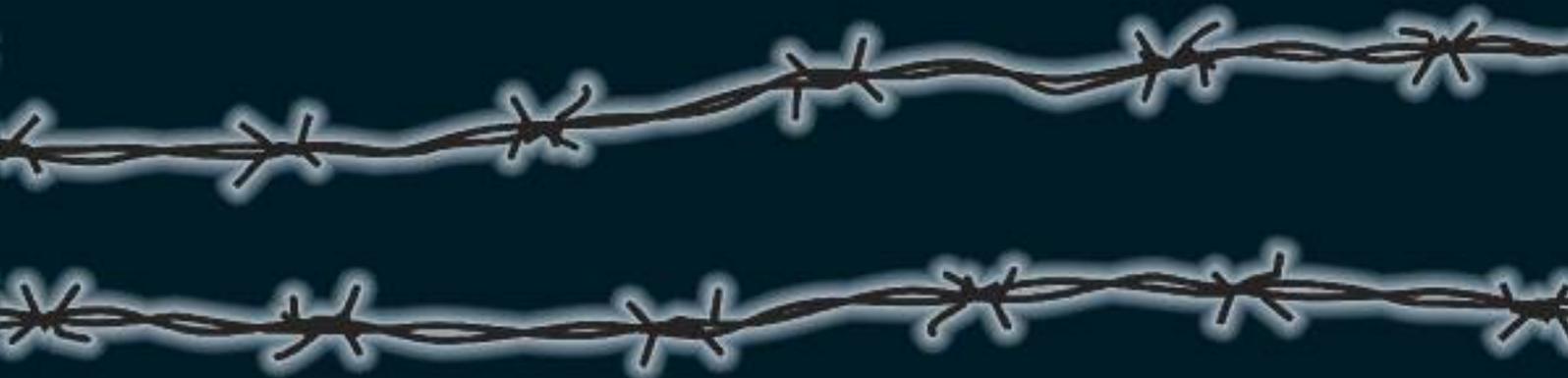


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Ethnicity Religion
Gender Race
Sexual Orientation
Age
Multiculturalism



The Oxford Concert Party

Arne Richards is Artistic Director of Oxford Concert Party.

The Oxford Concert Party is a registered charity committed to harnessing the transformative power of music to improve people's lives, especially for those who are or experience themselves to be imprisoned by isolation, disability, illness or walls.

Our principal aims are the advancement of education and enrichment of community life through music. We aim to make music accessible to all and offer a diverse range of musical traditions including original compositions, Vivaldi, Argentinean Tango, Russian music and Scottish and Irish folk tunes. Our approach and eclectic mix of musical styles, instruments and traditions lends itself well to projects that aim to promote inclusion and break down false barriers of perception. We have two principle areas of work: a) public performance and touring, b) participatory project work with older people, especially those with dementia, prisoners, refugees and asylum seekers, people with special needs, children and young people in educational settings. Our extensive experience of music projects in high security prisons has shown that music can have a transformative effect on inmates and has even helped to 'turn around' several offenders, now released, with whom the group still keeps in touch.

We are currently halfway through a three year programme of work which has been generously funded by The Patsy Wood Trust and The Joseph Rank Trust, two organisations which recognise the value of the work we undertake. We are grateful to them and to the regimes which welcome us into their prisons.

Who we are and why we do this

The musicians of the Oxford Concert Party, (Isabel Knowland, Gregory Warren Wilson, Lianne Melchior, Trevor Burley, Lucy Hare and myself) are all established and sought after professionals who can regularly be found in the pit of West End musicals, on concert platforms with major orchestras and recording with chart topping groups such as Suede, Coldplay and Spandau Ballet. So why do we choose to break into our successful professional careers to spend a week at a time in the unglamorous surroundings of prisons? It is because we are all passionately committed to increasing opportunities for prisoners to access the healing and humanising power of music. We are convinced of the long-term benefit this works brings to prisoners individually, the prison community collectively and thus ultimately, society as a whole.

I am the Artistic Director of the Oxford Concert Party (OCP) and an authority on music for healing and my work as a consultant music therapist has taken me to Scandinavia, the Far East, Australia and the USA. I also have a busy practise as a hypnoanalyst in which I incorporate the little known technique of Guided Imagery through Music. I believe that the very act of coming together with others, making vocal sounds, laughing together, learning music from different cultures, breathing and physically moving all have a remarkably powerful cathartic and therapeutic effect. This belief is the foundation on which we have developed and built OCP's prison projects.

Development of our work in prisons

We started our prison work in 1992, initially playing straight concerts in many prisons throughout the UK and Ireland, including HMP Grendon, HMP Bullingdon, HMP Whitemoor, HMP Canterbury, HMP Perth, HMP Leyhill, HMP Dartmoor, and in Ireland Cork Prison, Limerick Prison and Mountjoy Prison. The concerts were always very successful, but it became apparent from the response of many of the prisoners that a more prolonged and personal contact was really needed. Hence OCP started doing four-day projects often involving men who had had no previous experience of practical music-making as well as those who already had musical skills. These evolved further into our current five day projects. We have taken these projects to prisons including HMP Grendon, HMP Whitemoor, HMP Dartmoor, HMP Blundeston, HMP Peterborough, HMP Shepton Mallet and HMP Lancaster Castle. The response of prisoners to the projects has been such that the OCP is constantly developing and extending its work in prisons in the belief that music can play a key role in the rehabilitation process. We have consistently received incredibly positive feedback from the prisons and inmates alike who have valued these workshops, all of whom have experienced both the immediate and longer terms effects of this work in their lives.

As prison populations grow it becomes more and more important to offer prisoners opportunities which challenge the roots of repetitive offending behaviour. Our prison projects aim to play a key role in the rehabilitation process for prisoners, offering a unique opportunity for prisoners to participate in a 5-day music workshop which culminates in a performance for other prison inmates. This does much more for the

participants than simply develop their musical skills; it provides a safe space for inmates to step back from their habitual lives and selves, develop teamwork and explore and express a range of emotion and thought often repressed in the prison environment. We seek to bring about a respectful and positive approach to working together as a group through problem solving, taking turns, listening to one another and taking responsibility. Prisoners are given an opportunity to take risks, to try things out and share ideas in a creative way. The process of our unique approach to working with prisoners, particularly 'lififers', is extremely important, demanding intensive, sustained work from the inmates and building momentum over the 5 days. We find that our projects work most effectively with Category A and B prisoners.

The basics of the project are the same in each prison, with an opening concert by the group to any inmates who wish to attend, followed by the workshops (the number of which can vary in agreement with each prison) with a group of 20 — 25 inmates, and finishing off with a concert of the work created during the week. Although the group has a wealth of experience and resources on which they can call, the content of the workshops is largely dictated by the participants. We can illustrate this best by describing a project run in HMP Dartmoor.

How the Dartmoor workshops worked

Our main objective in this project was to work with two separate groups, consisting each of around twenty men, for three sessions each and to produce two concerts on the final day. This particular event was arranged by the Quaker Minister at the prison, Monica Hazell, with funding from the West Devon Quakers and Ockham Holdings.

As with previous workshops/concerts in other prisons, we had no real knowledge of who would be taking part, whether they played instruments or how they might respond and therefore we adopted an open ended, flexible approach to what might happen. I rather like to think of this type of venture as that undertaken by Odysseus on his journeys to and from the legendary island of Ithaca. For us, it neatly describes the process by which groups and musicians come together for a shared experience. We embark on this without clear knowledge of where we will end up, but all know we will change and grow on the way. From previous, similar projects I am quietly confident that

such groups of inmates will provide a wealth of ideas and resources, whether or not they have experience of music, and it is our job to harness and encourage these and to create a performance together. Very often, this process is far more important than the final outcome and although the sessions are usually enjoyable and frequently humorous, there are some painful moments as people work through real issues in a supportive group structure. Through the medium of sound improvisation and composition of musical form, everyone has the opportunity for self expression, taking turns to take responsibility, listening to others and being listened to by others. People are given the opportunity to work in small groups, produce individual pieces or to merely take part in the larger workshop context. Inmates very often find a new-found confidence in exploring simple musical skills as well as self respect and respect towards other people's contributions.

The project took place in the main body of the chapel which was equipped with some electric guitars, a good sound system and a drum kit. The OCP provided a collection of percussion instruments including drums, shakers, bells, gongs, tambourines and various sound-makers from around the world. The two separate groups met from 9.30am to 11.30am each morning (Vulnerable Prisoners Unit) and from 2pm to 4pm (Main Prison).

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Session One

With both groups, the aims of this session were to:

- ❑ Introduce ourselves, the instruments we play and some of the music we perform.
- ❑ Get to know one another as a group through rhythmic games and discussion.
- ❑ Think towards a final outcome of the project in the form of a performance of inmates' music and poems, OCP repertoire and a larger scale improvised structure to be played by everyone.

We began the workshop session by exploring sounds made by several exotic instruments including a Tibetan prayer-bowl, a didgeridoo, a large gong from Indonesia and some Chilean rainsticks. We passed the instruments one by one around the seated circle and each person was invited to play. As well as a useful 'ice breaker' and a gentle introduction to making sounds in a simple way, this activity enabled us to observe responses and to get to know each individual informally.

Each member of the OCP introduced themselves in turn. We talked a little of our lives as professional musicians and demonstrated our instruments. Inmates were invited to try the instruments and we discussed the range of music written for them. The workshop group played some simple rhythm games using a variety of percussion instruments. We looked at the basis of Flamenco music as a 12 beat structure and composed a short piece in this form.

We also improvised a rhythmic composition based upon the type of shoes we were wearing. This was immediately very popular and proved to be a great success in the final concert. We then performed some pieces to the men: the first movement of Vivaldi's concerto for two violins and continuo; a piece I composed, 'An Armenian in Krakow'; and 'La Cumparsita' (an Argentinean Tango).

Session Two

The aim of this session was to develop and add to the material for the performance, including individual items and poetry.

We saw a marked change in members of both groups at this stage of the project, both in their attitude towards the activities and to each other. We had observed a more supportive and overall sensitive atmosphere with the vulnerable prisoner group from the beginning but with the second group there was also a distinct softening and a real commitment towards the project. It became evident that people were willing to take risks, to try things out and share ideas in a creative way.

We began the session by developing a structure to involve everyone in composing, improvising and playing either percussion instruments or guitars, drums and keyboards. The structure (in a rondo form) was based upon the Irish melody 'Eamonn a Chnuic' to be played by OCP. The workshop group was divided into three groups each of which included two members of OCP. Each group was asked to compose an 'episode' which would be played in between performances of the main theme. This exercise produced an extraordinary burst of ideas, experimentation with sounds and words and discussion in all groups involved.

Several men produced individual items for the final performance including poems by Mike, Paul and Phil from the first group and by Danny, Phinny and Angus from the second group. Some of these were performed with musical backing by musicians and inmates and will

be published in the OCP newsletter, 'Party Notes'. Other items included songs and pieces by Phinny, Danny, Jimmy and Angus. The workshop group then worked on 'Silly Samba' which involved all inmates and musicians with the addition of a rock-style drummer. We concluded the session with our rhythmic piece 'Sole Music', based on the type of shoes we were wearing, and more listening to OCP repertoire.

Session Three and Performances

Our main task in this final session was to rehearse and consolidate all the items for the final performance. By this time the men were so involved and motivated by the project that it was necessary to stem the flood of ideas flowing from them in order to make up a programme!

The performances were played to audiences of inmates, prison visitors, sponsors and other professionals working with offenders. Each performance lasted for about an hour and consisted of the work discussed above as well as music performed by OCP. This included pieces from the baroque era, Celtic and Latin American music and original compositions by myself.

This project was an outstanding experience for us. It proved to be a powerful transformative process for all involved and was a testament to the commitment of the men and the palpable dedication of Monica Hazell who was determined to make it a success. Monica's response to the project was as follows:

A Music Project at Dartmoor Prison

We were privileged to welcome the Oxford Concert Party to the prison from 10th — 13th January. The Artistic Director, Arne Richards, is a consultant music therapist, and his unique compositions and arrangements for the Oxford Concert Party show his love of world music and inspirational style. Last year the group entertained us with a concert; this year three days of music workshops, men from the Vulnerable Prisoners Unit in the mornings, the Main in the afternoons, culminating in two concerts on the fourth day. This was a unique and very valuable experience for the men involved.

We saw a marked change in members of both groups at this stage of the project, both in their attitude towards the activities and to each other.

Arne's quiet manner and delightful sense of humour soon had the men relaxed and listening intently. They were introduced to the instruments played by the group, were able to handle them and experiment with a wide range of percussion. They were treated to a wonderful range of music played to them by the group who played with exciting vitality and sensitivity. The music included Arne's composition 'An Armenian in Krakow', which was his way of expressing the experience of visiting Auschwitz concentration camp — a composition of haunting beauty and pathos. The men were gradually drawn in to interpret a variety of moods using the instruments available. Every man's contribution was valued, and they gradually gained confidence to express healthy emotions that could rarely be expressed on the 'Wing'. There were exercises in rhythm and sound interpretation, and the men were encouraged to be sensitive to the variations of tone and colour in the instruments they played. As could be expected the morning and afternoon workshops contrasted strongly. The V.P.U. were soon producing very imaginative work. Some of them brought their own poetry which was read with an appropriate background of music. It was good to see the men working so well together in groups, listening to each other, accepting and working with the precision needed in starting and ending a piece, and 'fading out' on occasions to create further atmosphere. All this required self-discipline.

The men greatly respected the professionalism of the group, and came to value the opportunity to create music alongside such a quiet, sincere and brilliant group of musicians. The afternoon group were enabled within the first session to express themselves freely with the percussion. There was a lot of noisy expressive drum playing, some of it very good, but possibly resolving a lot of frustration and working out of aggression. Each evening the Oxford Concert Party discussed the day's work and planned the day ahead around the evolving creativity of the men they were working with. The 'Mains' exuberance was gradually tempered and these men, as the V.P. U., were

expressing other moods and greater sensitivity in their playing. Again the men were soon working together cooperatively, listening, and treating other members of the group with respect. The culminating concerts were much enjoyed and the Oxford Concert Party very satisfied with the week's involvement. The officers who were detailed to oversee the workshops and concerts were very impressed, and couldn't believe their luck in being able to experience such musical brilliance. The men were loathe to say goodbye to their friends who proved to be such unassuming people. I hope the memory and influence of their presence will linger in the prison for a long time to come.

Outcomes from the projects

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The feedback from post project evaluations is always very positive. HMP Blundeston recently said, 'It makes the regime so much happier when they can see your obvious experience of working with the prison system. Area are happy because you tick four out of five boxes that justify what we do with arts in prisons'.

The inmates are equally happy. Comments have included:

- ❑ It should be sent to evry jail so they get the chance (sic)
- ❑ Classical music keeps me calm. I would like more days for the project
- ❑ Good to mix different types of music, cultures and instruments. Beautiful sounds. It brought the different nationalities of men together which is unusual in prison. It was calming.
- ❑ Usually you see people but don't talk to them, but now we have got to know each other.
- ❑ ****ing great!

The inmates think that the musical and artistic quality of OCP is excellent and they find that their experience of the project is better than expected. The outcomes for our projects are: encouraging communication; nurturing self-esteem; building trust and confidence; and increasing social and interpersonal skills. A high percentage of participants (between 70 per cent — 86 per cent) feel that we achieve excellence in all the outcomes, with the remainder considering us good. As a participant from a project in HMP Shepton Mallet said, 'Your work helps a deprived group of people in prison to regain some self esteem and to work in harmony with others.'

But how do these outcomes impact on and translate into the real lives of inmates? The impacts of the workshops can be life-changing. In some cases it has provided new impetus towards creative musical work on release, in others it has afforded an opportunity to release long-held emotion or opened minds to modes of expression habitually shunned. We know three men with whom we are still in contact whose lives have changed completely since their involvement in one of our projects over 10 years ago.

For reasons of confidentiality, we will not go into details, but these three men had each in some way or other had a passing involvement with music either before their sentence or as a result of trying to find something to occupy their minds whilst inside. None of them had thought of music as a possible way of life after their time was up. However, on their release, one went on to study music at university; another is a singer/songwriter who has worked with prison charities; and the third is channelling his energies into creative musical activities and working to hard to raise funds for an orphanage in Afghanistan. Most importantly for them, and for the wider society, they have not reoffended.

These are three great human stories, sufficient in themselves to prove the validity of our work. However, money is always an issue in judging any project, and this is no different when working with offenders. Therefore, it is worth mentioning that in the last 10 years, the tax payer has potentially saved at least £1 million, the cost to have kept just these three men within the penal system. This does not take into account what they have contributed through paying tax and being financially active members of their communities.

We do not claim that our week long projects in themselves are the only element in turning these mens' lives around, but we believe that our work can be a catalyst in the process which helps an inmate see a new

possibility for their lives. With the ongoing and invaluable support provided by the chaplaincies, educational departments, writers in residence and other services within prisons, the inmates can begin to create a new life for themselves on their release. The projects contain a strong element of sustainability in that staff within the prison will be encouraged to use and develop the ideas utilised in the workshop sessions with other groups.

We recently completed a project at HMP Shepton Mallet where Revd Peter Browne, the Chaplain, said the value of the project was 'immeasurable'. He further added:

'The instant impact on the participants was very noticeable. I have never had so much positive feedback from any course. Also the long term value will present a lot later when we see how many continue with music... I would recommend any Chaplaincy Teams who are inclusive and holistic in their work to book in the OCP. I feel it can only benefit the work of Chaplaincy and its profile in the prison, and certainly improves the quality of the lives of those in our care.'

In conclusion, it is probably best to leave the last words to an ex-offender:

'With such long periods of time to endure so many people in prison have to struggle with their awareness of not only how much suffering they caused their victims and themselves, but how useful they possibly could have been in society had they

thought out what it was they were planning to do Self esteem can be talked about and reasoned, but it is only when you truly feel it deep inside yourself that you experience what it means for another person to think you are important enough to want to spend some time in your company. This is what the Oxford Concert Party did for me and I will be eternally in their debt.'

If you would be interested in having a prison project in your establishment, please contact Oxford Concert Party via www.oxfordconcertparty.org

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