

# **The Mussorgsky family project**

Ludger Hofmann-Engl  
Croydon Family Groups  
Croydon, Surrey, United Kingdom  
[ludger@croydonfamilygroups.org.uk](mailto:ludger@croydonfamilygroups.org.uk)

*In A. R. Addessi & S. Young (Eds) (2009). MERYC2009. Proceedings of the European Network of Music Educators and Researchers of Young Children, Bologna (Italy), 22<sup>nd</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> July 2009. Bologna. Bologna University Press*

## **Abstract**

The Mussorgsky Family Project was designed to bridge the gap between classical music and the general population. Over a period of 6 months 7 family groups (families with children under the age of 5) took part in this project which involved making a musical collage, partial improvisation on keyboards, glockenspiels and percussion instruments alongside Mussorgsky's Pictures At An Exhibition, attending a drum workshop in a recording studio, a live performance with recording, making a sculpture and attending a professional concert in central London. The evaluation of the project shows that this approach based on informal family learning has produced a very encouraging outcome. It also demonstrates that even very young children can take part in means-end collaborative music making.

## **Keywords**

means-end collaboration, partial improvisation, informal learning, family learning, popularizing classical music

## **Introduction**

Classical music is still inaccessible to large parts of the general population. In fact, the situation is considered to be so precarious that Miles & McLennan (2002) pose the question whether classical music is altogether dying by referring to the fact that every year more classical radio channels are forced to close down, and recent articles such as Jinny Kim's "Classical music: a different kind of art" (The Daily Cardinal, 7th May 2009) serve to confirm that there is an issue. This is despite the fact that institutions such as the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the Royal Opera and the Royal College of music have an active educational or/and outreach program (compare: RPO - Resound, spring 2009 issue). Attempts to reform the school system driven by the Orff Schulwerk and the Kodaly Method which ultimately resulted in a UK music curriculum which includes music performance, composition, listening and appraisal too have failed to bring about a change in modus operandi. The Mussorgsky Family Project was designed as a pilot project bridging the gap between classical music and the wider population.

## **Base Concepts of the Mussorgsky Family Project**

According to Young (2004) there are no studies except Young's which investigate the musical collaboration of young children. However, a study published by the National Center For Education

Statistics (2002) on the achievements of young children showed that those children who are being read to three times a week by their parents/carers outperform those children who do not enjoy this privilege. This is, the positive effect of informal and family learning has been observed. Hence, one of the base concepts for this project was to allow for informal and family learning.

Looking at the musical activities offered to families by the Royal Opera in April 2009, we find a Family Open Day (April the 14th 2009) and Compose Yourself (April the 15th 2009) as part of the Sounding Out for Families Project. However, so the author believes, that - as similar particular Compose Yourself was to parts of the Mussorgsky Family Project - isolated events are unlikely to have a long lasting impact. Therefore, it seemed advisable to design a project which would run over a time of half a year.

There exists a large corpus of research on the familiarity effect dating back to Maslow (1937) which indicates that people in general show a preference for familiar things. Particularly a study by Meineke (1997) is of interest, as it shows that unfamiliar elements are more readily detected if embedded within familiar elements. Hence, it seemed sensible to open the Mussorgsky Family Project with an activity the families were familiar with and to conclude it with a familiar activity.

During his time as head of music at the Link Schools, London (Beddington) between 2002 and 2006, the author experimented with the concept of partial improvisation. While the concept of partial improvisation has been employed by composers such as Schnittke (Serenade, 1968), the author is not aware that it has been used within the realm of formal or informal music education. At the time, the author instructed a group of pupils (mostly with ASD) to improvise alongside the Nirvana recording Something in the way (MTV unplugged in New York, 1994). The result was presented during an internal school concert and both the performers as well as the audience reported back on how much they had enjoyed the experience. Based on this, the Mussorgsky Family Project was to incorporate the concept of partial improvisation.

Finally, it was decided that, while the majority of the Mussorgsky Family Project was to take place at the venues where the families regularly meet, some events had to take place at different localities and required some mobility of the families involved.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The project was run within Croydon Family Groups. Croydon Family Groups consist of 7 groups which run 2 hours sessions during term time. They are open to any parent/carer with a child under the age of five. Families drop in and some of them attend the groups more frequently than others. Groups are led by a group leader who engages the parents with mainly crafts activities while the children are looked after in the same room by a play team. 46 families registered with the Mussorgsky Family Project and 28 returned the evaluation form. 3 of those evaluation forms returned were handed in anonymously and the remaining 24 evaluation forms were matched with the relevant registration form. All adult registrants were female. The mean age of the 25 matched registrants was 36 (  $\pm 6$  ) years, and their children were equally male/female with a mean age of 2.7 (  $\pm 0.9$  ) years. Some families appear to have dropped into Croydon Family Groups while the project was running and dropped out again before it was completed.

### ***Materials and Equipment***

Groups used paper, glue and mainly cuttings from catalogs to complete the collage. Two sculptures were made out of papier mache and two out of clay. For the music sessions within the groups, a CD player/laptop, 2 keyboards, 2 glockenspiels, 1 bongo, 1 African drum, 2 shakers, 2 tambourines and 1


cowbell were used. For the practice sessions at the office location, 2 microphones were added, and for the recording sessions at the Braithwaite Hall (Croydon Clock Tower) a grand piano. One drum session at Crown Lane Recording Studio made use of a variety of untuned drum instruments and the other session incorporated a piano as well.

### ***Procedure***

The master plan was divided into 6 phases and 2 music facilitators were appointed to support the groups when the tasks exceeded the expertise of the group leaders.

Phase 1: During three sessions parents shared their personal musical experiences, brought into the groups items of musical nature (e.g. pots and rubber bands) and were introduced to concepts of classical music and the time periods by the facilitators.

Phase 2: Group members were asked to bring in cuttings which were music related and to produce a collage with the help of children. This phase was to last 3 sessions.

Phase 3: This phase was planned over 7 sessions and was designed to bring the instruments into the groups to play alongside *Il vecchio castello* and *Bydło* from Mussorgsky's *Pictures* at an Exhibition. While participants were asked to focus on G# on the keyboards and glockenspiels for *Il vecchio castello*, they were instructed to drum and clap the rhythm  alongside *Bydło*. During this phase families were supposed to perform during an internal concert, attend 2 drum workshops in a recording studio and visit a Music & Activity Group at Wandsworth Common Cafe.

Phase 4: This phase was supposed to involve a dress rehearsal during the afternoon at the Braithwaite Hall and an evening concert alongside the performance of the original version of Mussorgsky's *Pictures* at an Exhibition. It was planned to have this concert recorded.

Phase 5: In order to return to their routine of craft-based activities, this phase was designed to produce a clay sculpture based on a piece taken from Mussorgsky's *Pictures* at an exhibition. This phase was to last 5 sessions.

Phase 6: During the final phase it was hoped to have music students to come to Croydon Family Groups and to demonstrate their instruments to the families. The project was to be completed with a trip to a concert in central London (Southbank Centre).

### **Results**

Phase 1: It is interesting to observe that the groups were as diverse as were the approach of the two facilitators. While facilitator A made the attempt to follow the master plan, facilitator B followed his own plan. As a result, one group became very disgruntled and opted for a largely non-cooperative response. In a second group attendance started to drop and a third group was “rescued” by facilitator A. At the time, one group suffered from low attendance as it was, and communication with the families was difficult due to a great variety of spoken languages. However, one group stood out exceptionally well with one mother having completed piano grade 8 and another one being from Nashville and member of a country band. Yet another mother of this group had emigrated to the UK from Iran and never had had music lessons before.

Phase 2: Three of the 7 groups produced a collage while two other groups misunderstood the task and produced a collage of a person instead. One group did not produce a collage due to low attendance and the collage of group 7 has not been delivered to the office of Croydon Family Groups. Below is the collage of the group which overall showed most interest in this project (figure 1):



Figure 1. Collage as produced by one group during phase 2

According to the evaluation (participants who had registered and returned their evaluation), 1 participant did not like working on the collage, 4 liked it a bit, 5 liked it a lot and 6 didn't take part. The other participants made no statement. Of the three anonymous evaluations, 1 participant enjoyed taking part another one didn't and the third one didn't take part. The ratio between participants who liked taking part and who did not like taking part was 10 : 2. Thus we conclude that phase 1 was successful in terms of preparing participants for phase 2 and that the vast majority of participants who took part during this phase enjoyed working on the collage.

Phase 3: A number of elements during this phase had to be altered. Firstly, the trip to Wandsworth Common Cafe did not take place because after initial contacts, Wandsworth Common Cafe disengaged from contact with Croydon Family Groups. Only one trip to the recording studio took place as no suitable date for the second trip could be found. The second trip took place during phase 5.

It also became clear that the initial plan to have families perform alongside the entire composition in the evening during phase 4 would be inappropriate because of the age group of children. Thus the plan to have an internal concert was altered to having 2 practice sessions, record the families involved at the Braithwaite Hall in the afternoon during phase 4 and to hold a concert proper with Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition in the evening.

During this phase, the musical equipment was brought three times into every group. For the piece Il veccico castello, the two keyboards and two glockenspiels were used alongside the percussion instruments. For the piece Bydło only the percussion instruments were used. The original pieces were played back using the CD player/laptop via the PA system.

The vast majority of children showed great interest in the music and the instruments and were enthusiastic about taking part. While the parents tended to be more reluctant to join in, they eventually did and performed confidently alongside their children and the original music. At times, participants found it difficult to remember g# on the keyboard which led the facilitators to mark the g#s with stickers. However, in one group the parents showed little interest even when the children did. Apparently, someone had described Mussorgsky's music as too heavy and depressing, and this had an overall negative impact on this group. Still, out all all groups 10 families agreed to come to 2 practice sessions at the office which the author considers a good outcome. During those practice sessions older siblings and several fathers took part as well, and all parties involved found this to be a great



experience.

The trip to the recording studio was a very popular item. Out of the registrants who returned their evaluation forms, 2 said that they were not interested in it, 11 wanted to come but could not make it, 10 actually came along (the maximum number we could accommodate) and the 5 out of those who returned their evaluation form said that they liked it a lot. The three anonymous replies indicate 2 who could not make it and 1 who had no interest. The ratio between participants who were interest and the participants who were not interested was 22 : 2. The recording of the drum workshop made during phase 3 can be downloaded from:

<http://www.croydonfamilygroups.org.uk/resources/CFG+Drums.mp3>

Phase 4: Phase 4 took place on the 8th of January 2009 at the Braithwaite Hall(Croydon Clock Tower). For the afternoon session, 10 families turned up including some fathers, siblings and friends. All in all there were 30 participants. These participants were divided into three groups and both pieces from Pictures at an Exhibition were rehearsed with each group and subsequently recorded by Crown Lane Studio. The session was monitored by a CALAT observer and supported by a play leader and group leader. The author played the original music on the grand piano alongside the families. Figure 2 shows one group performing Il vecchio castello and figure 3 another group performing Bydło.



Figure 2. One group performing Il vecchio castello



IFigure 3. Another group performing Bydło

4 Parents who had been to the afternoon recording session came back to the evening concert. Tickets were on general and internal sale and the money raised was returned into the funds of the charity. The recording of Il vecchio castello can be downloaded from:

[http://www.croydonfamilygroups.org.uk/resources/Il\\_Veccio\\_Castello.mp3](http://www.croydonfamilygroups.org.uk/resources/Il_Veccio_Castello.mp3)

The author can report back that the atmosphere of this event was full of excitement and joy. The results from the evaluation form show that 2 participants had no interest in coming to this event, 12 wanted to come but could not make it. Out of the returned forms nobody disliked it, one participant liked it a bit and 3 liked it a lot. Two of the anonymous evaluations show no interest while one could not make it. The ratio between interest and no interest was 23 : 4.

Phase 5: During this phase the author went to all groups and handed out a copy of the CD to everyone. All 60 copies except 1 have been taken. Five families expressed directly how thrilled they were about the CD with one family requesting a second copy. However, a large number of participants did not remark on the CD on their evaluation forms. Out of the registered participants who remarked on the CD, 3 stated that it was rubbish, 3 found it okay, 2 found it good and 1 found it brilliant. One of the anonymous evaluations states that the CD was good and the other two do not comment. None of the participants who considered the CD to be rubbish participated during the recording and one expressed no interest in participating. The ratio between rubbish and okay or better was 3 : 7. However, the author is fully aware that to those families who participated, the CD is a precious memento. So far, two of the clay sculptures and the papier mache bust of Mussorgsky have arrived in the office (figure 4). The production of the second papier mache bust was observed by a CALAT official and by the author. Participants clearly enjoyed the work.



Figure 4. Mussorgsky's bust as modeled by one of the participating groups

Of the evaluation forms which arrived in the office, 9 participants stated that they did not take part during the sculpturing, 2 liked it a bit and 3 liked it a lot. Nobody disliked it.

Phase 6: Both the Royal College of Music and the Royal Academy of Music were approached as well

as Croydon Music Service to encourage students to visit our groups. There was an initial response from the outreach officer at the Royal College that a note would be put up. There was neither a response from the Royal Academy of Music nor from the Croydon Music Service and no further communication between the Royal College and Croydon Family Groups. Hence, the idea of sending students into our groups had to be scrapped. The project came to a conclusion on the 29th of March 2009 with 5 participants attending a concert at the Southbank Centre (Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra performing the 3rd symphony by Beethoven amongst others). Two of the participants who came along felt the urge to add their own comments to the questionnaire saying that the event was “fantastic” and “most enjoyable”. All other participants simply could not make it. One of the anonymous evaluations states no interest.

## **Overall Result**

Asked whether they now liked classical music more, 6 participants liked it more now, 9 the same and 3 less. Further being asked whether they had learned anything, 5 stated that they had learned nothing, 6 that they had learned a little and 7 that they had learned a lot. Finally, when asked how they would rate to project as a whole, 10 participants rated it as excellent, 4 as good, 7 as okay and 2 as poor.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly, the Mussorgsky Family Project has been a goof success. Families enjoyed working together and felt at ease when confronted with classical music. Even the very young children were able to take part during the means- end collaboration in phase 2, 3 and 4. The recording can serve as proof that partial improvisation with families with young children is not only enjoyable but of a good standard. The evaluation demonstrates that parents have gained knowledge through this informal learning project and that it has been successful in popularizing classical music. The adaption of the master plan proved to be sensible and enhanced the quality of the project. However, there are three areas where there is room for improvement. Firstly, many families found it difficult to find additional time particularly around the Christmas period. It probably would be better to start a project of this kind in January. Parents expressed throughout the project that they would have liked to attend the concert in central London. Perhaps, it would have been helpful to plan the concert trip longer ahead and to support parents to find child care for the evening of this event. However, the area which needs most work is to do with networking. Quite clearly organisations are still very reluctant to collaborate. It might be necessary to actually go to these organisations rather than to phone or email them.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The Mussorgsky Family Project was carried out by Croydon Family Groups and was sponsored by the National Lottery via CALAT.

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