

# Connected Communities

## Community Music: History and Current Practice, its Constructions of 'Community', Digital Turns and Future Soundings

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**George McKay and Ben Higham**

## **Executive Summary**

The UK has been a pivotal national player within the development of community music practice. In the UK community music developed broadly from the 1960s and had a significant burgeoning period in the 1980s. Community music nationally and internationally has gone on to build a set of practices, a repertoire, an infrastructure of organisations, qualifications and career paths. There are elements of cultural and debatably pedagogic innovations in community music. These have to date only partly been articulated and historicised within academic research.

This document brings together and reviews research under the headings of history and definitions; practice; repertoire; community; pedagogy; digital technology; health and therapy; policy and funding, and impact and evaluation. A 90-entry, 22,000 word annotated bibliography was also produced (McKay and Higham 2011). An informed group of 15 practitioners and academics reviewed the authors' initial findings at a knowledge exchange colloquium and advised on further investigation. Some of the gaps in research identified are: an authoritative history, an examination of repertoire, the relationship with other music (practice), the freelance practitioner career, evidence of impact and value, the potential for a pedagogy.

## **Researchers and Project Partners**

Report written by Prof George McKay, University of Salford, and Ben Higham MA FRSA, independent consultant.

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A colloquium for around 15 ‘critical friends’, at which the project investigators presented their findings to date, was organised at the University of Salford in October 2011. This was a key moment in the review’s knowledge exchange agenda, at which leading academics and practitioners (some are both) in the field from across the UK came together to discuss the topic. The investigators sought delegates’ guidance on the adequacy of the range of research review, and on the quality and completeness of the findings. McKay and Higham also used the opportunity of the meeting to share community music and academic research practice, and to discuss future funding possibilities and other potential knowledge exchange collaborations. This was generally considered to be a vibrant and productive day. Further information about the day is available at <http://georgemckay.org/jazz/community-music/ahrc-symposium-2011/>.

Colloquium delegates were:

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## 1. The report

Music in community centres, prisons and retirement homes; extra-curricular projects for school children and youth; public music schools; community

bands, orchestras and choirs; musical projects with asylum seekers; marching bands for street children. All this—and more—comes under the heading of community music.... But a single definition of community music is yet to be found.

ISME Community Music Activity commission 2002 conference

Community music is recognised as an important and regularly funded feature of music-making and teaching in the UK today, and a leading movement in the contemporary practice of community arts. It has a national structure which includes music action zones; important regional organisations (CM, Community Music East, More Music, SAGE) and outreach projects (such as the now Salford-based BBC Philharmonic Orchestra); a national advocacy organisation (Sound Sense); dedicated training courses with HEIs, music colleges (Guildhall, RNCM), and MusicLeader; continuing innovations and funded experiments (In Harmony/El Sistema); and, not least, a significant and well-established cohort of dedicated freelance professionals who work as community musicians as part of their creative music careers. Community music also has a range of international practices.

## **1.1 History and definitions of community music**

There was a confident early statement of practice by the International Society of Music Education's (ISME) newly-established Community Music Activity commission in 1990: 'Community music is characterised by the following principles: decentralisation, accessibility, equal opportunity, and active participation in music-making. These principles are social and political ones, and there can be no doubt that community music activity is more than a purely musical one' (Olseng 1990). Yet we were surprised to identify the following question: how far is there yet a solid body of academic writing that tells, problematises and theorises the development and practice of community music? (This may be changing—some academic monographs are now appearing (Higgins 2012), and with the *International Journal of Community Music* (established 2008) there is one dedicated

academic journal.) It was notable in comparing the situation with that of community music therapy, which has both a narrower remit and a shorter history, but has recently produced a fairly confident body of academically informed writing (see 1.7).

For a cultural, social and pedagogic practice which established itself to a significant extent within an oppositional framework, as part of the radical countercultural project of community arts, definitional uncertainty or reluctance is perhaps surprisingly common (ISME 2002, Veblen 2004). This is all the more surprising since community music has developed a presence in HEI music curricula and has accredited training courses—the kinds of disciplinary and institutional activities in which one would expect clear initial articulation of definition. Others have argued that its fluidic or labile identity offers a strategic advantage (Cahill 1998)—the hustling mentality of many professional (improvising and popular) musicians is evident also in their capacity to locate funding pots, new projects and commissions. Practitioners at our colloquium viewed flexibility in adjusting to the demands of external policy shifts and funding initiatives as an important organisational feature.

There is clear evidence, usually as case studies of specific community music projects, of an important foundational role in its development for the United Kingdom (Everitt 1997, Price 2002, Moser and McKay 2005, Higgins 2007, Higgins 2012). There is also work mapping its national variations (Veblen 2002) and, importantly, its international scope: Ireland (Higgins and Campbell 2010), USA (Coffman 2010), Norway (Pavlicevic and Ansdell 2004), Australia (Cahill 1998, Bartleet *et al* 2008, Peters 2008), but also Canada (Murtazda 2006), South Africa (Stige *et al* 2010), China (Ruisen 2011). Some arguments have been made for a global understanding: multiculturalism as an aspect of community music's social awareness (Murtazda 2006).

## **1.2 Practice**

A significant quantity of writing about community music is practice-oriented, that is, concerned with the techniques of running a community music programme, a practical and descriptive explanation of the content of such workshops. What are the musical pieces? What instrumentation or technical equipment or software are required, if any, how should a room be laid out for the event, what roles does the amateur or workshop leader have, how can everyone hear all the voices, can there be musical mistakes, when are we improvising (Stevens *et al* 1985, Higham 1996, Paton 2000, Moser and McKay 2005, Higgins and Campbell 2010, Paton 2012)? The movement has been resource-oriented rather than actively reflexive. Of course, the practical orientation may be the flip-side of the historical and definitional lack above.

A key forum has been the ISME Community Music Activity commission, which has met biennially since 1990 (Olseng 1990, McCarthy 2007, Higgins 2012). The commission originally aimed to report and champion the new work by community musicians in the field, and so it has tended to privilege community music practice, and operate less as a space for theorisation and reflexivity. It is arguable that, in community music practice itself, there remains some resistance to theorising it. There may be links here both to community music's partial origins in improvisatory music and to the (contradictorily) common sense *and* transcendental discourse of some jazz (McKay 2005a).

Colloquium participants generally agreed that the longstanding 'process vs. product' debate product (the social relations built through the workshop vs. workshop series culminating in a performance or recording, say) was an enduring but unhelpful binary (Small 1998, Renshaw 2005, Rogers 2006, Rimmer 2009, Paton 2011).

### 1.3 Repertoire

Music genres—such as improvised music (jazz, free—see below), percussion ensembles (African, samba—Naughton 2009, Dearling and Kigongo 2008), digitally-centred forms such as rap and dance music, pop and rock (Rimmer 2009)—are often the focus for engaging participants, particularly young people, given the emphasis of, for example, in the United Kingdom, the Music Manifesto (Rogers, 2006). More traditional forms of participatory music-making such as folk, brass bands and so on (Everitt 1997) have been debatably less prevalent in community music-making as opposed to amateur music-making; though arguably folk is more significant in Ireland’s community music (Higgins and Campbell 2010). While professional orchestral and opera activity in the community—outreach programmes—may have been about audience development (Price 2002), there is evidence of a more nuanced understanding as well as of a shift in practice towards greater community and learning activity, with family and community orchestras, for instance (Everitt 1997, Cahill 1998, Addo 2002, Kors *et al* 2007, Bates 2011).

Improvisation is often seen as a genre in itself—and indeed claims are made for community music being fundamentally a pedagogic *as well as* musical improvisatory practice (Stevens *et al* 1985, Bailey 1993, McKay 2005a, McKay 2005b, Borgo 2007, Sotis and Nettle 2009, Turino 2009, Higgins and Campbell 2010, Paton 2012). This can be problematic as practitioners and participants may have difficulty determining progress and achievement. Yet improvisation remains a significant, even core, practice for many community musicians.

### 1.4 Community

The ‘community’ in community music has sometimes been difficult to define, and some community musicians are reluctant to do so, though most practitioners would identify their community as those who want, or are required, to participate in their offer (Higgins 2006, Bartleet *et al* 2008, Rimmer 2009, Coffman 2010). The musical practice or event can form or contribute to the community—the choir as a musical community (Ahlquist 2006), the festival or street carnival as musical-social



exceptional space (Sharpe 2008, Stige 2010), the band or collective (Higgins 2012). The institution as music location may contain a target community that is literally a captive audience —prison, hospital, residential centre, for instance. Within community music therapy ‘community’ signals the effort to move outside a clinical or restricted practice to a wider, more socially engaged one (Ansdell 2004, Powell 2004, Wood *et al* 2004). In limited ways academic research on community music has helped to theorise community (Veblen 2002, Higgins 2006, McKay 2010, Higgins 2012).

### **1.5 Pedagogy**

Early community music identity, in the UK at least, often positioned itself *outside* mainstream music education—this was part of its radical agenda. As Christopher Small articulated it in 1977, ‘the purpose is to replace the education *system* with an educational *community*’ (1977, 221; emphasis original). There has been some research about its negotiated shift in identity (Small 1977, Mullen 2002, McKay 2005b, Elliott 2007, Higgins 2012), as well as about its pedagogic practices in the context of ‘non-formal’ and ‘informal’ education and music-making (Rogers 2005, Kors *et al* 2007, Renshaw 2005, Bartleet *et al* 2008, Elliott 2009). Its position within the system of music education now seems more secure and less critical, which raises three further questions. First, around the process of accreditation, the recognition of community music within HEIs and music colleges, and the extent to which accreditation may be a marker of success (Addo 2002, Gregory 2002, Paton 2011, Bates 2011). Second, the acknowledgement of the development of training needs and the availability of career paths (Higham 1996, Price 2010). Third, the need for reflexive methodological understanding of community music practice in the context of teacher training (Koopman 2007).

### **1.6 Digital technology**

Questions are asked of the ways in which community music practice has been altered by the development of digital technologies in creative music-making. How

does community music exploit the ‘democratising’ and ‘cool’ aspects of digital music technology and production (Higgins 2000, Healey 2005, Missingham 2007)? Playing and working with the digital music forms preferred by its youthful constituencies is a route to cultural access and acceptance for community musicians. Working with disabled or special needs groups is a significant area of activity where the accessibility of (adapted or innovated) technologies is also exploited (Healey 2005, Challis 2011). Creating music for mobile technologies and internet composition are other digital forms used (Finney and Burnard 2009, Brown and Dillon 2009). Yet community musicians have also found issues of gendered alienation from technology (Healey 2005). In its work with older generations, or with particular music genres (vocal, jazz), does community music present the workshop as a non-atomising socio-cultural space, implicitly rejecting the digital in favour of the nostalgically acoustic, analogue or embodied? Community music in part springs from the community arts model of community as located—and is predicated on ‘the congregationist imperative’ (McKay 2010). Digital developments have altered that assumption of social presence.

### **1.7 Health, well-being and therapy**

The relation between health, well-being and culture is an important one for community music (HDA 2000, IHHD 2006, Paton 2012). The development of community music activity as identity, catharsis and celebration has been significant. Notably the embodied social musical experience of the choir has been recognised as a musical community (Ahlquist 2006, Murray *et al* 2010) and this has been linked with the development of strong social and political identities in examples such as gay men’s choirs (Elliott 2007). Community music has also been identified as part of a participatory, educational and celebratory dimension at events and festivals and carnivals (Sharpe 2008, Stige 2010). Most significant here is the development of a reflexive practice of Community Music Therapy and the connections and discontinuities between it and community music (Powell 2004, Pavlicevic and Ansdell 2004, Wood *et al* 2004, DeNora 2005, Stige *et al* 2010).

### **1.8 Policy and funding**

Community music has an essential if sometimes uneasy relation to the various publicly-funded schemes put in place in Britain by government since at least the 1980s. Charity funding has become another major source for organisations. There is a history of government employment and training initiatives contributing to the development of new cultural services, particularly in times of economic constraint. In the 1980s community music was a beneficiary of just such an initiative (Higham 1990, Price 2002), alongside an Arts Council music amateur programme (Price 2010). In the later 1990s culture-led regeneration policies and social inclusion projects (Matarasso 1997, Social Exclusion Unit 2000, Jermyn 2001 and 2004) under New Labour contributed what Everitt (1997) has called the ‘subsidy revolution’ facilitated by lottery funding. The establishment in 1998 of Youth Music saw aesthetic excellence and social benefit targets sit somewhat uncomfortably alongside one another (Rimmer 2009). The Music Manifestos (Rogers 2005 and 2006) put forward a case for community music-type involvement in mainstream education, and have also influenced the recent government-commissioned report on Music Education in England (Henley 2011). It remains to be seen what impact, if any, the Big Society will have on community music practice as a viable professional (rather than volunteering) activity.

## **1.9 Impact and evaluation**

Reports on evaluating the social and cultural impact of community music and arts in relation to a variety of changing government initiatives. The policy initiatives have included reducing unemployment, fighting crime, supporting social inclusion, reducing anti-social behaviour, encouraging health and well-being (Matarasso 1997, Merli 2002, Jermyn 2001 and 2004, Selwood 2002, Murray *et al* 2010, Paton 2011).

## **2. Research gaps**

These are identified by the authors, or were raised at the colloquium, as areas for potential further future research:

- The history of community music, authoritative critical overviews, alternate interpretations and definitions.
- The repertoire practice of community music, authoritative critical overviews, alternate readings.
- The relations between community music and other cognate (or, for some, distant) practices: music outreach programmes, music therapy.
- The role and activity of the solo or freelance community musician, in terms of career.
- Which research questions can help academics collaborate in a fulfilling knowledge exchange? Research which could support funding applications was identified by community music organisations at our colloquium. (This included: evaluation evidence, longitudinal studies of impact, consideration of diversity.)
- Where is the evidence that community music ‘works’? Or rather, could the evaluative evidence be collated from its current disparate sources?
- Pedagogy—an improvisatory teaching? And reflexive teaching methodologies for community musicians.
- Understanding the place of digital, multimedia and mobile technologies: inclusive (for some people with disabilities), accessible (for young people and their popular musical tastes), atomising ...
- More generally, the community arts as an important and enduring aspect of grassroots participatory cultural work is an area worthy of on-going research for any and all ‘connected communities’.

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## The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

*“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”*

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

[www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx)

