

# Music for the Many Project for Culturedale 2024-2025

## Songs from Home

### Introduction and Summary

The start of our project was much less formal than we had originally planned, as we found that our

participants were much happier to share and talk about their music and cultural identity in informal meetings at the school gate, at home or in friends' houses than in larger meetings at school or in a community centre.



Our Orchestra at Beech Hill School has been the catalyst for the project, with its very diverse, multicultural membership and its capacity for learning and performing new repertoire.

The project has enabled us to build a good relationship with Halifax Unity, a new, inclusive community space on Queens Rd., in the heart of the community we serve. This in turn has enabled us to offer continuing provision for our instrumental pupils who left Beech Hill School last year who are now scattered across several different secondary schools but can now meet up as an orchestra on Saturday afternoons at Halifax Unity as Halifax Youth Orchestra.

Collaboration with Calderdale Valley of Sanctuary has facilitated engagement in the project by refugee and asylum seeker families and by the wider community, including the organisation's volunteers and other local people.

Our performance of nasheeds in Todmorden Town Hall and the outreach work in Ferney Lee School leading up to it helped to empower some members of our South Asian muslim communities to share music from their cultural traditions. It also gave the wider community the opportunity to hear, learn, perform and enjoy music from these traditions and to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of them.

In addition to these planned collaborations, this project has been characterised and energised by the new, unexpected and very exciting artistic collaborations which it has sparked. These include work with:



- The Jafar Cakes, which is a collective of refugee and asylum seeker musicians, based at St. Augustines Centre. As well as facilitating meetings and learning sessions with experienced musicians from several different Middle Eastern cultures, the Jafar Cakes have shared the group's repertoire with us and have taken part in performances with our young people and families.

- Hussnain Hanif's Burnley Nasheed Choir, which is a group of young singers from primary schools in Burnley specialising in Islamic song. Members of this

group collaborated on our nasheeds performance with our Todmorden children.

- Tibor Kalas, who is a wonderful violinist from the Roma tradition, living in Halifax. Tibor has taught us many traditional gypsy melodies and songs and has helped us to play in a gypsy style.
- Marco Rebet and Msy, who are pop stars very well-known in their native Mauritius, and who now live in Halifax. They have taught us some of their biggest hits in French creole and have performed in one of our concerts.
- Stephen Shulman who is a local professional violinist specialising in klezmer music from his own Jewish cultural heritage. Stephen has shared music and techniques from this tradition in our workshops and has played a major part in our performances.
- Halifax Chamber Choir, a local classical choir. Our Halifax Youth Orchestra gave a concert with this choir at Dean Clough in December 2024, which was a great experience for our children to hear a live performance of classical choral music and for the choir to hear our children's multicultural repertoire.

- Three Valleys Gospel Choir, a gospel choir based in Todmorden. Our Halifax Youth Orchestra gave a concert with this choir at Boothtown Methodist Church in December 2024. It was a great experience for our children to hear gospel music performed live. We look forward to future collaborations with this and the Halifax Chamber Choir.

## Activities

### research, introductions, rehearsals and performances, September – December 2024

Our children's orchestra at Beech Hill School learned and practised an Arabic song, called *Mawtini*, introduced to us by the family of a Palestinian child in the orchestra and a Kurdish song called *Qij Kali Lew Alli*, introduced to us by the family of one of our Kurdish children, along with the two favourite Christmas carols of our orchestra's children of Christian families: *Silent Night* and the traditional Ukrainian piece *Carol of the Bells*. The children performed these in our December concerts at Dean Clough with Halifax Chamber Choir, at Beech Hill School with the school choir, and at Boothtown Methodist Church with the Three Valleys Gospel Choir. A special connection happened when some of our children's families, who are refugees from war-torn middle eastern countries, realised that the conductor of the gospel choir is herself a refugee from Ukraine.



For some of the children's families, this was the first time they had attended a concert. When our children gave a concert with Halifax Chamber Choir at Dean Clough, one of our Kurdish refugee parents was very moved and said about the classical choral music "That's the most beautiful thing I have heard."

In December and January, our music leaders met with Iranian-Kurdish singer, Goli Jalali and Palestinian singer, Hind Merhi, both refugees living in Halifax, who, over the course of several sessions, taught us some songs from their respective traditions in Farsi, Arabic and Kurdish languages.

Our music leaders were also invited to the family home of one of our pupils of Roma gypsy heritage, where several members of the family are musicians and who shared some traditional Roma songs with us and taught us how to play the style of Roma music most popular in Slovakia, called *czardas*.

Our music leaders were then able to teach this newly acquired culturally diverse repertoire with the children in school and, where children have recognised their home cultures being represented in our work, they have become much more keenly engaged in the music-making and have a stronger voice in the group.

### Song sharing sessions



We held three song-sharing sessions for families at Beech Hill School in December, January and February.

In each hour-long session we worked with parents and their children to discuss what music means to us and how it expresses our cultural identity, and to share and learn songs from each other's traditions. Some parents took part in all three sessions, but most took part in just one session.

Families shared church songs, pop songs, film songs, qawwali and national anthems from South Indian, Punjabi, Iranian, Kurdish and Romani traditions. Some participants showed skills in playing guitar, piano or drums. The two sessions with the fewest participants were the most productive because the atmosphere was less intimidating for those shy of singing for the group. One parent who came to all three sessions said "I suffer a lot from anxiety and this music calms me down."

In the second session we learnt about Roma church songs, when it transpired that one of our participants plays guitar at the Roma church services. This led to discussion about music in our different faith traditions, and comparing the participatory nature both of Qawwali in Sufi Islam and hymns in evangelical churches.

In the third session a participant with little English, who was at first very reluctant, turned out to be a professional singer from Mauritius who sings in French Creole. When he eventually felt comfortable and confident enough, supported with an instrumental accompaniment by our music leaders, he sang one of his songs for us. He went on to describe Mauritius' unique musical genre, called *sega*, which was new to all of us, and showed us the traditional *sega* rhythm on a drum.

### Public community workshops

In February we held two different workshops at Halifax Unity open to the general public. One was led by Kurdish singer Goli Jalali, who performed and taught the participants songs in Kurdish, Farsi and Arabic. Most of the participants were local people of white British heritage so the repertoire was all completely new and unfamiliar.

The second public workshop was led by violinists Stephen Shulman and Tibor Kalas and focussed on songs and melodies from Ashkenazy Jewish and central European gypsy traditions. It was exciting to hear the similarities between these two musical cultures and we discussed the reasons why there is so much overlap, and then to hear the similar musical features also in Indian music in the home culture of the South Asian participants. When learning the words of the Roma songs we could also see the similarities between Romani vocabulary and Punjabi vocabulary with their common North Indian roots.



Participants were a mixture of instrumentalists and singers, including some violinists from Calderdale's amateur symphony orchestras. Some of our young pupils came to this session, as it was on a Saturday afternoon. All the music we shared in the session was also available in sheet music notation for the participants to take away and share further.

As we were packing up at the end of this session some of the local children of Roma heritage, who had felt deterred by the adult formality of the main session, came into the room and picked up the instruments to sing and play gypsy songs more spontaneously, which was wonderful to see and hear and gave a very important example of how widespread, natural and essential live music making is in this community.

### Nasheed singing in Halifax and Todmorden

Our visiting artist, Hussnain Hanif, spent an afternoon coaching the choir at Beech Hill School to improve their performance and singing technique, working especially on Islamic songs familiar to the children's families from Arabic and Punjabi traditions.

These children gave a very confident and proud performance of the nasheeds in our Songs from Home concert on 25th February in Beech Hill School.

Hussnain Hanif also joined our Todmorden children's nasheed group for a recital of Nasheeds in Todmorden Town Hall on 5<sup>th</sup> April with guest performances from the Burnley children's nasheed choir and from Bradford-based musician Anaya Khan. Leading up to the performance, which coincided with Eid-ul-Fitr celebrations, the children of Ferney Lee School in Todmorden have all been learning and singing nasheeds in whole-school assemblies, which has created a real excitement amongst our children and their families about this colourful musical culture. The Town Hall performance was the first time that our Todmorden nasheed group has included children from non-Muslim heritage. Many of the non-Muslim people in the audience were hearing and learning about nasheeds for the first time. The programme reflected a varied spectrum of nasheed traditions, from Punjabi qawwali, to traditional Arabic chant and

American pop-influenced nasheeds, some a cappella, some with piano, guitar or tabla accompaniment. It was a joyful celebration of muslim cultures which brought different communities together and formed part of Todmorden's civic celebrations for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Todmorden Town Hall.

### **Songs from Home combined Concert at Beech Hill School, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2025**

As well as the Beech Hill Choir performing nasheeds, the Beech Hill School orchestra together with our new Halifax Youth Orchestra, performed their Songs from Home set, including specially-written orchestral arrangements of *Mawtini* from Palestine (featuring guest Palestinian singer Hind Merhi), *Qij Kali Lew Alli* from Kurdistan, *Nane Coxa* from Roma tradition and *Allah hu*, a Punjabi qawwali, for which they were joined by the choir for a very special collaborative performance.

The event also included guest appearances from *The Jafar Cakes*, featuring singers Goli Jalali and Hind Merhi, Iranian guitarist Arten and klezmer violinist Stephen Shulman. They presented songs from Iranian, Kurdish, Lebanese and Syrian traditions.

It was a very powerful experience to see and hear families in the audience engaging with and singing along to their diverse home musical traditions being recognised in the programme.

The finale of the concert was by professional artists Marco Rebet and Msy, who are asylum seekers from Mauritius and members of our local community, giving their first public performance of their own music since arriving in the UK. This is an important opportunity for asylum seeker musicians to perform in public, as they are unable to perform in professional venues because of the legal restrictions on asylum seekers working.

We will shortly produce a video documentary of the project including clips from workshops, recordings from performances and participants' feedback, as well as a book of the songs we have collected so far for use by other groups and musicians.



### **SONGS FROM HOME**

#### **Participation statistics:**

**Adults taking part in workshops and rehearsals: 38**

**Children taking part in workshops and rehearsals: 185**

**Children taking part in performances: 62**

**Audience members at live performances: 245**

**Professional music leaders and guest artists: 8**

**Volunteers: 6**

