

# Performing Recoveries

An evaluation of New Note Orchestra



# Contributions

Thank you to all interviewees who gave their time, thoughts and experiences to the project.

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## A note from the researcher

It was a pleasure to work with the musicians and organisers of New Note Orchestra. In a project where ownership of output was so central to the group, it felt important to privilege the musician's ideas and input throughout the process, including in the language of the final report.

I felt that joining in on practices and interviewing with the sound of rehearsals in the background provided me with some genuine insight into the world of a New Note musician. Through having open, two-way conversations with musicians throughout the process, I hope I was able to form a genuine connection with the people who make the orchestra what it is.

The final report is intended for supporters, funders, commissioners and anyone else who is interested in exactly how New Note supports the recoveries of its members. But perhaps more importantly, it's for the musicians themselves to have a clear articulation of exactly what they think New Note is contributing to their continued recoveries.

# Contents

Quick summary .....1

Introduction .....2

Methods .....3

Findings.....5

    The local recovery community.....5

    Why music matters .....6

        A safe space for developing well being .....7

    Playing together.....8

    Safety .....9

What makes us unique? .....11

# Quick summary

Maintaining a recovery from drug or alcohol addiction is one of the biggest challenges a person could face. New Note Orchestra offers people facing this challenge an opportunity to improvise, practice and perform music with no need for prior musical experience. But in an environment... With multiple recovery groups and meetings, what can New Note provide its members that similar groups cannot?

Using material from 9 interviews with orchestra members and 2 interviews with orchestra organisers, the answer to this question fitted into 5 key areas: the local recovery community, the music itself, being affected, the structure of the group, and maintaining safety.

New Note Orchestra was found to be closely linked to other recovery activities in the area, particularly other creative groups. Musicians often (but not always) attended these groups before coming to New Note. Commonly, musicians in the orchestra who had been to more formal groups felt the need for talking about their previous lives had lessened, and they were ready for a creative activity to support them in their ongoing recoveries.

Attending the orchestra was also creating a new self-image for members. Where once members might have self-identified as 'addict' or 'alcoholic', with regular participation in the group they increasingly self-identified

as 'musicians'. Musicians felt that the conductor knew how to get the best from them in improvisation, and that they had a more intuitive knowledge of music as a result. Musicians were proud of the musical pieces which originated from improvisation sessions, because it was something that was created as a collective.

Musicians often talked about how being a part of the orchestra affected them, and its role in helping them to explore complex emotions. The dynamics of playing and performing in a group were also translated to other areas of life, which were benefiting orchestra members and their recoveries.

The complex dynamics that take place within practices and performances would not have space to form without all parties feeling that they were in a safe and supportive space. The orchestra members and organisers worked together to ensure new members were warmly welcomed, barriers to access were removed, and people were encouraged to engage fully with the group.



## Introduction

The New Note Orchestra is a non-profit project based in Brighton & Hove. They aim to support people who have faced addiction issues by making music together and performing their compositions. The group meets weekly with around 15 members in a session, playing instruments and singing, guided by their conductor. There is no need to have any musical experience to be a part of the group. The orchestra uses improvisation to shape unique pieces of music as a collective. These pieces are often performed alongside orchestra members sharing their stories and being asked questions by audiences.

The number of people successfully completing treatment for drug and alcohol misuse continues to decline nationally<sup>1</sup>. Public Health England suggests that on



average just 46% of people complete their initial treatment, a figure that drops to 26% for those who misuse opiates<sup>ii</sup>. These success stories can reduce even further over time as some people face relapses and adapting to a life without substances. Creative spaces like New Note Orchestra often support people who have ~~completed the first phases of their recovery, but could~~ still benefit from a recovery-affiliated groups in order to sustain their progress.

Exactly how such groups contribute to people's continued mental wellness and recovery is currently under researched. The literature on creative arts interventions is often focused on a wide range of artistic endeavours, with specific groups of people such as young adults, people with dementia, or people with depression. Links have been made to the ability of music to support recovery from trauma<sup>iii</sup>. Although to date no work focuses specifically on recovery, systematic reviews that are available seem to provide support for arts interventions enhancing mood, self-awareness<sup>iv</sup>, intrapersonal and social skills generally<sup>v</sup>.

Although New Note does not provide an intentionally therapeutic space, literature on music therapy is often closely associated with New Note's work. Articles on improvisation suggest that it is an effective intervention to reduce performance anxiety in musicians<sup>viii</sup>. Those that make reference to recoveries specifically indicate that music could improve engagement in more traditional, CBT based therapies during initial treatment

stages<sup>viii</sup>. All these findings provide support for the value of interventions such as New Note Orchestra, but cannot articulate specifically how music creation might sustain post-treatment recoveries from addiction.

The orchestra is situated in an area with a thriving non-profit sector. The South East has the highest amount of non-profit organisations per person anywhere outside of London<sup>ix</sup>. Brighton and Hove is particularly notable for its non-profit sector, and its wide selection of groups and activities for people in recovery from drug and alcohol misuse. New Note Orchestra is one of many projects which are supporting people to maintain their recoveries in the community. In this context, what can New Note provide its members that comparable groups cannot?

Everyone has a unique and personal relationship to recovery, and to the activities that help to sustain that recovery through difficult times. In finding some commonality of experiences in the orchestra, it is hoped that the project will be better able to articulate the contribution it makes to a thriving local recovery community.

## Methods

The data was gathered through nine interviews with New Note Orchestra members, and two interviews with orchestra organisers. The interviews were between 30 and 60 minutes, and were semi-structured, leaving room

for the musicians to talk about what was important to them. The interviews were typed up and analysed using thematic analysis by a team of two researchers. The interviews were supplemented by visits to gigs and practice sessions.



# Findings



## The recovery community

New Note Orchestra is based in a city which is considered to have a thriving recovery community. Groups for people recovering from drug and alcohol addiction range from more formal support such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings (AA and NA), to more informal, creative spaces which are led by members of the community themselves. The majority of musicians who were interviewed took part in at least some other recovery activities, or related wellbeing activities locally. Some of those interviewed had also taken a guiding role for people new to recovery as support workers, sponsors and volunteers.

**‘RECOVERY IS SUCH A BIG THING IN BRIGHTON’**

The musicians that were interviewed often found New Note through more informal, community-led recovery groups. The most common way to hear about the orchestra was through being a part of the musical recovery scene, often through Cascade Recovery Choir and open mic sessions<sup>x</sup>. However, this was not the case for everyone. New Note was also discovered through AA meetings, drug and alcohol workers, or related work and

volunteering, indicating that orchestra members had varied roads in to joining the group.

As well as gaining musicians through the local recovery community, New Note also provides a space for its musicians to meet like-minded people, build skills and reducing anxieties about creative group work. Many musicians were more involved in other recovery activities and groups as a result of their time with New Note. One musician even talked about forming their own creative group because of their time with the orchestra.

**‘IT WAS THE FIRST MAJOR STEP I TOOK, THEN THAT HAS BEEN THE CATALYST FOR ME TO GET INVOLVED IN OTHER THINGS’**

Because the musicians were often active in a number of different groups, there was a need to manage their time well. When they felt it was important for their recoveries, some musicians took time away from New Note to attend more formal meetings like AA. Conversely, some attended New Note as an alternative meetings like these. The most commonly shared view was that after intensive periods of attending formal meetings in the earlier stages of their recovery, many orchestra members simply felt ‘talked out’, or that they had largely said that they needed to say in formal meetings. New Note was one of the creative groups in the city which could provide some non-verbal space for continual reflection and personal development, and a new way to articulate recovery. For

many it felt like a space where the focus was on the present and the future, rather than on the past.



## Why music matters

The majority of orchestra members mentioned a previous connection with music, which often started from childhood. These connections took different forms; some people hadn't played since childhood, others stopped when they started taking drugs or drinking, and some kept playing throughout their lives. One person had never picked up an instrument before joining the orchestra. The emphasis on welcoming all abilities to join to the orchestra allowed this range of experience to feel welcome and able to contribute.

Orchestra members commonly felt that being a part of the group was developing their skills as musicians. They noted improvements in their sense of rhythm—and building a more instinctive knowledge of their instruments. They felt that these improvements were down to the combination of weekly practice and a focus on improvisation and improvisation exercises. The development of these skills were valued by musicians not only because development had its own inherent worth, but also because it enhanced the quality of non-verbal communication that could be used to connect with the group.

'BEFORE I PUT MY FINGER THERE BECAUSE I KNEW IT WAS  
IN THE RIGHT KEY, NOW I KNOW WHAT NOISE IS GOING TO  
COME OUT'

Notably, the orchestra members identified themselves first and foremost as musicians, over other possible identifiers like 'in recovery' or 'addict'. This is an example of how new identities were being formed through music creation. There is no set space to talk explicitly about recoveries in practice sessions - a format was supported by everyone who was interviewed. As mentioned in the previous section, many members feel that they have already come through extensive periods of talking about their recovery (or else have alternative spaces for this), and are ready for new activities and challenges. Others provided simpler explanations - we're just too busy making music to talk about our recovery or to think about ourselves as addicts. The act of working together to create music in the here and now had become a priority over other identities.

'WE ARE NOT ADDICTS WE ARE MUSICIANS'

The music that is performed by the orchestra is created by the orchestra. Small musical phrases or sections created through improvisation are developed and worked on through the conductor to create an original piece, which is owned by the orchestra members themselves. The exercises the group use to refine these pieces include matching people for call and response, working with different rhythms, and encouragement to listen to and match the styles being generated. These activities develop a keen sensitivity to sound and an ability to

respond to the group's soundscape, which contributes to a sense of cohesion in the group. Orchestra members felt their conductor was highly skilled at bringing out material from improvisation and working with the group to make it into a whole piece of music.

'YOU INTERWEAVE ALL THESE DIFFERENT IDEAS AND AT THE END OF IT WE CAN SAY 'WE WROTE THAT''

Having ownership of the music the orchestra produces was seen as a high priority by the musicians. Being able to see their musical contributions bought together and formed into a finished piece was something musicians felt proud to be a part of. Many felt that this ownership was something which truly distinguished New Note from other recovery groups and activities in the local area.



## A safe space for developing well being

Practices and performances were often described in emotional terms, where orchestra members felt moved by their activities. Some players talked about arriving to practices feeling flat or tired. After sessions, the same individuals left feeling creative and energised in a way that often lasted into the rest of the week. Some even drew parallels with 'highs' generated from their former addictions, but felt the emotion generated through the

orchestra was an example of how to experience positive emotions without the need for substances. Performances were often seen an extension of this positive emotion, with feedback from the audience and the inclusion of sharing recovery stories making those spaces still more affective.

'I GET SUCH A BUZZ OUT OF GOING TO REHEARSALS FOR NEW NOTE, IT TAKES ME ABOUT TWO HOURS JUST TO WIND DOWN'

Improvising was often described as a way of speaking without words, used to communicate with each other and the wider world. Some orchestra members talked about improvisation as a 'blow out', giving examples of where the group had been conducted to play anything, as loudly as possible. These kinds of exercises allowed players to connect to feeling free and expressing emotions non-verbally, through their playing. Call and response exercises also encouraged individual musicians to both express their own personalities, and to react and work with other people's personalities and emotions.

'WE WERE SITTING THERE GRINNING, HAVING A CONVERSATION MORE FLUENT THAN WE'VE HAD WITH WORDS'

Several orchestra members talked about being numbed to more subtle emotions and feelings when they were in active addiction. These complex feelings were starting to emerge again thanks to their recoveries, but these could be challenging to manage. The orchestra was providing them a way to explore these subtler emotions again safely





and gently, through a non-verbal medium. Examples of these more subtle emotions were an acceptance of the 'here and now', and finding peace with incomplete work or imperfections. These examples all seem to illustrate a developing emotional sensitivity and awareness generated through the shared creation of music.

'THE MUSIC IS UNKNOWN AND A BIT SCARY AND ONCE YOU START GETTING YOURSELF STRAIGHT, THAT'S UNKNOWN AND SCARY TOO'



## Playing together

Aside from the emotional connection to music and the ins and outs of developing musical skills, the practicalities of working and performing together were also valued by the orchestra members.

The majority of those interviewed valued learning more about the importance of listening to and working with others in the group. Many musicians felt they had a tendency to try to make own their own ideas too prominent, without trying to fit into the wider sound being created. Some reflected that this tendency was common for those in recovery generally. Orchestra members felt that musicians playing too loudly in improvisation sessions was a sign of underdeveloped listening skills. With facilitation from the conductor, the musicians believed they had all progressed in finding a way to best contribute to improvisations without trying to take over. One musician talked about singing exercises,

and the power they had to bring the group together and focus as a collective at the start of practice sessions.

Refocusing on responding to sound and energy in the space was prominent for many musicians. Organisers commented that newer members of the orchestra often came in to the group with scattered and animated verbal communication, which settled into more relaxed patterns over time. This is a reflection of how facilitated musical practices were translating non-verbal work into skills in the verbal, social world.

‘YOU NEED TO SIT, LISTEN, PLAY YOUR PART IN A WHOLE.  
NOT HAVING TO BE THE CENTRE ALL THE TIME, BECAUSE YOUR  
TIME WILL COME’

The idea of ‘playing your part’ in a wider environment was also mentioned in reference to preparations and packing down before and after gigs. Musicians talked about how they enjoyed carrying out logistical plans as a group, including getting to venues, setting up and packing away. These practical jobs were seen by some as the same mechanism as improvisation – contributing meaningfully to wider goal. Another key part in making this happen was to allow others to complete their tasks unhindered.

‘IS MY BIT TO DO, AND THAT’S YOUR BIT TO DO, AND IF  
YOU WANT HELP WITH YOUR BIT I HAVE TO DO IT ON YOUR  
TERMS’

These practicalities of working in a group seemed to be generating reflections and applications to other areas of life. Lessons from the space had real-world implications for musicians. Some examples of these changes included feeling better able to let things go, listening to others rather than waiting to talk, and being okay with not being able to help others until they were ready. These developments seem to be organically formed from experiences and reflections within the space.

‘I’VE GOT TWO CHILDREN AT HOME, AND I’M JUST PART OF  
THE ORCHESTRA – I JUST PLAY THE PARENT’



## Safety

A clear message from all of the orchestra members interviewed was that they always felt safe and supported during their time with the orchestra. Keeping the space safe is a shared responsibility of the orchestra members and the organisers. Without this foundation of safety, it’s unlikely that many of the positive impacts people have experienced through being an orchestra member would have the right conditions to take place.

The first few sessions were considered a crucial time for new orchestra members. If their introduction to the group did not feel safe, many said they would never have returned. In these threshold moments, everyone that was interviewed mentioned the warmth of welcome by

both musicians and organisers as a key reason they chose to come back. Equally important was the no pressure approach to taking part – the freedom to just watch and join in on their own terms over several sessions. This reinforced respect and support for potential new members.

‘THE FIRST COUPLE OF WEEKS WASN’T REALLY ABOUT THE MUSIC, IT WAS ABOUT SOAKING UP THE ATMOSPHERE’

Another important element of safety was the freedom to explore and respond to improvised sound freely in practice spaces. This allowed musicians to become more attentive to the quality and characteristics of sounds when developing new work. This was not only reassuring for new members, but also made the orchestra inclusive to those with less musical experience. On the foundations of this approach, musicians also felt encouraged to try new instruments and ways of playing that they may not have otherwise engaged in, to find what suited them best.

A number of orchestra members talked about how organisers would work quickly to remove any perceived barriers to taking part. Any instrument that musicians were interested in was found for them, if an instrument wasn’t working for someone, they swapped. This focus on inclusivity is in contrast to the isolation that many of its members had experienced during their time in active addiction. This type of facilitation resulted in members

feeling supported musically, and their contributions valued in emerging work by the group.

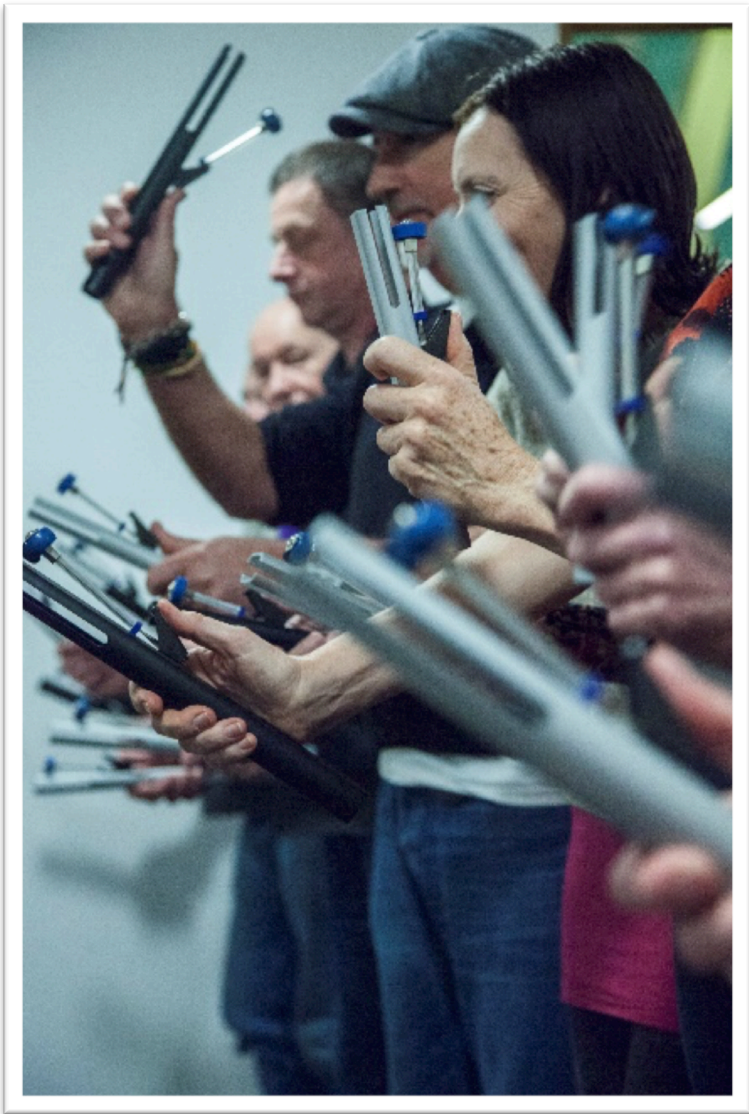
‘I SAID IF YOU CAN GET HOLD OF A FLUTE I’LL COME. WITHIN A WEEK THEY HAD THREE FLUTES, SO I DIDN’T REALLY HAVE ANY EXCUSES ANYMORE’

Many potential issues were addressed by the conductor through their planning and approach to the work, stopping problems before they arose. Providing everyone the opportunity to solo and have more focus on them and their instrument meant that musicians were less inclined to worry about ‘getting a chance’ and playing over others. For more anxious members, this also encouraged people to push themselves and play more prominently. Musicians also felt that the conductor modelled patience and encouragement with members who were struggling with particular pieces, which further reinforced in the group.

‘HE NURTURES YOU, SAYS “YOU CAN DO IT”, HE EASES YOU OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE’

Although talking about recovery explicitly is not a part of New Note’s rehearsals, recoveries are still supported by musicians and organisers. The group wanted to ‘be there’ for people who are feeling insecure in their recoveries, in whatever ways were meaningful to the person. Orchestra members talked about times when members had relapsed and attended practices under the influence of drugs or alcohol.





The general approach was one of compassion and encouragement rather than criticism, with organisers stepping in to talk to the person if their behaviour was causing people to feel unsafe. Generally though, although these occasions were memorable, orchestra members also felt they were rare and well-handed by everyone involved.

‘WE HAVE HAD A COUPLE WHO HAVE STRUGGLED AND WE JUST SAY WE ARE ALL HERE FOR YOU AND WE ARE NOT HERE TO JUDGE’

## What makes us unique?

Through interviews with the musicians and organisers it has become clear that a lot more than-making music is taking place in New Note Orchestra. It is a space for people with all levels of musical ability to process complex feelings, to develop communal practices, to create identities and to build positive activities into every-day life.

Central to these practices is the fact that music is generated by the musicians themselves. This ownership of the music is something which many musicians singled out as a unique element of the orchestra, compared to other local recovery activities. In the context of creating music in an orchestral format more generally, welcoming people with no prior musical experience is another unique element of New Note’s approach.

Many of the musician's insights into their recoveries through music were rooted in improvisation sessions. Orchestra members felt that improvising together contributed to becoming more intuitive musicians, expressing emotions and working through group dynamics together. The development of sensitivity to sound seemed to be offering a form of recovery in and of itself. The safety of the space facilitated these explorations.

Improvisation also provided an opportunity to continue to process recoveries in a non-verbal way. For many musicians the need to talk about their time in active addiction had reduced, and they now sought new experiences, identities and spaces.

More than anything the orchestra seems to provide a safe and creative space for musicians to play. For most of those interviewed though it provided much more than that – a space to perform their recoveries and develop a sense of themselves in a group. Perhaps in an indication of how powerful this factor is: many musicians interviewed did not touch their instruments at all outside of practices.

At a time when successful completion of treatment is in decline nationally, organisations which help people to maintain their recoveries are more important than ever. Inclusive, flexible and safe spaces like New Note are unique because they are co-created by the members, and this helps the space to stay relevant to those who need it.

**'IT FEELS LIKE EVERY NOTE HAS A VALUE, YOUR CONTRIBUTION HAS A VALUE, EVERY PERSON HAS A VALUE NO MATTER WHAT THEIR BACKGROUND, WHATEVER THEY CAN BRING, WHATEVER THE DAMAGE, WHATEVER POINT IN THEIR RECOVERY'**

<sup>i</sup> Public Health England (2018). '[What we've learned from the latest alcohol and drug treatment statistics](#)'

<sup>ii</sup> Public Health England (2018). '[Alcohol and drug treatment for adults: Statistics summary 2017 to 2018](#)'

<sup>iii</sup> Rickson, D., Reynolds, D., & Legg, R. (2018). learners' perceptions of daily singing in a school community severely affected by earthquakes: links to subjective well-being. *Journal of Applied Arts & Health*, 9(3), 367-384.

<sup>iv</sup> Daykin, N., Mansfield, L., Meads, C., Julier, G., Tomlinson, A., Payne, A., ... & Kay, T. (2018). What works for wellbeing? A systematic review of wellbeing outcomes for music and singing in adults. *Perspectives in public health*, 138(1), 39-46.

<sup>v</sup> Dunphy, K. F., Baker, F. A., Dumaresq, E., Carroll-Haskins, K., Eickholt, J., Ercole, M., ... & Wosch, T. (2018). Creative arts interventions to address depression in older adults: a systematic review of outcomes, processes and mechanisms. *Frontiers in psychology*, 9, 2655.

<sup>vi</sup> Kim, Y. (2008). The effect of improvisation-assisted desensitization, and music-assisted progressive muscle relaxation and imagery on reducing pianists' music performance anxiety. *Journal of Music Therapy*, 45(2), 165-191.

<sup>vii</sup> Allen, R. (2013). Free improvisation and performance anxiety among piano students. *Psychology of Music*, 41(1), 75-88.

<sup>viii</sup> Dingle, G. A., Dingle, G. A., Gleadhill, L., & Baker, F. A. (2008). Can music therapy engage patients in group cognitive behaviour therapy for substance abuse treatment?. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 27(2), 190-196.

<sup>ix</sup> NCVO (2018). '[Civil Society Almanac data 2018](#)'

<sup>x</sup> Cascade Recovery Choir (2018) [Website](#)