

This is City of London Sinfonia (CLS) | Participation biography

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City of London Sinfonia (CLS) is the orchestral home to over 40 outstanding professional musicians who come together in the shared belief that music has the power to transform the lives of people across all areas of society. They bring a distinctive, seriously informal style to everything they do, breaking down the barriers between their musicians and audiences – whether performing on a world-famous music stage or sharing musical, creative experiences with residents in care homes and hospital schools.

Last Season, CLS celebrated 30 years of inspiring wellbeing and education work in their year-round participation programme of ‘in-the-moment’ and creative music-making projects. CLS musicians are at the heart of the programme, working alongside specialist workshop leaders in the planning and delivery of projects in a range of settings including care homes, hospital schools, hospices and in mainstream education. Musicians also lead the Comfortable Classical relaxed concert series, in partnership with the Albany, Deptford.

CLS’s residencies include Bethlem and Maudsley Hospital School, working alongside young people (aged 8-18) who have severe mental health conditions, and Headway East London, a specialist day centre for people affected by brain injury. Participants work with sound artist Gawain Hewitt and CLS musicians to create new music in response to the Orchestra’s artistic programmes. In May 2019, the participants’ compositions – inspired by the Orchestra’s *Absolute Bird* concert series – were recorded and featured within sound installations, which audience members were able to interact with at concerts.

For over 20 years, CLS musicians have led weekly music sessions for children and their families on hospital wards at major NHS Trusts in London, including Evelina Children’s and University College London hospitals, encouraging artistic expression of patients and a distraction from the everyday. Musicians also work alongside workshop leaders in care homes (Jewish Care) and hospices (St Christopher’s Hospice), creating music with and for participants. CLS’s Creative Primaries project takes place throughout the school year with Key Stage 1 pupils in partnership with Tower Hamlets Arts Music Education Service and Harrow Music Service, focussing on schools in socioeconomically deprived areas and providing children with an opportunity to experience the joy and fun of live music and artistic creativity with a professional orchestra.

In addition to their weekly activities, the Orchestra is working with King’s College London and the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience (IoPPN) in a new ‘Sound Young Minds’ research project, aiming to measure the impact of their music projects in mental health settings. They are also designing a new series of intergenerational concerts with Orchestras Live, building on their ten-year success of concerts for children aged two to five.

Quotes and testimonials

“What marks our orchestra as special and unique is that all of our musicians believe in and see in the benefit of this kind of music-making, and it is something we relish.”

Alexandra Wood, CLS Creative Director and Leader

“It’s not about doing it half-hearted, dumbing music down or being too laid back. You have to give a committed, high quality performance and show what the instrument can do to keep the musical integrity – this way people connect to it.”

CLS musician

“Since her injury, Mary has struggled with the loss of her social and familial roles, and music has been a way for her to regain those things. Working with the CLS team gave her that sense of community, of adventurous friendship, that is such a big part of what she looks for in music.”

Staff member, Headway East London

“Historically, Carl has often been withdrawn in group situations, his contribution limited by his quiet speech, but now he was able to make his distinctive mark on the musical work of the group (showing a clear preference for laying down a heavy dub-style bass and drum line). All of us who know Carl well could see how this work gave him motivation, purpose and satisfaction: and it also gave him a chance to express aspects of his history and personality which might be hidden because of his impairments. In this way it brought him closer to the other participants and helped strengthen relationships which continue at the centre today. It was great to see Carl’s face in sessions – often expressionless at other times – lit up with the widest imaginable smile.”

Staff member, Headway East London

“George, a gentleman with a progressive neurological condition, highly intelligent suffering multiple losses as his disease advances. Music is one of the areas where he can still experience creativity and actively participate. During sessions with City of London Sinfonia, we noticed how strongly he was able to sing although his speech is often difficult to follow. Music – its form and pace – helps George order and slow down his speech and so around his singing in sessions, his spoken word becomes much clearer. He’s been able to clap and play rhythmically in time with music. His condition means he often stumbles and is prone to fall but again the music and its form, pulse and framework supports his experience of ‘order’. George becomes more fluid. He is much more physically alert and present during sessions, sitting more upright. He also smiles throughout, and we have not seen him being happier or more relaxed than in these sessions. Socially, in music, we see the whole man – reflective, witty, generous and warm, engaged and passionate.”

Staff member, St Christopher’s Hospice

“I have been delighted to be part of our programmes and haven’t stopped talking about them. I’m very lucky to be able to use music in this way. Without it, I’d not have a way to communicate with these wonderful people that is meaningful and beautiful.

Katherine ‘Waffy’ Spencer, Principal Clarinet

“Playing alongside the Orchestra’s players and myself has provided a solid sense of confidence to these young people. While they may not accept verbal praise in all cases, I got the sense that it was difficult for them to refute that they had the right to be there as music-makers and that they had a value and achieved something.”

Gawain Hewitt, Workshop Leader (Bethlem and Maudsley Hospital School)

“We had a young person who had hardly engaged in any education activity for more than 20 minutes in the past. He stayed and participated through the full two hours with [the] musicians and said that he was really enjoying it.

Teacher (Bethlem and Maudsley Hospital School)

“I am delighted, as a teacher, seeing them actually using some of the things I’m trying to teach them... the children are clearly understanding... it is wonderful to see.”

Primary school teacher (Creative Primaries, Harrow)

“CLS’s project is one of very few Key Stage One projects and therefore fills a gap in provision.”

Alison Porter, Tower Hamlets Arts and Education Service (Creative Primaries, Tower Hamlets)