

Instrument Library

Ian Cook

The 'instrument library' in Leicester, UK, receives unwanted musical instruments from the local population and, serving as the 'middle-man', makes these available so they can be borrowed by asylum seeking and refugee musicians based in the region, allowing musicians to continue their art and enhancing the local music scene.

Area Arts

Kind-category of project Regional initiative of national public broadcaster and local music group

Kind-category of actor Public body, arts group

Country UK

Year 2002 -

5 key-words world-music, asylum, refugee, musicians, community support

1.1 Description of the project

Project Initiators

The project was initiated by and since has largely been in the hands of Karen Pirie, who works for the BBC (see below) and Sheila Mosley, who helps run Farside Music (see below) and is involved with Long Journey Home (a regional network, focussing on artists in exile).

BBC Leicester

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The British Broadcasting Corporation is funded through a system of licence fees, which every person in the UK with a television has to pay. As well as producing commercially orientated programmes and popular entertainment the BBC is also required under its charter to produce a certain level of community initiatives, which may not always be financially 'successful'. As well as television and radio programming, this also includes activities such as orchestras, festivals and drama groups. The instrument library project is such an activity.

Farside Music

(the first Wednesday of every month)

8pm Criterion pub,

Millstone Lane,

Leicester

Sheila Mosley tel: 07751888391

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Farside Music is a group of musicians who meet regularly and organise monthly performances, at which local musicians are given a chance to perform. The group is run by volunteers 'for the love of music' with their events put on for free (only asking the public for donations to cover some of the costs) with the primary aim "fundamentally to provide opportunity for the performance of live acoustic music from around the world". The instrument library complements the aims and activities of the group.

Project Description

BBC Leicester in collaboration with Farside Music Group set up a local 'library' of instruments from around the world. Located in the basement of a local arts centre, it allows new arrivals into Britain to borrow instruments until they "get themselves on their feet".

Relying mostly on donations of unplayed or unwanted instruments from the public, the project aims to get these instruments into good use by acting as the catalyst and means by which musicians, who had been forced to flee their own countries, could begin to play music once again.

Local 'ex-musicians' were targeted through the local media and at World on Your Street events, though the regular performances of the Farside Music group, the respective websites of both partners and through the various contacts of Karen Pirie and Sheila Mosley. The project has been running since 2002..

An example of what the library has in stock (sample from June 2006):

Bandurrias

Banjo

Bodhran + Beaters



C Whistle Gold

Coccelele

Djembe x 3



Drum – Egg Timer Shape Yellow



Egyptian Semsema
Fiddle (violin) x 3
Flute x 2
Guitar effects pedal
Acoustic Guitar x 5
Harmonica
Harmonium listen to Alim



Kambala
Keyboard Casio CTK 50
Keyboard Yamaha PSR 210 + power pack + stand
Keyboard Yamaha PSR 240 + power pack
Keyboard Yamaha PSR 77 Keyboard + power pack
Maracas
Melodica
Recorder x 2
Saz
Shaker
Tambourine x 2
Tempo
Tro - U
Trumpet



Viola
Whistle - G Gold
Wooden Whistle AB/G
x-50 Combo Amplifier
Assorted whistles

1.2 When and how long? Structure and steps of the project

The project started in 2002 when Karen Pirie, who at the time was working for the BBC in Leicester on the World on Your Street project, had to track down world musicians based in Leicester. “It turned out lots of these were asylum seekers and had no musical instruments ... I came across a group of Somali musicians who had to hire stuff whenever they had to play, as they couldn’t bring their instruments with them. I thought ‘this is crazy’, because there must be lots instruments lying around that people don’t use and could be put to good use. I had heard about a project set up for youth music; an instrument amnesty for youth projects and schools.”

An ‘instrument amnesty’ takes its theme from similar ‘drug amnesty’ or ‘gun amnesty’ schemes, where the public are given the opportunity to rid themselves of the illegal items without fear of prosecution or repercussions. It is a comical play on the name, because although not practising musical instruments not a crime (!), it may bring a small amount of shame or embarrassment to admit that once good intentions to learn an instrument have been neglected. It is hoped that people see the scheme as a good way to make use of the instruments they themselves could not.

Karen believed that they could use the same model and so contacted her friend Sheila Mosley who was involved in the Farside Music club and they then decided to start the project as a joint initiative, “we put appeals out wherever we could, virally, via radio Leicester and got loads of stuff donated.” After asking around various groups and organisations a local arts centre offered them the use of their basement to store the instruments.

1.3 Place and context

Music

Music is recognised by many different groups as a way for people to escape troubles and also as a way to bring communities together. As well as improving community relations multicultural music events involving refugees, can comfort those who were fleeing persecution by allowing them to once again undertake something they love.

On the other hand people often start to learn an instrument, but do not have the time or the determination to continue. People in this situation will often store away their instruments and all but forget about them. These instruments are, however, often in good condition as they sit in cases un-played.

Being a musician under certain regimes can have unfortunate consequences, as Karen Pirie explains she “discovered that people were often ‘booted out’ of countries precisely because they were musicians, often for playing the ‘wrong type’ of music.” Consequently there were many musicians in the region who no longer had their instruments.

Britain is a home for people who were born in many diverse parts of the world and when they arrive in the UK they often bring their music with them. The instrument

library was originally included as part of a BBC programme entitled 'World On Your Street', launched in April 2002, which was a celebration and promotion of international music in Britain by Radio 3. Radio 3 attempted to produce a musical map of Britain, showcasing where people would find world music in their local area (on their street).

Leicester

Leicester is in the centre of England and is widely known for its multicultural make-up, with over 40 per cent of its population non-white. In 2010, if current trends continue, it will become Britain's first Asian majority city. Many Asians immigrated to Leicester in the 1960's and 1970's, when large numbers were either heavily encouraged or forced to leave Africa at the behest of newly independent governments. For instance, in Uganda Idi Amin expelled all Asians from the country, with around 6,000 of those expelled eventually settling in Leicester (source icar.org.uk). Since then the ethnic population has continued to grow, with a large number of ethnic Somalis, often EU residents from the Netherlands, choosing to settle in the city.

Some recent reports have suggested that there is opposition to increased migration, including towards those seeking asylum, and not just from white-Britons but also amongst the immigrant community themselves. For example The Hindu Times, one of India's most widely read daily newspapers, when reporting about the last British General Election in 2005, interviewed, Eijaz Ahmed, a self-employed builder who came from India to Britain in 1979, and when asked about the issues which he perceived as problematic he said that there were "too many" people are coming into the country and that, he claims, is "not good" for settled communities." (www.hindu.com). However, many others have held Leicester up as an example of multicultural tolerance as it has not experienced the same degree of ethnic tensions reported in other parts of the country.

1.4 Targets

- Asylum seeking and refugee musicians.
- The local community.
- People interested in World Music.

The targets can be summarised by the explanation for the project given by Farside Music on their website "We want to build up a collection of instruments that can be borrowed by asylum-seekers/refugees who are musicians, in the East Midlands. We have contact with artists in exile who are adding to our cultural rainbow by sharing their music with us, at Farside Music on a Sunday evening and when invited to play at other events."

1.5 Methodology

Publicising the Project:

- A call was put out through the local BBC mediums for people to donate their instruments.
- Musician networks through Farside Music and Long Journey Home.
- Utilising World on Your Street events.
- Performances by the musicians using the new instruments.

Practical Innovations to help the project run smoothly:

“We organized sets of drop off points in the beginning (during the publicised amnesty) so if people wanted to donate items then could either drop them off at BBC Leicester or at local music shops or local venues etc. This saved on the cost of going to collect the instruments and also gave more people the chance to donate.”

1.6 Funding and Networks

Long Journey Home, “an East Midlands wide network that recognises the important role the arts can play in breaking down barriers, empowering the disenfranchised, and enriching the cultural wealth of society as a whole,” awarded a grant of around 1,000 UK Pounds (1,500 Euros), which was used to fund performances and new instruments. As well as buying specific ‘rare’ instruments to augment the collection of western instruments, the money was also used to pay for some repairs.

Both Sheila Mosley and Karen Pirie knew many people, musicians, asylum seekers and refugees and asylum seeking musicians. These informal networks were utilised to spread knowledge of the project as well as to find donors. Furthermore the diversity of BBC mediums was used to spread news of the project.

Karen had the time necessary to “get the ball rolling” because she could incorporate it into her working day, “I was getting dedicated paid time from the BBC to track down musicians, to record their stories and interview them. We were recording their music, aiming to create an archive of Leicestershire based musicians.”

2.1 Strengths

Karen was really happy about the popularity of the project, both in terms of volume and in the geographical area covered. When questioned about the current status she reported (despite no longer being heavily involved, as no longer living in Leicester) “I’ve got a flute in my draw ... and someone has just offered me a piano. I don’t know how many other schemes there are like this, but we’ve had offers from all over the place. Obviously it was just a Leicester scheme to start with but with Sheila working with Long Journey Home she had contacts in Nottingham [another city in the Midlands] and it has just spread from there really.”

The popularity of the project has probably some relation to its individual nature. There are no similar projects in this field. Whilst similar projects exist within the field of music (such as the instrument amnesty for children mentioned by Karen) and using similar models of recycling unwanted items (for example with furniture, see: <http://glossopdalefurnitureproject.co.uk>) there are no known projects providing instruments to asylum seekers.

It has helped create a network of musicians. Networks that cut across cultural lines help to enhance intercultural understanding. Common bonds between people that transcend ethnically based cultural ties help to foster new levels of cooperation and co-existence. This in turn can lead to asylum seekers and refugee feeling more welcome and accepted as they realise members of the local community are prepared to give up something to help them.

2.2. Critical points

One concern Karen voiced was that there is sometimes too much to do on a voluntary basis. Though it has been possible to set up the project successfully and keep it running, this has only been possible because of the good will of the arts centre that loaned their basement out to the library. For example, “by giving their time to let us in and out of the building and also to turn people away who’ve come without an appointment, they saved us lots of time which neither of us had.” Ideally Karen, if trying a similar project, would suggest, “to get some kind of funding for an administrator, even it’s an hour or two a month just to keep things ticking over.” The Instrument Library in Leicester however was not planned and was more of an “accidental thing”, so it was not possible in this case.

It could be argued that it is important for all organisations to implement sound structures, even at the beginning. This might allow organisations to more easily grow and also to change hands when the original members no longer have the time or inclination to continue. For instance, Karen has moved away from Leicester and consequently is no longer able to be heavily involved in the project and so it has been left largely in the hands of Sheila. On the other hand, it could be reasoned that the informal nature of project also has had its advantages. As refugees tend to move around a lot more than others, the loaning of instruments needed to be done on a personal basis with prearranged appointments (with either Karen or Sheila). In this way they could keep track of the instruments much better, with very few of the instruments going missing over the four years of the project.

Some members of the public have complained that they should also have access to the instruments, arguing that it is unfair to reserve their use only for asylum seekers. This problem however has been partially overcome with either Sheila or Karen agreeing on an individual basis that people could borrow instruments until somebody who they were really meant for needed them and then they had to bring them back.

2.3. Conclusion: what is “exportable” in the project

There appears to be three important lessons that people could learn from the project: not to underestimate the generosity of the public, the usefulness of informality and flexibility within projects and the utilisation of paid time to create projects which will eventually become voluntary.

People are very generous and happy to donate 'items', in this case instruments (though there are similar projects with furniture etc). It could be reasoned that people may prefer to donate when they can see the practical results; their money is not going into an organisation or group to fund salaries or office space, rather they can see the physical tangible results of their generosity in the community.

Informal structures within small organisations are useful so that flexibility is enhanced to overcome day to day problems which are unforeseeable. For instance in the case where non-refugee members of the community wanted to use the instruments, informal one-to-one agreements were used to resolve the issue. Projects which start small may not need to be over concerned originally with rigid plans, but instead allow themselves to evolve to the needs of the groups they are serving.

People can use their paid time within a certain job, in this case the BBC, to set up projects which will become largely voluntary when the opportunity presents itself. Often resources and networks exist and which although do not immediately appear as relevant can be utilised in innovative ways

3. OTHER COMMENTS

Some samples of world music which is performed in the UK. All artists are involved in the Long Journey Home arts network. A CD, 'On the Border', from where these extracts are taken, is available on the long Journey Home website (see below).

'Banee aadam' – words by Saadi, a Persian poet.

The same poem is used to grace the entrance to the Hall of Nations of the UN building in New York with this call for breaking all barriers: [1]

"Of one Essence is the human race,
Thusly has Creation put the Base;
One Limb impacted is sufficient,
For all Others to feel the Mace."

Sung in traditional style by Hamid who is Iranian.

Listen here:

<http://www.longjourneyhome.org.uk/Audio%20Border/Hamid%20stereo.mp3>

'On the Border'. Reza is Iranian, and Gaylan is from Kurdistan-Iraq. They are both well-respected percussionists and they have great regard for each other. This track symbolises the power of music to bring people together, to cross borders and to work together.

Listen Here:

[http://www.longjourneyhome.org.uk/Audio%20Border/Gaylan%20Reza%20stereo.m
p3](http://www.longjourneyhome.org.uk/Audio%20Border/Gaylan%20Reza%20stereo.mp3)

4. LINKS

The BBC's Webpage on the 'instrument library' which helped launch the project:

www.bbc.co.uk/leicester/music/world_on_your_street/refugee_instrument_amnesty.shtml

Farside Music Homepage:

<http://farsidemusic.org.uk>

Long Journey Home, the local/global arts network:

www.longjourneyhome.org.uk