

# Can music really improve the lives of children with special needs?



Bethlehem

Music as Therapy International is a UK registered charity that devises and delivers innovative, high-impact music therapy projects around the world. Projects Manager, **Jane Robbie** describes how they share the benefits of music with vulnerable communities overseas, including children with special needs attending a Montessori school in Yangon, Myanmar.

**M**usic as Therapy International believes passionately in the power of music to make the most of people's potential, whatever limitations their disabilities or emotional needs appear to cause them. The charity's roots lie in the orphanages in Romania where Director Alexia Quin delivered a pilot project in 1995. It was here that she discovered that it was indeed possible to share basic music therapy skills with local staff working with children with severe disabilities.

"Music is the invisible key to open the doors to an individual's inner world. In some of the rooms we will find pain and sorrow, in some others, joy and happiness. Only by visiting these rooms will a child be able to find his own way in life. As a session leader, my role is to guide that child on his journey and encourage him." Local Partner, Romania

I joined Alexia in 2000, and since then our dedicated team of professional Music Therapists and student musicians, have enabled over 3,000 disadvantaged children to benefit from locally delivered music programmes, born out of our introductory training projects. Over the past five years we have extended our reach beyond the boundaries of Romania and have established locally sustainable music programmes in 15 care settings across four continents.

Our projects provide local staff – our Local Partners – with the skills, musical instruments, experience and confidence to run therapeutic music programmes long after the volunteer team has

returned home. This unique approach not only transforms the children's lives for the better, but also empowers our partners to use their new skills to get to know the child beyond their difficulties.

"We have so many trainings as teachers, and they are all about the teacher – the planning, the lesson, the thinking, the materials – but this training was the first one that taught us how to be with children, to communicate with them, be with them and help them be more confident... It is like a mother and baby, who can talk without using words." Local Partner, Project Beit Sahour, Palestine

What does a Music as Therapy project entail and what can it achieve?

We recruit professional Music Therapists who, assisted by student musicians, then share their skills with local care workers, teachers or social workers. These members of staff observe our therapists in action, gradually getting more involved in the music sessions until they are able to lead sessions themselves.

The aims of the sessions are not

recreational or educational, but therapeutic. They provide a safe space where children are encouraged to express themselves freely using a musical instrument, their voice or through movement. By responding empathetically, the session leader assists in developing children's social interaction skills, verbal and non-verbal communication skills, cognitive and physical development, play skills, emotional well-being, self-confidence and self-esteem. Our Local Partners tell us how regular therapeutic music sessions help their children connect with others to develop trusting relationships and communicate with more ease. All these areas of development are proven outcomes of music therapy, the principles of which are the foundation of all our skill-sharing projects.

"Music as Therapy is a novelty for our school and it has turned out to be the best way for engaging children to have motivation, encouragement and inspiration. The parents, teachers and educators mention that these sessions perceptibly assist the children in their mental, emotional and social development. The children became more active, communicable and more open. The interest of the school educators is growing fast. We can say that musical therapy project is one of the most successful in Georgia." Head Teacher, Public School Nr. 200, Tbilisi 2011

After the introductory training ends, we offer long-term support to ensure that the legacy of the life-enhancing techniques we have introduced will be a lasting one. Experience has taught us



Tsvia Horesh in Myanmar

the importance of evaluating the impact of all our projects, monitoring the continued practice of our Local Partners. We use this information to plan ahead strategically, guided by our Music as Therapy International Advisory Panel and Trustees.

### Project Myanmar 2013: Montessori Children's House

Myanmar (or Burma) is a country in transition that has recently been going through significant political, social and economic changes. It is estimated that there are more than one million physically disabled people in Myanmar today, but sadly there are very few resources available to work with this section of society. Music as Therapy International is pleased to be working with Israeli Music Therapist Tsvia Horesh to enhance what is currently available to the children with special needs at the Montessori Children's House in Yangon.

Tsvia explains, "Music therapy benefits children with disabilities or special needs, but there are no music therapy training courses in Myanmar. I approached Music as Therapy International in 2011 to explore ways in which we could make the benefits accessible and with their help I structured phase 1 of an introductory music therapy training course. I travelled to Yangon in May that year and ran the course, which was attended by 25 teachers from nine different special education schools in Yangon. This was followed by on-line supervision and a follow-up visit in October 2012.

"One of the schools involved in the training was Montessori Children's House. I met Dr Kyai Win, founder and Director of the school, who explained why they were desperate to learn new ways of working with the children with special needs: 'We started Montessori Children's House in Yangon in July 1998, after receiving training by a Montessori trainer from the London Montessori Centre. As we encountered more and more children on the autism spectrum we started to run special needs sessions in 2005 from 2 to 4 p.m. We now have 40 students; 30 attend sessions in the morning and 10 in the afternoon. The children in the afternoon sessions are all on the autistic spectrum.

'I decided to attend Tsvia's music as therapy training course together with a music teacher from the school to find out about other channels to reach the



Rwanda

autistic children and get a better rapport to help them gain social, communicative and cognitive skills. The training was excellent and after completing it, we introduced music as therapy sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays with children on a one-to-one basis as well as in group sessions.'

"Dr Win was soon able to see developments in the children who participated in their music sessions. For example 'One boy, a selective mute, who would not participate in the classroom, showed improvement after receiving 6 to 7 individual music as therapy sessions. He trusts the teachers better, has become more sociable and has even vocalized one or two single syllables.

'Another boy in the class with ADHD attends group music as therapy sessions. He can now sit through the 20 minute session. He still fidgets in class but follows the teacher's instructions. He used to daydream and could not focus for a few seconds but now he is paying more attention to the teachers during story time.'

"Having seen the potential of music, Dr Win was keen to develop the school's potential to offer it to more children: 'Although we are experiencing some success, we feel we need to learn more. We have asked Tsvia Horesh if she can arrange more music as therapy workshops and training.'"

Music as Therapy International has been working with Tsvia to help her respond to Dr Win's request. She has successfully recruited two music therapists to deliver the training and she will travel with them to oversee the first week of the project. The training will enable the staff to deepen their knowledge and hone their skills gained in the first course. We are confident that

by the end of the project these Local Partners will have the confidence and skills needed to continue to run regular music sessions for the Montessori children.

But, as Tsvia explains, her involvement will not end there. "After this next phase of activity, I will work alongside Music as Therapy International to provide on-going support for Dr Win, her team and most importantly the children at the Montessori school in Yangon."

### Where next?

Alongside this project, Music as Therapy International will be working with Local Partners in Rwanda, Georgia, Palestine, Romania and the UK. But where will we be working in 2015?

We are particularly interested to build our network in Georgia and, having seen how our approach resonates with that in use in a Montessori school, we'd be very interested to hear from any other schools worldwide that may wish to introduce some of the benefits of music therapy to the children in their care.

If you are based outside the UK and would like to find out more about working together with us, please contact [janerobbie@musicastherapy.org](mailto:janerobbie@musicastherapy.org)

For those living in the UK, we co-ordinate and run a University credit-rated learning programme for Early Years Practitioners. The next course starts in January 2014. For more information, please contact [shannonperkins@musicastherapy.org](mailto:shannonperkins@musicastherapy.org)

For more information, or to make a donation towards any of Music as Therapy International's projects including Project Myanmar, please visit our website [www.musicastherapy.org](http://www.musicastherapy.org) or find us on Facebook.