust; Cursley, J. and Maruna, S. (2015) 'A Narrative-Based Evaluation of '*Changing Tunes*' Music-Based Prisoner Reintegration Interventions' available at <http://www.artsevidence.org.uk/media/uploads/final-report-cursley-and-maruna-changing-tunes.pdf> [accessed 19.02.2018]; Wilson, D. et al (2008) 'Promoting positive change: Assessing the long-term psychological, emotional and behavioural effects of the Good Vibrations Gamelan in Prisons Project' Birmingham: Centre for Criminal Justice Policy.
11. Cohen C. (2003) 'Engaging with the Arts to Promote Coexistence' in Chayes A. and Minow, M. (eds.) *Imagine Coexistence: Restoring Humanity After Violent Ethnic Conflict* Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.

feedback showed that this was always replaced by feelings of elation when their hard work had paid off. Nathan felt that had been missing from his experience in MiR sessions: he commented that he thought a performance would be good for MiR participants because 'at least then they'd know they've achieved something.' ITT musicians have noticed this over their many years of working—one talked with enthusiasm in interview about the moment

> *when people have done their gig at the end of the week and the audience comes up, and you can see them [prisoner participants] holding themselves differently.*

For people who have been marked out for doing something wrong, achieving something worthwhile can be transformative.

Performance as a Marker of Significance

Performances, then, are important for the aims of the project and for the experience of the participants. Performances are also significant occasions in and of themselves, which is vital in a prison context. As has been seen, the hope and aim of an ITT project, as with any prison programme, is that it will have a positive impact on participants' lives. Simply put, the project needs to matter. A performance marks the project as significant, both by being something notable with which the performers can identify their progress, and in demonstrating that others—those who organise and those who attend—are also invested in their progress.

Performance events are momentous occasions for the performers, characterised by heightened emotion and meaning in a way that is 'very different to the rehearsal process.'[12] This difference was evident from the way that even for the 'live run-through' at the end of each MiP week the participants paid more attention to their personal presentation. Gemma (ARO) had noticed this in other MiP weeks she had witnessed:

> *it's amazing isn't it, how they get themselves all ready and all smart and everything.*

And, indeed, I observed during my fieldwork that the men prepared for the final morning by visiting the barbers, shaving and, sometimes, putting a shirt. Clearly, even with a small audience this was an event that the prisoners were taking seriously.

Performances are memorable, and thus can act as a milestone for those who have performed, evidence of the journey they have been on. And crucially for prisoner participants, the performance event marks the entire process as significant, in that both the musical and personal development are understood as important life events worth recognising and celebrating. Christopher, an MiR participant who had not been able to perform, compared the idea of a performance to a 'graduation day'. The analogy works well: both involve some ceremony, the approval of a supportive audience, and the recognition of a process that has been noteworthy and worthwhile. In interview, some MiP participants, who had given some form of performance, claimed that the week had changed their lives or made them a better person—largely unsubstantiated but deeply-felt accounts of the transformative experience they had been through. These claims are easy enough for researchers to either state without critique in an effort to justify musical activity or ignore completely in an attempt to only make assertions that are empirically provable; the middle ground between these two positions is to acknowledge that these experiences are highly significant and full of meaning for some participants, even if the transformation is yet to be seen in a tangible way. Learning musical skills was clearly valuable for all participants, regardless of whether they showed others, but performing to an audience signified that the journey they had gone on, musically and personally, was quite literally applauded by others as well.

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The Audience Question

Who, then, should be doing the applauding? Clearly for MiP participants the 'live run-through' to the drug and alcohol counsellors constituted a performance of sorts, but there are good reasons for extending the audience beyond the ARO staff and including other prisoners, prison officers, participants' families, and even the general public.

Although participants expressed doubts about whether they would feel confident performing to other prisoners, they were sure other prisoners would appreciate being in the audience. Performing to other

12. Davidson, J. W. and Correia, J. S. (2001) 'Meaningful musical performance: A bodily experience' *Research Studies in Music Education* 17/1 p75.

prisoners was presumed to be the best way of widening involvement in the project, because other prisoners would see and hear what they had done and want to take part. Given the value the participants placed on their musical activities, more people doing music projects was seen as an unequivocal positive. Prisoners also suggested that having an enjoyable performance event would be good for the prison atmosphere, with knock-on effects on prison safety. Prisoners declared that much of the violence in prison is the result of boredom and the depressive atmosphere; a performance would raise spirits and provide an exciting conversation topic. There were glimpses of this during my fieldwork: other prisoners would dance along in the corridors when they heard the music through the windows or doors, and prisoner participants reported the 'buzz' on their units after sessions. Far from posing a security risk, prisoners were convinced that musical performances could improve the safety of the prison.

Similarly, having prison staff in the audience, particularly officers, could improve the prison environment. The ARO staff who made up the audience of the 'live run-throughs' are plain-clothed and seen as having a more caring relationship with the prisoners; officers, on the other hand, are in a position of power.[13] Several prisoners pointed out that including officers in the audience might help the uniformed staff see the prisoners in a more positive light and could break down the barriers between the two groups. Aaron pondered having a mixed band—which has happened in other prisons—as a way of improving relationships, and thought that having officers in an audience would be the first step in this process. From a staff point of view, a performance can bring some excitement and optimism to their jobs. Gemma (ARO) spoke of her experience of performances in previous years, saying:

> *I think as well for the staff morale and things like that, it's really good, you get a sense of everybody coming in together. And I think we're lacking that a lot.*

Staff concerns are an issue across the prison estate, with high levels of violence and understaffing creating dangerous conditions. A performance would not be the solution to all these problems, but the joy of seeing prisoners at their best and being a part of their success could help with job satisfaction. Many prisoners suggested having their families in the audience, unaware that this is the ideal in every ITT project. Desistance literature shows that maintaining good family relationships can be a key part of ex-prisoners staying away from crime;[14] we also know that the consequences of one person going to prison are felt beyond that individual.[15] Prisoners told me how excited their families were to hear what they had been doing—their children, partners and parents were proud of them, and the experience gave them something new to talk about. Including loved ones in the audience allows that pride to be felt and received in person; families can share these valuable moments together. Many prisoners wanted their families to see that they were capable of achieving good things, and to know their lives and relationships with others did not have to be defined by their crime and imprisonment.

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There is also a case for including members of the general public in the audience for performances. Few prisoners suggested this explicitly, but there were comments suggesting that the desire to prove they were able to do something of value was not directed just at their families, but to the world at large. George spoke about wanting to educate people, to show that just because someone is a prisoner, '*it doesn't mean that…they haven't got talent, they can't do something positive, can't do something good.*' A performance would let them '*show people what we can do as prisoners*'.

But beyond the enhanced feelings of self-worth in prisoners, including the public in audiences for prison performances could also aid eventual reintegration. Fergus McNeill has argued that desistance must include reintegration into society, therefore rehabilitation 'is not just about sorting out the individual's readiness for or fitness for reintegration; it is as much about rebuilding the social relationships without which reintegration is impossible.'[16] Almost all prisoners will eventually be released into the community, and the likelihood of continued desistance is influenced by the relationship between ex-offender and community. In any musical

13. Prisoners and ARO staff shared this sentiment.
14. Laub, J.H. and Sampson, R. J. (2003) *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent boys to age 70* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
15. Arditti, J. (2012) *Parental Incarceration and the Family: Psychological and Social Effects of Imprisonment on Children, Parents, and Caregivers* New York and London: New York University.

performance, the audience are more than passive observers: connections are forged between performer and audience as one 'speaks' and one listens. By including the general public in an audience, music can act as a mediator, or bridge, between the incarcerated and the free, who will one day be living alongside one another.

Conclusion

This article has shown various benefits of including performance in a music project, and the potential benefit of widening the audience to those in prison and out of prison, known and unknown to the participants. What has not been addressed in this article is how some of these ends might be achieved by other means. One suggestion from ITT staff was to make the recording day the apex of the week, using this to provide the sense of achievement and the resultant CD a physical milestone of the progress made. Bridges can be built between prisoners and community by having through-the-gate programmes, such as the ITT's 'Sounding Out' course, or collaborative projects in which prisoners, ex-prisoners and the general public make music together. These possibilities are all worth exploring. However, none of these should replace having performances inside prison. Performance is not an added extra to musical activity; it is an important and valuable aspect of a prison music project, and evidence shows that the outcomes of holding a performance in prison will make the effort worthwhile.

16. McNeill, F. (2012) 'Four forms of 'offender' rehabilitation: Towards an interdisciplinary perspective' *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 17/1 p30.