



CASE STUDIES

BitterSuite

Steph Singer

The delivery organisation

BitterSuite is a young company creating new, active ways of listening to classical music inspired by graphic notation and Synaesthesia, a neurological phenomenon which results in stimulation being perceived in a second sensory or cognitive pathway. The most common form is colour synaesthesia, where letters, numbers or sounds are perceived as inherently coloured. The organisation experiments with artistic collaborators and workshop participants to explore how they can deepen the experience of listening by extending the music into every sense.

The people

Participants The workshops were trialled with seven vulnerable young people based in North Croydon. The participants were all referred to BitterSuite by social services, with ages ranging from 12 to 17 years. They included a young carer, a young person supported by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) living in foster care and at risk of finding themselves Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and a young person under parental pressure relating to his career and in complex living circumstances. Other participants included two brothers who were home schooled and living in a volatile area, a young person attending college and a young person who found it difficult engaging in school.

Staff Workshops were led by Steph Singer (co-ordinator, previously a mentor and volunteer at StreetVibes PRU), Nichol Keene and Toby D'Angeli (workshop facilitators, founders of Elephant, a spoken word collective supported by the Roundhouse Theatre), and Jessica Hodge (pastoral support through her local authority Youth Arts role). Alongside these regular attendees were the collaborators of each week, including Julian Johnson (Graffiti Artist), Sarah McCartney (Perfumer), Freyja Sewell (Designer), Andrew Yiallorius (Chef) and Anna Pearce (Choreographer).

The project

The project aimed to encourage and engage participants to seek inspiration from broader sources and influences through a high-quality arts and music opportunity of the kind rarely experienced by the participants. Over the six weeks of the project, the leaders challenged participants to connect with classical music, explore their senses and engage creatively with the music as a group, through improvisation, experimentation and group discussion. It was hoped that through this work, participants would reduce disruptive behaviour, be able to name, identify and critically assess certain musical elements through sensory and descriptive vocabulary, and also that the multisensory approach of the BitterSuite would be tested.

Multi-sensory sessions

Each week the young people participating in the workshops would form new links between their senses and broaden their musical influences. Every young person would actively engage with the stimulus music and each session had the opportunity to create a new representation of a piece of classical music, including a graffiti mural, a perfume, a movement piece, a series of tastes, and a texture score.

The participants' favourite workshop was the first, entitled 'The Colours of Mars', which aimed to conjure the mood, character and tone of *Mars* from Holst's 'The Planets' through colours and graffiti painting. Through activities such as breaking colours down into moods, ideas and feeling, then asking participants to imagine the music were a series of colours, the participants were able to form connections between the music and colours through collaboration before creating their own graffiti mural of the music. This workshop proved to be a great opening session as it is the most immediately engaging, exploring the level of perception and creativity with which we engage most commonly: vision and colour.

"Loud would look big and bright" - Participant

The workshops 'Smelling the Music' (which made use of the Overture from *Orpheus and the Underworld* by Offenbach), and 'Musical Textures' (exploring music from Stravinsky's *The Firebird*) both enabled the participants to build their relationship with the music and explore it in innovative ways. In 'Smelling the Music', the use of improvisation and theatre to discover the different musical themes as opposed to dictating them helped the participants connect with the music and take ownership of the themes before creating their smells. In both workshops connecting musical language with creative description forged deeper connections between the senses and with musical vocabulary.

The final two workshops explored taste and movement using *Carnival of the Animals* by Saint-Saëns and Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. Again techniques such as brainstorming connections that could be made by taste or movement and music proved a good introduction to the session

before making more solid connections between the two. While ‘The Taste of Instruments’ saw the young people using music terminology from previous weeks, ‘The Movement of Melody’ was the least well attended, and it is thought that worries of embarrassment and body image might have prevented attendance for some participants.

“None complained it was classical music – in fact they even clapped at the end” – Jessica Hodge

Evaluating the project

The project was evaluated by six of the participants and gave a good understanding of their feelings towards each workshop and the project overall. These evaluations reveal that all participants felt included, engaged and encouraged by the project, and each member felt they learnt new things. Despite none of the participants saying that they found the workshops difficult, staff members felt that participants found parts of the workshop tricky, such as making connections between the senses and music, only listening to classical music, and pushing their descriptive language. Only one participant didn’t feel this was a new type of workshop that they hadn’t experienced.

During week of the first workshop, BitterSuite was featured on the Guardian Blog and was later discussed on BBC Radio 3’s *In Tune*. As a result the organisation have been discussing future collaborations and workshops with Sense, Jessica Hodge and Croydon Youth Arts, Inner Vision (a blind orchestra), Wilderness Festival and Hendericks Gin.

Lessons learned

What we would keep or build on

- Playing with and testing young people’s senses
- Allowing connections between musical elements and sensory stimulation to develop as a group is far more effective than forcing them
- Bringing a wide range of ages together, which provided a great dynamic for the sessions

What we would change

- Provide more individual, concrete outcomes alongside the abstract group ones, such as a painting, sculpture or film
- Provide more variety in musical genres, as the project leaders felt slightly restricted by focussing so intensely on classical music and it might help participants to engage more with the project. To aid this, the length of the project could be increased in the future.

Opportunities for the future

- Allow previous participants to create a taster session for other young people, providing an insight into what resonated with them

- Collaborating as a group to create a musical experience for an audience of local young people as a follow-on to the exploratory workshops