



Project Manager Sophie Mathias reflects on her time
at MERYC 2017: CREATING MUSICAL SPACES:
Origins, Cultures and Childhoods

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Introduction

My name is Sophie Mathias and I am a co-founder of [World Beaters](#). We work in partnership with marginalised communities, grassroots organisations and welfare agencies using music to celebrate cultural identity and support wider integration. Using world rhythms, songs and stories, our musicians combine early years music expertise and in depth cultural understanding. Projects thrive on skills sharing to understand differences and find common ground.

MERYC-EuNet Conference 2017

Music Educators and Researchers of Young Children's (MERYC) EuNet Conference 2017, Creating Musical Spaces: Origins, Cultures and Childhoods, was held at Homerton University from 20-24 June 2017. This was World Beaters first experience of MERYC activity and the first opportunity to deliver a paper on World Beaters' practice and the Luton Roma Music Project (LRMP).

Reflections on World Beaters' practice

Presenting at the conference

Time was tight to deliver all aspects of the multi-agency project, LRMP, and the room layout didn't lend itself to interaction between participants. A flexible approach was therefore required to present the essence of the work. Alison Street, our Chairperson, was helpful in embracing our needs and we felt the practice and spirit of the LRMP was shared with participants. We were followed by Laura and Hanna-Maija from Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences with their inspiring spoken paper '*Music expressing the unspoken, family music groups for asylum seekers*'. The delivery and findings of our two projects aligned in the following ways:

- The importance of opening sessions with simple, playful interaction
- The need for a flexible and sensitive approach to working with target groups
- The feeling of hope that was shared by leaders and participant
- Intuition is an enormous part of the music leader's role, i.e. sensing the mood and changing activities accordingly. For example both projects use drawing as a way for participants to express themselves, to encourage verbal discussion and invite parents in to the practice.

The role of fun in music sessions. Fun for fun's sake or musical fun?

Musical fun on the LRMP, is a goal we aim for, however, there are social factors, which influence this. The children often have no toys to play with at home, so faced with a children's centre family room full of early year's toys, the need to play is paramount. Children as old as ten enjoy the play kitchen and dressing up. Our music leaders require a flexible approach, leading some music activity and also finding the music in the play of children. During one session, a group of young Roma boys had exhausted their musical concentration and turned to the dressing up box, where they engaged in an interaction on cross-dressing which would be unheard of in other circumstances in their lives. As some of our Roma participants see music only as a tool to worship God, we are aware that our activities, particularly with older children, may be regarded as frivolous by parents.

Do you have to have an education or experience in music to be an early years music leader?

Conversation in skills sharing sessions with World Beaters musicians and practitioners often centre on this question. Our musicians, whose experience comes from musical heritages across the world, discuss what constitutes as a music education and what musical experience is the most valuable in delivering music to younger children. How can individuals with different skills and experiences support each other in project delivery? What is the impact of cultural and social constructs on music education and leadership?

Singing and world music delivery

The catalyst for setting up the World Beaters programme was a conversation with nursery staff who had a wealth of world percussion instruments but a fear of leading percussion sessions. They were lacking confidence in how to play the instruments and how to control the noise once children start playing. Demystifying the generic term of 'world music' and associated instruments was the foundation of World Beaters sessions in our first years.

Singing songs in different languages continues to be an important focus for the World Beaters team. We are constantly aware that there are many languages shared by our participants who often have more extensive language skills than us. Their voices are essential in delivery, adding to our repertoire and engaging a wider audience.

Inspiration and CPD

As we were leaving, Pamela Burnard, keynote speaker and Professor of Arts, Creativities and Education at the Faculty of Education in Cambridge, approached us in the car park and a totally inspiring 20 minutes of conversation ensued. She gave us a wealth of information and ideas and an unexpected invitation to present at a conference next year!

Other reflections from the conference

Improvisation

Improvisation was a buzz word throughout the day. The focus of Raymond MacDonald's keynote speech was uplifting. Alison Blunt, long term collaborator with World Beaters, felt that her musicianship and model of early years music delivery was given validation within the early years music pedagogic community for the 1st time. Karen Eaves' research on musical identities of early childhood music specialists flagged up that many specialists are not confident as improvisers but see it as an essential part of music delivery. Practical work with Raymond MacDonald and [BebePlimPlim](#) demonstrated how accomplished creative results can be achieved through confident leadership and clear guidelines, set at the beginning of an improvisation session.

Thanks to the London Early Years Music Network (LEYMN) and Sound Connections for supporting me to attend the day conference and to MERYC for the opportunity to deliver a spoken practice paper on the Luton Roma Music Project (LRMP).