

North Music Trust

The Sage Gateshead has put on the international cultural map a previously little celebrated town in the North East of England. During the same time that the building has become a landmark, it has also become increasingly known for its innovative work in building cohesion and integration for excluded groups of people across the 10,000 square miles of the North East and Cumbria, as well as through national initiatives.

As an integral part of its programme, North Music Trust, which runs The Sage Gateshead, has actively engaged a group of around 55 young people from refugee, asylum seeker and migrant backgrounds, as well as local peers to enable them to “broaden their horizons both socially and creatively”.

Youngsters aged between 13 and 20 have been participating in weekly sessions of Mongrel UK, a music and drama programme that enables them to explore identity and aspirations, cross cultural boundaries, challenge stereotypes about refugee communities and develop new skills – creative, administrative, social and personal.

Young people attend weekly workshops for 10 weeks at a time, during term time. They have had opportunities to share, research and rehearse music and drama productions, as well as collaborate with other arts organisations in the region: the group recently participated in *Elephant*, a production with Dodgy Clutch Theatre Productions at the Theatre Royal in Newcastle and had a chance to work with professional musicians from More Music in Morecambe.

The group has included participants from Afghanistan, Korea, Somalia, Kenya and France and represents 19 different ethnic origins. Most remarkable has been the opportunity it has provided for broadening the horizons and building the confidence of local young people, as well as their counterparts from other parts of the world. The parents of one girl talked about how the project had completely changed their daughter’s self-image, boosting her self-esteem to the point that she won an award at school.

But inevitably, some of the most moving stories of impact come from the participants. One 17 year old participant from Sierra Leone said: “When I first came to Newcastle in 2004 I felt very isolated and I didn’t have any friends and basically I wasn’t being myself. Some of the people were unfriendly and made no attempt to talk to me no matter how hard I tried to create a conversation and for about a year I didn’t seem to have any confidence.” As a result of being part of Mongrel UK he had gained respect and now felt integrated and had friends in the community.

The transformation has also been noted by project leaders, who have spoken of the importance of building sufficient confidence to “express themselves in a safe, comfortable space; to feel comfortable and safe to be themselves.”

Partners have paid tribute to the project too. Martyn Hudson of NERS (North of England Refugee Service), which has been a key project partner,

commented: “Mongrel UK has been a really important aspect of the regional work of the North of England Refugee Service. It links into our interest in providing meaningful experiences and personal benefits for young people around music and art, but more significantly, displays the value of the kind of partnership work that contributes to community integration, safer communities and the kinds of community cohesions built from below by young people working together to produce work that is communicative, creative and challenging.”

Plans for the project include developing partnerships to enrich the resources available to the group and encourage greater participation, as well as developing specific performance opportunities. Mongrel UK will present a new version of *Antigone* to be performed during The Sage Gateshead’s SummerTyne Festival in July 2008.

A Mongrel UK participant has joined The Sage Gateshead’s conservatoire-level training programme, The Weekend School. Two Mongrel UK participants are setting up their own music project with support from other musicians working for The Sage Gateshead.

Amanda Walker, Head of Development at The Sage Gateshead, said: “Mongrel UK plays an important role within our fully integrated Learning and Participation Programme that provides outstanding opportunities for making music to the widest number of people, as well as facilitates routes for talented people to progress to positive destinations. It is one strand within a horizon of opportunities available to people in the North East because of the organisation’s ongoing commitment to facilitating music learning opportunities for people from all backgrounds.”

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