

## **Worlds in Collision: Music and the Trauma of War**

Friday 28 June 2013, The Mansion House

### TRANSCRIPT

**Is Creativity Therapeutic?** – Panel discussion chaired by Nigel Osborne with Lord Alderdice, Prof John Sloboda, Major Guy Booth, Prof Morten Kringsbach and Hugh McManners

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Is creativity therapeutic? What I suggest we do, is to ask each of the panel to give us a couple of minutes on this, or 30 seconds would do, and then we will open out the conversation. So let me start with you, John, what are your thoughts on creativity as being therapeutic?

**JOHN ALDERDICE:** I guess for me the thing about creativity is it is right on the borderline between chaos and order. When one is being creative, one is taking things that are potentially not structured in time and space and bringing them together, not in a rigid way, but in a creative way. The problem about illness is that whatever it looks like, the person isn't in control of what's happening. And the person who is psychotic is captured in a disturbed way of thinking, as distinct from a dreamer who has a similar way of thinking but can waken up out of it. To me that is the difference between disturbance and creativity. In disturbance the person is captured by it, in creativity the creative person captures something. When someone is disturbed, if they can work with someone who is confident enough to allow things to be chaotic, disturbed, a bit messy, and not manipulate, that doesn't work, but in the context of the relationship draw the person into something that makes something timely and structured out of it, then that's the therapeutic component of creativity.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Wonderful. John, what is your opinion?

**JOHN SLOBODA:** In a sense it is such an amorphous question that I have only been able to address it by reflecting on the contents of today's wonderful presentations and really asking the question, what does what we heard today add up to in terms of answering that question? And there is a difficulty. That today's presentations have addressed music, musical activity with very different constituencies, from serving soldiers to ex-soldiers to civilian survivors, both adults and children, and across different countries and cultures. It has talked about different kinds of provision, for example cultural activity, music participation of a broad kind, but also it's talked about therapeutic activity administered by professionals to effect measurable improvement in some formally identified conditions, some of which would be non-clinical, such as bereavement, others would be more clinically defined, such as PTSD. We have different levels of understanding of the effects of these things, for example we have ideographic or anecdotal reports from practitioners and people who have been involved; we have evaluational research with a range of techniques, qualitative and quantitative, and at the far end we have randomised clinical controls such as medical professionals would wish to see. And there can't be a single answer to that

question for all of that, so the best answer would be: sometimes, and we need more knowledge to be precise in our answer.

Now, there are two cultures in the room, which several people have observed, and they are two absolutely valid cultures. There are practitioners, and, of course, practitioners must be evangelists and enthusiasts for what they do. It's what keeps them going in very, very difficult situations. They need to believe deeply in the effectiveness of what they do. But also in the room are people like me, who are researchers, intellectuals, and our job is to assess the evidence, calmly and critically, according to accepted intellectual traditions, and in the middle there might be the general public, the media, donors, etc. And I think all I could say is that what we know from a result of all of this work is that music is valuable. Now whether you call that therapeutic or not, I don't know, but it's valuable to every single person in this room and we've all experienced psychological benefits from it. And that same value will be found by any group, particularly if they have had not perfect access to it before. So of course it has value. But then on top of that, music is valuable for some people in some situations for assisting them to recover from the particular effects of trauma, violent conflict, which could be called strictly therapeutic, and I think what we have heard today is there is some evidence of short-term gain, you feel better after the session, or the gig, or whatever it is, but more evidence is needed, and there is very little evidence so far – although we would wish it to be the case – but there is very little actual evidence of long-term therapeutic change, so that would be my assessment of what we heard today.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Thank you.

**GUY BOOTH:** (laughs) Cheers mate, how do you follow that! Right, well coming from the purely practical point of view, I was sitting here thinking about that and thinking, for me as a musician, creativity is definitely therapeutic in so many ways. If I am in a place and I need something going, I'll sit down at the piano and I'll just start playing, anything might happen or come out, and it does something that gets me round into my mind, into the place that think perhaps I need to be. Likewise with my group, quite often they will go into the practice room and just start jamming and it could be on any tune and they will start jamming and suddenly the singers will start doing something, and somebody else will do something else, and the other week they played a piece of music, the tune escapes me now, but they went on for about 40 minutes; it was just a 1980s pop tune, and they just were creative with that pop tune, for about 40 minutes. And they came away from that buzzing, absolutely buzzing, as musicians, because they were being creative and it had, I think definitely, a therapeutic effect. And then consequently I think the other side of that is the creative people taking that creativity out and having the short-term effect hopefully, the therapeutic effect to people outside, from my perspective that's what I would say.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Terrific, thank you. Morten?

**MORTEN KRINGELBACH:** If I can just follow up on that, I thought it was very interesting what John said about these two cultures meeting each other. I think maybe the one thing I could add, thinking about the neuroscience of music, is that creativity in many ways is a question of expertise. In fact, I think it's quite difficult to define what creativity is. A good friend of mine calls it "mucking about", but, of course, the

mucking about has to come from somewhere, there has to be an expertise that one then plays with, there has to be rules that one then somehow changes. And I guess in many ways, in the way that music has become therapeutic, is by giving tools to people, both for creating music, but also for listening to music. And the neuroscience of music has shown that there are very big differences in the brains of people that make music on a daily basis, compared to those who don't make it on a daily basis. Expertise matters, and I think one of the ways in which we can help, and one of the ways that we can rebalance the brain, is by giving people tools to explore what it would actually mean to create things.

**HUGH McMANNERS:** There's obviously a difference between professional artists, professional musicians, who do it for a living, and people in the sessions that we've just heard about – they are probably two equal ends of a spectrum. However, I would say, although I come from approaching the professional musician side of it, that they're all equally valid, because no matter what level of expertise you've got, Morten was talking about it, and we have an exemplar here, what you've got to say is valid. What happens in the creative process – and if you think of any artist in any medium, this is exactly what's happening – they are using their own experiences to create their art, and the ones that are extremely lucky and acquire during their lifetime an audience for that art then become regarded as artists, and accepted as musicians. What the internet shows us today is that there are an awful lot of people who would dearly love to be musicians but only a very small number of them are actually listenable-to. But nevertheless, they are being creative and the point actually is, in all this, that it's the taking of the events in your life, whether they are mundane events or whether they are horrific events, and turning them into something useful through creativity, that's what all the greatest artists do. They turn their own experiences into something that's relevant to everybody else. And it's not possible, I know this myself, I am a songwriter. When I'm writing about things which are really, really close to me and very, very hard, I just look at it at the end and I go, "No, I can't inflict that on anybody else" so I have to somehow or other back off from it, make it more generalised, make it so that other people can resonate with the same sorts of feelings that I was trying to project but when I do it for something very, very close to me, I always overdo it, and, of course, the great artists, they don't pull back at all. They have got this trick of making it relevant to everybody else, and I'm going to get there once, before I go deaf!

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Thank you. I'll just add my tuppence which is as a practitioner, the things that people call therapeutic in what I do, for example, is when working with people to help them be creative, I am told it is regarded as therapeutic that they are able to express themselves, to communicate, to communicate with me, with the world, to strike empathy with me and with others through their work, so that there is the creativity towards a therapeutic potential process there. And another, much more obvious and has its own science, which is the exultation of children, is the pride and joy and self-belief that people can get through creating something, the sense of their own life and worth and identity, which is a huge thing for people, particularly for traumatised people, because that comes often with a different kind of dispossession, dispossession of identity, nation and so on and to rebuild it.

I have a lovely story, I was on the borders of Kosovo and Albania receiving refugees near Kukës and I had done a session with some kids who had just arrived across the

border from Kosovo and we wrote a song and when the kids were there, they said, "Can we bring our father and mother to hear it", and I said of course you can, so dad came and listened to the song, and said, "You know, two days ago, our house was burnt down, we lost everything that we have, but you can't burn down a song, can you?" And I think there's a sort of value there.

Summarising very quickly, we have heard from Lord Alderdice the idea of the chaos brought to order, and having started my life in psychiatric work I am very familiar with the power of that, the possibility of creating a place where somebody in total chaos, in the wilderness, a psychotic episode, can find a concentration and focus on to something tremendous and as John said, a measured possibility of evidence that we have, and I think we are thin on evidence, though we have got a lot of really good hard science behind us, we are in a rather paradoxical position, but again even there there is some short-term evidence, and we build on that, we have to, it is absolutely important. Guy, saying that this is it, the guys were playing and they were buzzing. To buzz is a great place to be! No other word is needed. Everybody - and for Morten saying this is a practical issue of tools as well, to give people, even the simplest of therapeutic situations, or creative situations, give them the means, even if it's, okay, you get a nicer sound from this drum if you hit it that side. You don't have to, but try that. Even that is great. And as Hugh said, to sort of tie this together very elegantly, that all of these acts that we have been looking at are on our spectrum of creativity and that's really important to me. It seems to me that, you know, Beethoven, or whoever you want to take as a paragon of musical art, is on a continuum with the kids we saw playing and the young people we saw playing. One dignifies the other. There would not be the other without the one. That seems very important.

So could I just, in the last ten minutes, maybe invite any thoughts on other people's points, the issue of order from chaos, the issue of evidence, the issuing of buzzing, the issue of tools and the issue of the continuum? Anybody any thoughts?

**JOHN ALDERDICE:** To me, the thing that we haven't spoken straightly about, and yet is there, and is crucial to this kind of day, is the relationship that's at the back of this. So, part of the experience that Guy is mentioning, about the buzzingness, for anybody in a band or choir, or doing these kinds of things, is the doing of it together takes you far further than you could on your own. The key thing, you know, it's not just in music therapy that you leave somebody there on their own with some bits and pieces that they can bang around with; there is a therapist there, who can help the person build a relationship with them, and they do things together. Julie describes very well the depressed person who after some sessions then says, "Please do this with me, and together we will make the music", and it's that togetherness, it's that relationship that's the therapeutic component, whether the therapeutic component for the guys who are well but can even be better, and have a buzzing time, or the person who is really disturbed, and needs that relationship to bring them to health. So the relationship with the person to me is key.

**MORTEN KRINGELBACH:** Can I just build on that? From the research in pleasure, which I have obviously taken a great part in, shows that probably the greatest pleasure in life is to be with other people. Jean-Paul Sartre said it the other way, "Hell is other people", but there is a flipside to that, and that flipside is really

where a lot of creativity, a lot of joy, a lot of pleasure can be taken and should be taken.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Absolutely. Harking back to one of my great collaborators, Colin Trevathan, the idea of this intersubjectivity, the idea of actually art being born and music in particular being born out of our need to find an empathetic communication prior to language, and probably evolutionary terms, is very likely, as we distinguish and study motherese, the sounds and melodies that mothers make to children, it's very clear that we have an evolving template of an intensely social thing where sound is the way that we can look inside the feelings of somebody else.

**HUGH McMANNERS:** And relating this directly to war; people don't, soldiers don't have a language that they can use to deal with the things that suddenly hit them. So in the aftermath of an IED or something, the words aren't there and of course, if you can't get it out somehow, it's going to stay within you, and it's going to rot. So this is why chaplains, when a war comes along, become one of the most important people in a military unit, whether or not you believe in anything, because they have this language and it is a different set of words which provides comfort whether you believe or not. They become very important people. I think music does exactly the same thing. It is a different language which gives you the ability to express things that you couldn't put into words.

**GUY BOOTH:** Music can put you into – as was mentioned earlier by a few people – into a safe place, can't it? We were in Bosnia with a former band in 2000/01, the town we were in escapes me. At the time I was a band master and I don't know why, but before we left the UK I grabbed a bag of old Christmas cards from the band. On the front cover there was a beautiful picture of our band in red tunics and plumes, and we looked absolutely fantastic. Although not that good because I wasn't on the front cover! But I had this bag of cards and the band were playing in front of me, and it was the first time that a band had been taken into this town. People were very scared to come out. The band started to play and I sat on the wall in front and I could see a little boy, right down the other end and I started looking in my bag. Gradually he came along, I pointed and he took out a card, and he ran off. I thought I wouldn't see him again. Interestingly enough he started to bring all his friends along. As I said to somebody earlier, with the children come the parents. And as we were talking about, I think, in Northern Ireland about changing and breaking cycles, it is being able to change or break a cycle so that the next generation don't think that is the here and now. It isn't the here and now. And I think the music that we were able to provide, I don't know if it is therapeutic but it certainly took people into a safe environment. The children ended up taking every single Christmas card because it was like the most amazing gift they could have been given. I think about doing that in the UK and they would have gone "whatever, last year's Christmas card". For them it was the most amazing thing. It was the music that had enabled that coming together and the parents coming out into the centre of the town with the children for us. I think it's such a crucial factor.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Having worked alongside the Army in various situations, sometimes I was sorry for my colleagues in the Army who, in horrible circumstances just had to deal with it, whereas I could go and work with children and heal myself immediately. I always felt a bit sad about that. But also, the other side of it, when on

occasions we had been able to work with the Army, like the Green Jackets working with us, with children in the community, it felt so natural and good. And far be it from me, it is not my position to do that, but there would be an agenda for the Army here in a kind of creative social outreach that could be tremendously beneficial in many places and tremendous for soldiers themselves able in a tough situation having to watch an awful lot of bad things happen and then get out there and do something extremely constructive which people have been extremely good at when I have had the chance to work with them. So, just a thought. Yes, John.

**JOHN SLOBODA:** To return in my role in this committee of being the crusty academic. I think that several different things are being talked about here, they are all very valid things but they are different things. We are now talking about the benefits of music. That's absolutely fine, but a lot of the things that we heard today didn't involve much creativity on the part of those who were receiving whatever it was that they were receiving as therapeutic or inputs. So for example the people being helped to sleep better by music were exercising no creativity at all. They were simply passive recipients of the music. That did them good too. But if the question is creativity of value, then we have to look just at those projects where the participants were actually invited to make music. So just to be a little bit clearer, we are not lending a benefit from one kind of activity to another just by being sloppy with our language.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** Absolutely. Though there are continuities here, for example having worked with the sleep and relaxation issue there was a continuity also between active, creative dialogue and listening. We tried to create programmes that move across through that spectrum.

**HUGH McMANNERS:** Of course, there is a creativity in listening as well. If the music you are listening to is stimulating you and challenging you and you are getting into it, getting the buzz, then in fact you are taking part. The empathy of, even in a rock band where you are playing very, very loudly, if you are in front of a crowd you feel it and you play differently, you play different notes. You play the whole thing completely differently to when you are in a studio. So I do think that listening is contributing very much to music.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** As we have just got five minutes could I see if there is a question from the audience?

**FLOOR:** I will be quick, it was a fascinating day as I anticipated it would be. I will pass on something. There was a debate I attended in May at the Royal Festival Hall, it was called "Is Talent Enough", it was arranged by the Borletti Buitoni Trust, it was about musicians and young musicians and what you needed to make your way in the professional world. It was introduced by Mitsuko Uchida, I wanted to pass on a couple of things she said, she was talking about certain qualities that you needed. You said about the spectrum and about people being valid, whether they are professionals or people with no knowledge about music. What two of the things actually said that really struck a chord with me were things I hadn't really thought about, she said music was actually an expression of character, the core of who you are. Also musicians, music it is all about expressing the self. The thing about people and culture and words and language and countries and nationalities and war is the fact

that words and culture often get in the way. Music has the potential to actually communicate at a very elemental level, and I just wish it was used more often.

**HUGH McMANNERS:** Absolutely.

**NIGEL OSBORNE:** On those inspiring words we should probably conclude this panel. Thank you very much gentlemen, and thank you everybody else for being such a lovely audience, we would like to take you home with us but we will see you again some time. Thank you.