



University of Brighton

CONALL GLEESON

NEW NOTE ORCHESTRA

Collaborative musical composition and
performance to aid recovery from drug and
substance misuse

RESEARCH OUTPUT



Conall Gleeson conducting the New Note Orchestra

Composer and research musician Conall Gleeson devised and led workshops through which collaborative musical works were developed by New Note Orchestra (NNO).

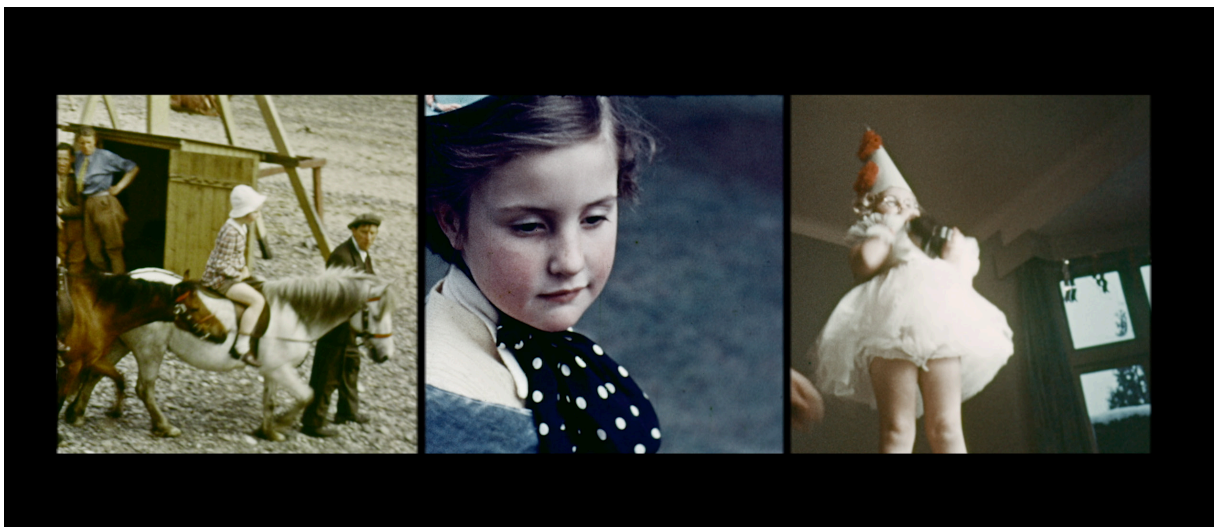
The orchestra's members have limited or no experience of music-making prior to joining and are in recovery from drug and substance abuse. Gleeson also facilitated NNO's musical performances, which involved accompanying pre-made films that focused on issues of importance to the members of the orchestra.

This distinctive participatory intervention developed 'understanding of the sources of subjective wellbeing for people who are dealing with addiction.' (Gleeson and Tomlinson, 2019)

The primary pieces and performances were titled:

- *Solace* (2017), audio-visual work investigating the impact of childhood experiences on addictive tendencies for orchestra members.
- *A Sense of Place* (2018), audio-visual work performed on four occasions across the South East: orchestra members investigate their own emotional responses to private and public spaces that are associated with their addiction and recovery.

New Note Orchestra

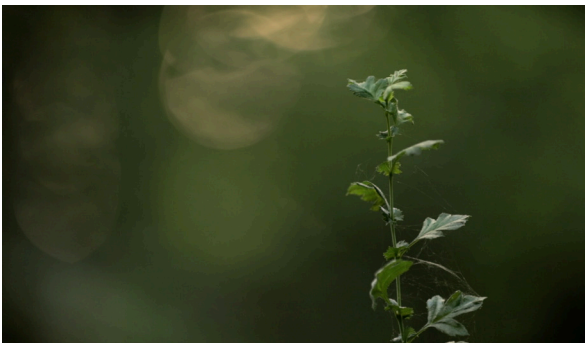


Still images from the background film used in *Solace*, integrating imagery sourced from the Screen Archive South East

***Solace* (2017) is an audio-visual work (30 mins) in which the orchestra performs live to a film that presents a portrait of the recovery process in the words of selected members of the orchestra.**

The film includes footage of childhood play and family gatherings from the Screen Archive South East (UK) intercut with interviews with orchestra participants. The film explores the origins of addiction for orchestra members and reflects on collective music-making as a means for community building amongst participants. It reflects on early indicators of addictive tendencies, typically in childhood. This includes the trauma and isolation that accompanies addiction. The development of *Solace* allowed investigation into the role of music-making in alleviating the stress and anxiety of such addiction and also in sustaining recovery.

New Note Orchestra



'... there is nowhere like the woods to come and reflect and to revel in recovery. It's a wonderful thing to get well.'

'My Sense of Place is Brighton, but a new Brighton, a Brighton through sober eyes, I can walk around with my head held high and see things that I didn't see before'

Still images and spoken words from the background film used in *A Sense of Place* (2018)

***A Sense of Place* (2018) is an audio-visual work (45 mins) in which the orchestra members perform live to a documentary film that revisits and reflects on public and private places that influenced their recovery from drug and substance abuse.**

The film, created and edited by NNO, features interviews with NNO members which explore ways in which space and place contribute to a sense of wellbeing and community.

New Note Orchestra

SOLACE



Solace
Recording of performance

Access to film at <https://youtu.be/obGc5mge4Uk>

A SENSE OF PLACE



Excerpt film from *A Sense of Place*
The Wood

Access to film at <https://youtu.be/nKZr4sE644o>



Excerpt film from *A Sense of Place*
Roger's Story

Access to film at <https://youtu.be/3ckBQZmbH3A>

New Note Orchestra



Excerpt film from *A Sense of Place*
The Tree
Words written and performed by
Craig Neesam

Access to film at <https://youtu.be/IWrYg-K3y6w>

TEDxNHS



TedxNHS
Introduction and discussion
followed by performance
conducted by Conall Gleeson

Access to film at <https://youtu.be/242DIWf9T9o>

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



New Note Orchestra musicians during rehearsal

Gleeson brought an understanding of musical composition and theories of performance to the complex questions surrounding vulnerability, isolation and recovery from addictive behaviours.

His work with New Note Orchestra asks an overarching question about the benefits of collaborative music-making on wellbeing. Through their work together he investigates aspects of recovery and music-making in order to establish a set of practices and frameworks that can be modelled for recovery, both short-term and long-term, and that test established practices in contemporary music-making.

The key questions for the research were:

- In what ways does composition and live performance support mental and physical wellbeing?
- Are there particular processes of collaborative music-making that are best suited to support recovery from drug and substance abuse?
- How can creative music practice inform public opinion on issues relating to drug and substance abuse, for example, by challenging stigma?

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Conall Gleeson works with people in recovery from drug and substance abuse. The participants have often also experienced homelessness, social isolation, poor mental health and may be at risk of suicide.

Through his work, Gleeson has developed methods and techniques for creative making that facilitate the exploration of recovery as experienced by members of the orchestra.

Whilst there is a significant amount of research that recognises an improved subjective wellbeing resulting from music activities such as singing amongst the general population (Daykin et al., 2017), there remains limited study of the health benefits to those with a history of drug and substance abuse. In addition, there are gaps in the research around the impact of instrumental performance, composition and live performance on recovery and wellbeing.

Funded by the Arts Council since 2016, NNO provides a safe space for people to be creative, build their confidence, increase coping strategies and restore a sense of control and achievement in their lives. Creating new music also helps participants learn new skills, improve their cognitive dexterity and develop relationships with people away from drugs and alcohol. The group meets weekly with around 15 members in a session, playing instruments and singing, guided by their conductor.

Gleeson's research draws upon the emergence of recovery-oriented practices across many statutory mental health services worldwide, as well as the increasing recognition of the valuable contribution of creative practices to subjective wellbeing. Recovery-oriented practices are increasingly offered as a more holistic approach to wellbeing by health professionals. Studies have shown that collaborative music-making offers the opportunity for time to be meaningfully occupied amongst those in recovery.

The efficacy of these methods has been recognised by the *All-Party Parliamentary Report on Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing* (2017) and is an example of the current trend for social prescribing, a more holistic approach to wellbeing which continues to grow in popularity amongst NHS GPs. In this capacity, NNO was invited to perform for an audience of medical professionals at the TedX NHS, London in August 2018.



**Conall Gleeson conducting the
New Note Orchestra**

RESEARCH PROCESS

COLLABORATIVE WORKSHOPS

To create the music score, the orchestra utilised the improvisatory techniques developed since working together. Weekly collaborative workshops, led by Conall Gleeson, explore rhythms, pitch and timbre by responding intuitively to the set of instruments NNO members bring with them to each session.

These were typically guitars, percussion and keyboards. The group played musical games to facilitate play and invention in the making of music. These included establishing musical boundaries and frameworks – such as when every person played slowly, played quietly, played at the top register or the bottom register of their instrument. It was found that such exercises offered an inclusive model for shared music-making where participation is not restricted by levels of instrument performance skill.

Improvisatory and sound-making methods also assisted in accessing deep, nuanced feelings, whilst film-making helped orchestra members to build hopeful and meaningful narratives.

Whilst these exercises generated musical content that was later edited to produce compositional form, they also facilitated the development of critical listening skills, which focused less on the sound each individual makes, and more on the listening of each individual to the collective sound of the ensemble.

'It's Tuesday evening and we're back in rehearsals, we've just played our final scheduled performance of our latest creation, and so after a short reflection on what we've achieved after months of hard work, we begin to look forward to our next project – so begins 'the experimental phase'. This is an opportunity to hone our musical skills; exercises in listening, dynamic balance, rhythmic accuracy and harmonisation underpin the freedom of improvisation. Sometimes it doesn't work, we're not 'feeling it' as a group and the sound deteriorates into a disconnected jumble.

'More frequently, what starts as a single musical theme, grows into beautiful sonic landscape or an exhilarating pulsing groove. When this happens, we feel connected to each other through the music, there

are smiles all round, everyone has contributed their own little part to something wonderful, and someone inevitably says, 'we should keep that!'

James, December 2019 (NNO Blog)

To create *A Sense of Place* (2018) the orchestra expanded its method of inclusive practice to facilitate partnership with poets who are also in recovery and to incorporate spoken text in the live performance.

LIVE PERFORMANCE

The live public performance was the arena in which the resilience and confidence in recovery is tested against a public audience.

NNO members used the public performance not solely to evidence their recovery from addiction and their achievement as musicians and composers, but to actively address public perceptions of drug and alcohol abuse: by creating works for film and live music performance which aim to explore and communicate the process of recovery as experienced by members of the orchestra. One of the aims of the live performances was to develop public understanding of recovery and to challenge the stigma associated with drug and substance abuse.

'The Towner Gallery was delighted to host the New Note Orchestra. We were so impressed by the quality of the whole experience, both the live performance and the commissioned film. The Q&A at the end was very powerful and moving, for audience and performers alike.'

Niamh Pierce, Deputy Director, Towner Gallery, Eastbourne

RESEARCH INSIGHTS



New Note Orchestra 2020
Photograph of collaborators
by Natasha Bidgood

The insight from the collaborative music-making practice emerged through expert, iterative work in the performance workshops and was underpinned by testimony from the many participants.

It was shared and developed through the performances and recordings of them, through recorded interviews and blogged insights.

Refining and answering the questions posed in the research, Gleeson recognised the separate parts that composition and performance could play both in the wellbeing of the individual and the communicative potential of music. Together these allowed for an understanding of a best-practice framework which in turn led to the evolution of a distinctive and inclusive model for music making that focuses on the development of listening skills, rather than on the development of instrumental performance skills.

This proved a particularly effective form of collaborative composition in supporting recovery from drug and substance abuse, largely because it develops awareness and sensitivity to the sound one makes as well as the sounds made by others.

PARTICIPATION

Participation in composing and performing music was found to increase self-esteem and confidence, significantly supporting recovering addicts in remaining drug free.

In testimonials online and in reports about recovery from addiction and evaluations of the NNO, members of the orchestra have written about experiencing substantial benefits to health and wellbeing through music-making (see examples below). In addition to sustaining long-term recovery from alcohol and substance abuse, members have reported an increase in self-esteem and confidence, a greater sense of control and empowerment, improvements in psychological wellbeing and reductions in cravings, anxiety and depression. A survey conducted of NNO members found that outcomes were generally very positive, with 76 per cent of responses agreeing that they had seen significant or dramatic improvements in their health and wellbeing. Supporting recovery was the most positive response (89 per cent) followed by feeling positive about life (84 per cent).

After playing the handbells on my first visit to New Note, I vibrated with a new joy inside. I love the syncopated rhythms and the way the sounds produce a completely unique and mesmerising harmony. Our connection with each other is totally respectful and encouraging and so beautiful. I love it and my life has been strengthened by that and I sense that's what we transmit to our audiences through the music and film projects we openheartedly offer.

Helen, December 2019 (NNO blog)

'For me New Note has rekindled my self-esteem, which in turn has developed my confidence. The confidence to play and create music. The confidence to be curious and express ideas. The confidence to simply socialise. The confidence to be in my own skin. Be myself.'

Dan (cited from Hart et al., p.75)

NNO demonstrates the drive to remain free from drug and substance abuse can be fuelled by, and fuel, creative and artistic ambitions, particularly where there has been recognition of artistic excellence, for example, by the nomination of Solace for the British Composer Award.

PERFORMANCE

Research recognised the communicative importance of performing collaboratively developed compositions in front of live audiences. This both validated significant work and commitment by participants and offered them a means to communicate directly with their communities and health professionals, helping change perceptions about the realities of living with drug addiction.

Live performances, followed by a Q&A between orchestra members, the audience and invited academics and health professionals who lead the field of music and recovery, have resulted in a shift in perception about addicts and their capabilities:

'We had an audience and it was clear that it wasn't just the usual recovery crowd that had come along to support; there were a lot of local people we'd never met before.'

'That was a big leap for us. It's one thing doing it in rehearsals; it's another thing performing to a crowd. The reaction was amazing. We'd proven that we could do it and that brought a huge boost in confidence for all of us.'

Roger, 2019 (NNO blog)

'On behalf of all of us here at Nesta, and our partner Power to Change, I wanted to say an enormous thank you to everyone in New Note Orchestra. We were already delighted that you had agreed to play for us. But in all honesty, I don't think we ever imagined that the music was going to be so wonderful. The audience were completely spellbound, and I know it was the highlight of the day for many of them.'

Christina Cornwall, Interim Director,
Health Lab, Nesta

'The number of people successfully completing treatment for drug and alcohol misuse continues to decline nationally. Public Health England suggests that on average just 46 per cent of people complete their initial treatment, a figure that drops to 26% for those who misuse opiates. These success stories can reduce even further over time as some people face relapses and adapting to a life without substances. Creative spaces like New Note Orchestra often support people who have completed the first phases of their recovery, but could still benefit from recovery-affiliated groups in order to sustain their progress.'

(Dowding, 2019)

New Note Orchestra



New Note Orchestra
Rehearsal and performance

DISSEMINATION

PERFORMANCES

Solace

2017 Brighton Fringe Festival, St Lukes Church, Brighton. https://issuu.com/brighton_fringe/docs/brighton_fringe_brochure_2017

2017 Cinecity Festival, Sallis Benny Theatre, Brighton. <https://www.cine-city.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CC2017.pdf>

2017 Depot Cinema, Lewes. <https://lewesdepot.org/newnote>

2018 Nominated for a British Composer Award (2018) for its integration of community engagement and compositional skill. <https://www.prsformusic.com/press/2018/british-composer-awards-2018-nominees-revealed>

A Sense of Place

2018 Cinecity Festival, Towner, Eastbourne. <https://www.townereastbourne.org.uk/event/a-sense-of-place-new-note-orchestra/>

2018 St Luke's Community Church, Brighton.

2019 Depot Cinema, Lewes. <https://www.sussexexpress.co.uk/news/orchestra-former-addicts-performing-lewes-160460>

2019 The Old Market, Brighton. https://issuu.com/tomvenue/docs/jan-apr_19_brochure_-_issuu

JOURNAL ARTICLE

Gleeson, C. and Tomlinson, A. (2019) 'Solace: music-making as a route to recovery and well-being', *Contemporary Music Review*, 38(5), pp. 526-528. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07494467.2019.1684071>

TALKS

May 2018: The Future of People Powered Health 2018, NESTA <https://www.nesta.org.uk/event/future-people-powered-health-2018/> Video timeline location 2.13.25

August 2018: TedX NHS, IMAX Cinema, London. Five-minute performance and public talk in the TedX format (not currently available online).

May 2019: The Musical Museum: Music and Well Being Conference, Brighton Pavilion, Brighton Fringe Festival.

ONLINE

Audio excerpts from *A Sense of Place* <https://soundcloud.com/user-497119187>

Films from *Solace* <https://www.newnote.co.uk/what-we-do/solace/>

Films from *A Sense of Place* <https://www.newnote.co.uk/what-we-do/a-sense-of-place/>

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- Dowding, K. (2019) *Performing Recoveries, An Evaluation of New Note Orchestra*, Brighton: University of Brighton. <https://www.newnote.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Performing-Recoveries-FINAL.pdf> (Accessed October 2020)
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NEW NOTE ORCHESTRA

Mollie Mathieson, Founder and Chief Executive
 Conall Gleeson, Musical Director
 Patrick Harrex, Friend of NNO
 Dan Blomfield, Trustee
 Bridget Taylor, Trustee
 Narcus O'Dair, Trustee
 Marco Martinez, Special Advisor
 James McConnel, Special Advisor
 Suzie Edgely
 with orchestra musicians

(overleaf)
**Musicians from the
 New Note Orchestra with
 percussion instruments**

New Note Orchestra

