

The inside track: Co-creating music within UK prisons

For pianist **Clare Hammond**, performing in prisons began as a way to get out of a rut, but the project soon became something much bigger. Her latest work is co-created with prisoners and informed by their experience of the criminal justice system

I first entered a prison eight years ago. I had been ill for about a year with profoundly unsettling postnatal depression and, in an attempt to kick myself out of a cycle of distressing and repetitive looping thoughts, I decided to try something new. My husband introduced me to a friend who worked as a prison chaplain, and he arranged for me to pop in one afternoon to play to around 100 men.

I had no idea what to expect or how well I would be received. Initially, my audience was distracted, but as I played and spoke about challenges the composers had faced in their lives, I could sense their attention shift and refocus. In the absolute silence that accompanied Schubert's Impromptu in G flat major and the enthusiasm with which they spoke during our post-concert Q and A, I realised how powerful music can be in a prison environment.

I decided to keep going and, since then, have given 46 concerts in 12 prisons across the Midlands and the South-West. Last year, I formalised this work by setting up the Gloucestershire Piano Trust. With the help of my three dedicated Trustees, we provide 10 prison concerts and more than 30 school concerts, reaching over 300 prisoners and 4,000 schoolchildren, each year.

The most fulfilling part of each prison concert is speaking to the audience afterwards, particularly when they describe how important music is in their lives; how it inspires, offers hope and builds bridges between people in situations where verbal communication can be fraught. In response to this, we designed a more interactive project so that participants could make their own creative contributions. In May, I led eight workshops at two prisons in Staffordshire in collaboration with composer Michael Betteridge to co-create pieces for solo piano.

Co-creative work is something I had no experience of, so Michael took the lead while I supported with musical interjections at the keyboard. He asked our participants to describe the sonic environment in the prison and to depict these sounds in graphic notation. Together, we translated these into musical motifs. The clang of steps dropping from a sweat box (the bus used to transport



Tune translation: Hammond and Betteridge asked participants to describe their 'sonic environment', then translated each sound into musical motifs

people to prison) became three sonorous chords in the bass. Men shouting 'Gate!' to be let through to a different area of the prison was a discordant flourish in the treble. We experimented with a constant heartbeat motif that was interrupted frequently, to represent the rapid, unpredictable changes of atmosphere and emotion that shape the men's daily lives.

As we collaborated, I caught glimpses of the ways in which prison life differs from life outside. As most men share a cell, the chance to be alone is extremely rare. Situations can escalate very quickly, so both prisoners and staff need to be on high alert at all times. The inevitable constraints of the environment also mean that prisoners have very little agency, which can lead to significant psychological ramifications. In discussing the piece's structure, we experimented with the effect different musical forms exert on a narrative. Should the last bar imply closure, or hint at developments to come? Most men are aiming at release, but as it approaches emotions are mixed. We decided to express that strange blend of optimism, uncertainty and trepidation with an inconclusive final chord.

This project was demanding and exhausting, but



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as it progressed it was a real joy to see the change in the participants' body language. The men came from different wings so didn't know each other prior to the workshops, and many had no practical musical experience. We asked them to try new, and often unconventional, activities – performing rhythms together using boomwhackers or developing pitch sets on a glockenspiel – to which they responded with enthusiasm, seeming to enjoy the challenge. By the end, they looked more relaxed, laughing and joking together. They demonstrated respect for each other and negotiated decisions in a way that honoured everybody's contributions.

In our final workshop, I performed a two-minute draft of what is to be a five-minute piece. Even in embryonic form, I was impressed with how Michael managed to knit together a piece that made sense musically, yet also incorporated everybody's ideas. We are now preparing a concert for friends and family at which the men will hear the completed pieces for the first time, and receive a printed score and CD recording. While it is nerve-wracking to present them with our 'working out' of the initial draft, I believe that the final pieces do justice to our collaboration and the process that we shared.

In the past, I have worked frequently with contemporary composers, though my creative input is usually limited to commenting on the final score, suggesting ways in which their ideas could be notated more clearly. Prior to this project, I had never improvised in a group setting or developed compositional ideas in a way that could be described as genuinely collaborative. It was an exhilarating and

humbling experience to see how much creativity our participants possessed and how much a group can achieve, if everyone is listened to, feels included, and is treated with respect.

I have certainly created memories that will stay with me for life, and I hope that the same can be said of our participants. We are so grateful to them for their openness, to the librarians at Staffordshire Prison Library Services for making this possible, and to Changing Tunes, Storybook Dads and Theatre in Prisons and Probation for their advice and support.

This project was supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England. We are also grateful to the Gloucestershire Piano Trust, Marchus Trust and Leigh Day Solicitors for their support.

If you would like to hear these pieces in person, I shall be performing them live at recitals across the UK in the 2025-26 season. **CM**

Clare Hammond's next project, a recording of piano concertos by Walton, Britten and Tippett with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and George Vass, will be released on BIS Records on 10 October.

Above: Participants were encouraged to share their experiences through music and lyrics

Clare Hammond with (L-R) Prison Library service advisor for Staffordshire Alan Smith, HMP Featherstone librarian Adeline Fergus and composer Michael Betteridge

