



## Playing the room

For the last few years, the City of London Sinfonia has been making music with older residents as part of their Room to Room Music initiative in north London care homes run by Jewish Care. **Judi Herman** meets members of the team behind this remarkable project

“Maureen, you look lovely this morning,” utters my computer. Once again, I’m on Zoom, but it’s not a work meeting I’m joining. No, what I’m transfixed by today is the grace and elegance of an elderly woman sitting in a wheelchair, her arms and upper body swaying in time to music played by a string duo from their respective Zoom windows. Maureen is receiving a ‘visit’ at her Jewish Care home at The Betty and Asher Loftus Centre in north London, which provides residential, nursing and dementia care. Her guests are Matt Maguire and Helena Ruinard, who are part of the City of London Sinfonia’s Room to Room Music project.

Residents who have strong connections to music are especially likely to benefit from the project. It is a vital part of Jewish Care’s Living Well provision for residents, described on the website as “a daily programme of activities tailored to individual needs and abilities carefully planned by a dedicated Living Well Team.”

This is Maureen’s sixth session with CLS musicians, who have been running the project in association with Jewish Care since 2018. Pre-pandemic, the visits took place in person, and everyone involved adapted to the virtual change as necessary, but in-person visits have restarted this spring.

Maureen greets Matt (viola) and Helena (violin) enthusiastically, clearly

bowled over by the opening compliment. The pair’s outstanding musical talent is immediately evident – as is their gift for empathy and building a rapport with their audience. Demonstrating what their instruments can do and the differences between them, they ask what sort of music Maureen would like to hear and begin to improvise the dance-like tune, which soon gets her moving. When the musicians pause, she remains animated and chatty, remarking that the pizzicato tune sounds like Benjamin Britten. The session continues with the musicians letting Maureen examine the instruments and the maple wood they are made of, interspersed with music and chatting, during which Maureen shares memories of her late husband, an opera singer with “a deep masculine voice”. Right on cue, the musicians produce a sound to evoke that voice. Their sensitivity and spontaneity make the session wonderfully moving and uplifting.

The project lends itself to the intimacy of the room of its title. A prime mover is Fiona Lambert, director of participation at CLS. When she took the position around four years ago, she tells me she made a point of joining the teams of musicians going into care homes: “Small ensembles essentially giving concerts in communal

lounges.” This was part of an ongoing initiative for an orchestra “leading the way in creative, collaborative practice in health and social care through its participation programme” and the driver of everything the orchestra does.

“The work was all very lovely,” remembers Fiona, but she still wondered how they could make a deeper impact. “We went directly to Jewish Care to ask what they really needed and they said: ‘We really want to work with people in isolation

in their rooms, who can’t access musical activities in the communal areas.’ So we worked with them to devise this project. It was very much a collaboration, building on Jewish Care’s ethos about the individual. If you really want to make

an impact, it has to be bespoke for that person,” continues Fiona. “Jewish Care have been quite honest with us. For some, it can be more effective to put on a CD, because you’ve got more control over it.”

This frankness inspired CLS to devise a new way of working. They brought in musician Caroline Welsh in the role of amateur, to help engage the audience, as she had experience working with Music for Life, a long-established project aimed at transforming the quality of life through music for people living with dementia. “It was challenging for our players,” Fiona

**“We are giving the residents quality of life, improving their wellbeing.”**



admits. “Of all the work we do it is the one project where musicians have to bring all of themselves. And without sheet music, there’s nothing for them to hide behind. It’s incredibly exposing.”

So how is it for a musician rising to the challenge? “The only way is to go in with a blank piece of paper,” says Katherine ‘Waffy’ Spencer, principal clarinet in the CLS. “We bring along all our expertise, but we don’t bring any preconceptions, even about what that person liked the week before. But having said that, we did Room to Room in deepest darkest lockdown for six weeks, trying to work with the same residents, and it was really nice to have less of a blank sheet every time. There was a development of a relationship from our side, but most importantly, from theirs. By the end it was apparent to me how people had developed – and that includes the musicians as well.”

Musicians from the CLS who sign up for the project must be willing to take part in specially devised improvisation training. “Caroline really shaped the project,” explains Waffy. “We felt challenged by her and were allowed to develop.” She vividly remembers the very first session, when “some were frightened of improvising and being vulnerable”. They sat in a big circle and were told to make any sound and then to connect with another person across the room whilst performing that sound. “By the end of the day we were happily improvising. Everyone felt their voice was valid, could make a difference and connect, and that was delicately handled from the moment of playing the first note together.”

Musicians coming into the home once a week are all acutely aware that it’s the care provided by dedicated staff at the home on a daily basis, their knowledge of every resident, that is the bedrock

on which Room to Room Music is built. In their ‘person-centred approach, Living Well facilitators work in close collaboration with “other members of the team, staff, families, volunteers and visiting artists to support the social, emotional, spiritual, and cognitive wellbeing of residents in accordance with Jewish Care’s philosophy of care,” according to Living Well team manager Pawel Moczulewski. Each member is consulted at every step of the project and provided with practical support to enable the sessions. I speak to Pawel and two of the facilitators, Christina Nimako-Brago and Tamer Ali.

“With our support, the musicians have become specialist music engagement artists,” Pawel says proudly. So it’s not music therapy? “No, music therapy is based on different guidelines,” Christina clarifies, “but it is therapeutic. What we are getting from the project is something money can’t buy – giving the residents quality of life, improving their wellbeing.”

Individuals living with dementia are often withdrawn, monosyllabic and unresponsive. Tamer shares an example of how the project has helped Brian, one of the residents, who was difficult to engage with and encourage. “He was so inspired by the music that he did some colouring

**L-R: Matt Maguire (viola) and Becky Knight (cello) with Maureen; Katherine Spencer (clarinet) and Abi Hyde-Smith (cello) with Brian; Dinah and Theo with Maguire and Chris Rawley (bassoon). Below: Room to Room Music session on Zoom**

in and brought it to a session, so the musicians could ‘play’ the colours.” Tamer and Christina agree that the rewards far outweigh the obstacles faced and time spent in trying to facilitate the sessions.

In another get-together, string players Matt and Helena were working with husband and wife Theo and Dinah (not their real names). I had the chance to observe the musicians’ warm and sensitive engagement skills. The couple tended to remain in their room because of their various physical conditions, but before Covid, they had regularly attended concerts in their synagogue and socialised. The team felt the project was a perfect fit for them. Initially Dinah had been doing most of the talking but as the session progressed Theo began to join in. After laughter from Dinah as she joked about the merits of Helena’s violin, compared to the “blooming bassoon” that had been played at a previous session, Theo began to engage too, beginning thoughtfully, “Isn’t the violin an emotional instrument.” This was the last of six sessions for the couple.

The plan is for the musicians to deliver more weekly sessions in another JC home, But Pawel ended on a wistful note: “The only regret is that we can touch just a few residents on each occasion. If there were more funds, more organisations that would like to work this way, it would be wonderful.” ■



Visit [cityoflondonsinfonia.co.uk](http://cityoflondonsinfonia.co.uk) for more info on the Room to Room Music project and [jewishcare.org](http://jewishcare.org) for info about Jewish Care.