

CONFERENCE REPORT OPEN ACCESS

Hear My Music Conference – ‘Embedding equity: Inclusive by design’

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Conference information

Title: Hear My Music Conference – ‘Embedding equity: Inclusive by design’

Dates: 7 June 2025

Organiser: Hear My Music

Location: Glasgow, United Kingdom

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Introduction

This was the first conference organised by the Scottish charity Hear My Music. Hear My Music was founded in 2010 and aims to support “people with complex needs and/or autism to express themselves as individuals through inclusive, participant-led music making” (Hear My Music, 2025a). The theme of the conference was ‘Embedding Equity: Inclusive by Design’ and it was advertised as “open to anyone working within, or with an interest in, inclusive music practice and inclusive education” (Hear My Music, 2025b). The venue was The Social Hub, Glasgow, United Kingdom.

The conference was small and in-person with a varied population from music-related professions in attendance. This included community musicians, music improvisers, accessible music practitioners, music teachers, music therapists, and music therapy trainees, all with a strong local presence. This amounted to 37 delegates, including seven presenters and Hear My Music musicians, and four Hear My Music staff members.

I currently deliver music therapy in an Additional Support Needs school where Hear My Music facilitate music sessions. I was motivated to attend the conference to find out more about the overlap of our practices and the potential for knowledge exchange. I was hopeful for engagement with systemic issues affecting disabled people’s access to music, potentially highlighting solutions or approaches for delegates to consider within their own practices.

Organisers and funders

The conference was funded by Creative Scotland's Youth Music Initiative Continued Professional Development and Training fund, which supports individuals and organisations to provide opportunities for continued professional development for music practitioners working with young people. This enabled Hear My Music to share their work and nourish the development of other practitioners. The Hear My Music organising team for the conference were Emily Carr (Creative Director), Morag Currie (Development Officer), Laura Leslie (Project Manager), and Noanie Heffron (Administrator).

Programme

The conference was varied and stimulating with plenty of musical performances and spoken presentations throughout the day.



Photograph 1: Leia Gobbi and Hear My Music practitioner Matt Todd at the keyboard



Photograph 2: Marcus McGuire accompanied by Hear My Music practitioner Oliver Hawker on guitar

The first presentation was given by Beth Black and Struan Robb. Beth Black is an ex-employee of Hear my Music, currently undertaking doctoral research trialling a new inclusive college music course which accommodates disabled students. Struan Robb made music with Beth and multiple Hear My Music practitioners throughout his childhood and now is the sole participant in Beth's doctoral research.

Struan shared his perspective on being a disabled student and songwriter and the importance of receiving access support for college. He performed two original songs which showcased his commanding voice and unique lyric writing. Beth shared the frustrations and triumphs observed within her research of Struan's student experience, summarising that wider hurdles such as financial access to social support and entry requirements for education providers were hindering any meaningful progression towards inclusive music learning. A poignant learning was how the college staff and students gained by way of Struan's participation, as he was likely to offer a significantly contrasting perspective to the main class group, and additionally would require an alternative method of explanation of which he was not the sole beneficiary.



Photograph 3: Struan Robb presenting

The keynote presentation was delivered by Hear My Music's patron Professor Adam Ockelford, a leading voice on inclusive music education in the UK. Adam shared his contributions towards creating the Sounds of Intent model of musical development (Sounds of Intent, 2025). I could see some similarities here with music therapy assessment scales. The model provides a rating scale, numbered 1 to 6, enabling practitioners to assess the nature of an individual's musical output in three key areas: proactive, reactive, and interactive (see Sounds of Intent, 2025). Corresponding terminology was offered for these

different levels of musical ability: delegates were shown a video example of a child who was considered a "sound-maker" (rated level 1-2), contrasted with another child who was considered a "pattern-maker" (rated level 3).

Adam also shared his recent publication, *Count Me In!* (Ockelford et al., 2023), a resource pack for inclusive music making with children and young people which is informed by the Sounds of Intent framework. A video was shared demonstrating *Count Me In!* within a specialist primary school. Pupils engaged in a musical activity at varying levels depending on their educational and sensory needs. In one classroom, a song from the resource pack was played on the speakers whilst pupils engaged in activities related to the lyrics, which were about water play. In another classroom, pupils engaged with a song which had been broken down into its constituent parts and they were able to stop and start these using the interactive board. The school-wide use of *Count Me In!* was seen as an indicator of the resource's efficacy and impact. However, I noted that the school's Head of Inclusion is a co-author of *Count Me In!*; a close connection which clearly influenced both the decision to adopt the approach and the perceived success of its integration.

An emotive presentation was given by Hear My Music board member Mary Bell, a disabled musician, practitioner, and teacher who has been a pioneering force in the development of music education for d/Deaf people. Mary charted her path through many adverse experiences, including her loss of hearing as an adult due to meningitis. Mary described the years that followed as "trying to get back to music through adversity", which led her to teach d/Deaf children to play music. Mary's examples demonstrated that these children's participation in music was more than simply learning how to play: it was a boost to their self-confidence as they defied others' expectations. Mary's emphasis on learning music for reasons beyond academic achievement has clear relevance to music therapy practice and nods to the disputed boundary between aspects of music therapy and music education (Bunt, 2003; Robertson, 2000; Roman, 2016; Salvador & Pasiali, 2016). Mary summarised by advocating that "music is not about your ears, it is about your heart" and encouraged everyone in the room to "have tenacity in everything you do".

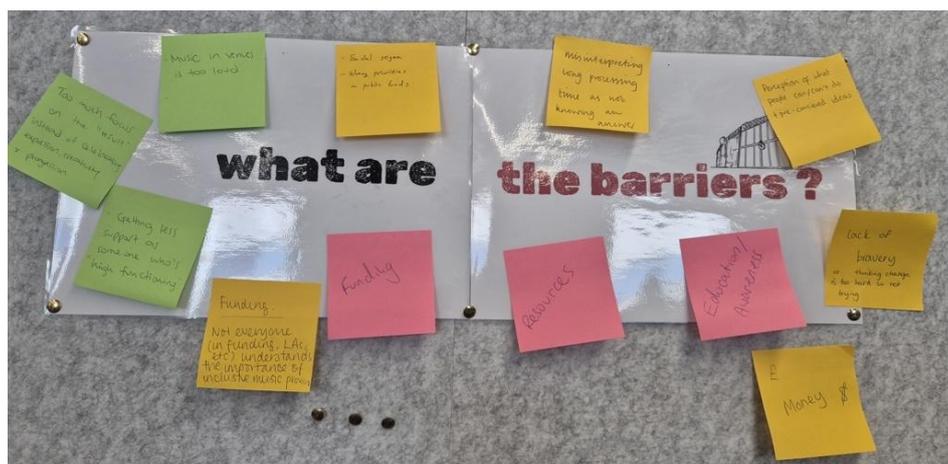
Towards the end of the day there was a livestreamed appearance from well-known autistic and disabled pianist Derek Paravicini. Adam Ockelford, who has played a significant role in Derek's musical development, led the session. Derek demonstrated his ability to take song requests and play arrangements of them in any musical style, even if he has only heard the song once before.

This session demonstrated what spectacular things happen when disabled people have access to music. However, I felt some discomfort at the 'objectification' of Derek for our awe. I was struck by the fact that Adam was Derek's voice for much of the session and told him when to start and stop playing, often raising his voice over Derek's playing and explaining to delegates that "otherwise he'll carry on forever". This did not feel like Derek's own presentation: the group was liberally interpreting and projecting some form of inspiration onto Derek in our own preferred time and manner, rather than seeking out his thoughts on the conference theme.

It is recognised that sharing examples "of a disabled person doing something that non-disabled viewers perceive as being extraordinary" as a source of inspiration is a form of objectification coined as 'inspiration porn' (Grue 2016; Haller & Preston, 2017; Young, 2012; 2014). Bell and Rathgeber (2020) suggest that although this often involves the disabled person simply performing an everyday activity, "the activity is cast by a nondisabled viewer/listener as something to marvel at, as something that tugs at the heartstrings, as something wholly unexpected due to a problematic assumption of a disabled person's abilities and humanity" (p.582).

I therefore would have liked to hear more about Derek's personal experiences of disability, inclusion, and access within his musical career, rather than the group of delegates making assumptions about these experiences based on their perception of disability more broadly. I felt that this would have had more relevance to the theme of the conference and would have provided more direct learning points for delegates.

Panel discussions



Photograph 4: Sticky notes surround a central provocation: What are the barriers [to embedding equity]?

Throughout the day, delegates were encouraged to reflect on and write down (on sticky notes) their experiences of the reality of embedding equity and inclusivity. In the afternoon, these sticky notes were collected and collated for a panel discussion entitled: "What does a truly inclusive music world

look like?”. Panel members were the aforementioned presenters Mary Bell, Adam Ockelford, Beth Black, as well as Hear My Music’s Creative Director Emily Carr, Hear My Music Chair of the Board of Trustees Moyra Hawthorn, and Struan Robb’s mother Helen Robb.

In this panel discussion, several key points of interest were raised:

- Equity and inclusivity should go beyond simply putting people with differing needs in one room and should champion bespoke facilitation.
- Listen to and learn from those whom inequity directly affects.
- Musicality in the UK is currently exclusive and dominated by preconceptions of talent and skill.
- Pathways into music are increasingly vanishing, yet these early experiences are essential for flourishing later.
- Barriers to music access include funding and attitudes, which are underpinned by an ignorance regarding preconceptions of what disabled people are able to do.
- There was recognition of the consensus in the room, and so next steps might be to bring these conversations to people who can influence systemic change.

Accessibility

Conference tickets were accessibly priced as ‘pay what you feel’ with a suggestion of between £10 and £30. The organisers also offered a Travel Buddy scheme to support access to the venue. The organisers arranged for live captioning displayed on a large screen throughout the day. The venue was located in the city centre near public transport and a large car park. It was encouraging to witness a small charity implementing features of accessibility which are often missing at larger, more expensive conferences.

Since the conference, Hear My Music has produced a limited-edition resource called *The Little Book of Hear My Music*, which contains reflections on embedding equity into music provision as well as practical tips and activities for practitioners. This is available through their website at the following webpage: <https://hearmymusic.org.uk/2025/06/27/june-newsletter/>

Closing reflections

The conference presented me with an opportunity to reflect on the themes of inclusivity and equity within music therapy, and how these are informed by ever-changing definitions of health, disability, and productivity. As a music therapist interested in social and cultural perspectives of health and the influence of medicalised language and systems on the music therapy profession, I found it interesting that this community seemed united in not seeing individual difference as a problem to be overcome using music but were instead interested in creating pathways of access to music within society. This encouraged me to reflect on the existence of various medical, social, and holistic perspectives on disability, how these influence understandings of ‘therapy’ in our work, and how this might disrupt or oppress opportunities for equitable music-making.

This was a meaningful event for the accessible music practitioner community in Glasgow, and I look forward to future opportunities to come together, reflect, and attend to the social issues that are woven into the fabric of our work. My heartfelt thanks to Hear My Music for paving the way for these conversations.

Author information

Stella Hadjineophytou (she/they) is a music therapist working for Nordoff and Robbins in Glasgow, Scotland, and a doctoral student at Nordoff and Robbins/Goldsmiths, University of London. Stella has experience of delivering music therapy in a wide range of settings, including care homes, psychiatric care, educational institutions, and with victims of trafficking. Stella is interested in writing about and researching disability and access in music therapy practice. Stella is currently the Co-Chair of the Scottish Music Therapy Trust.

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Photographs taken by the author and Hear My Music with permissions for inclusion in this report.

Author contributions

Stella Hadjineophytou is the sole author of this paper and is responsible for the conceptualisation, writing (original draft), and further edits. Some of the photos featured in this paper were taken by Hear My Music staff and permission was given to include these.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) usage

No AI was used at any point.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to report.

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