

New Note's debut rehearsal took place on 6th October 2015 and was the beginning of a great adventure for the world's first recovery orchestra, a journey which would have a profound effect on the lives of the participants. To mark that fourth anniversary, four of the orchestra's key participants explain to interviewer Jon Wilde how it all evolved.

MOLLY (Founder/Chief Executive): Back in 2011 I was working in television, developing new ideas for shows. I got to know a composer called James McConnel whose son, Freddy, had died of a heroin overdose at the age of eighteen.

After James wrote a piece in The Telegraph about Freddy, I got in touch with him out of the blue and we met. It struck me just how much James had used music to help him cope with his son's death. I rang him up one day and said, 'What if you could stop somebody like Freddy from dying by using music? What if we got ten people in recovery to create a piece of music together? Maybe it could be a TV documentary?'

James absolutely loved the idea and that was all the encouragement I needed.

One morning in 2013 I was on my way to pitch the general idea to Channel 4. On the London underground, I happened to see this huge poster of the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO) playing in Trafalgar Square. I thought, 'Wouldn't it be brilliant if we got them on board?' I had this idea in my head of someone who was homeless, sleeping in Trafalgar Square, maybe a heroin addict. Six months later, they were playing with the LSO in Trafalgar Square.' By the time I got to Channel 4, the idea was fully formed.

Channel 4 loved the idea and the documentary which became Addicts' Symphony was up and running. With the help of James, we pulled together ten musicians with a wide range of abilities. From October 2013, they worked

together for two months, building towards a concert with the LSO.

In the finale of the documentary, there's a beautifully emotive scene with our participants playing with the LSO. I'd seen these ten people come together to make music and they'd remained sober. That was incredibly powerful. It was when we were filming that scene that I found myself thinking, 'I want to start a charity...'

There was a lot of work ahead but, because I'd already established that the idea would work through the documentary, doors started opening. But I still had to show that it would work as a concept in Brighton.

Through 2013 and 2014, I kept furiously busy. I was accepted onto a course at the School of Social Entrepreneurs. I worked out a formula, designed a pilot, contacted all the local drug, alcohol and recovery services, did all the governance, registered as a charity, assembled a board of trustees...What kept driving me on was the belief that this would work.

Not that everyone shared my belief. A few people told me that I was wasting my time, that I'd never get it off the ground. One person told me that it was doomed because, as he saw it, the kind of musicians I was planning to work with (recovering addicts, most of whom had a history of homelessness) were the most unreliable people in the world.

I just kept going and, luckily, there were people who encouraged me, who had the same belief as me that this idea would work.

After piloting the idea in Brighton in the summer of 2015, we were gearing up for our first proper rehearsal that October with the idea that, provided there were enough musicians, we would co-compose a piece of music and perform it at Xmas.

We did all we could to promote the first rehearsal. All the local services knew what was happening. Places were leafleted. But there was no guarantee that anybody would

turn up. Two nights before, I was telling myself, 'If less than five musicians walk through the door, it won't be sustainable. If more than five turn up, we'll probably be alright. It will be enough to build on.'

On the night of 6th October, nine musicians walked through the doors of St. Luke's church in the Seven Dials area of Brighton. We were up and running.

DAN (musician): I remember the first rehearsal very clearly. I'd come out of rehab four months earlier and had just moved back to Brighton. I was trying to connect with the recovery community here.

Though the bass would become my main instrument in the orchestra, I turned up that day carrying a flying-V electric guitar that I used to gig with in my twenties. I hadn't picked it up in years. I was looking to pick my confidence up by playing that.

I almost walked away before I walked in. It was that whole thing of being scared of meeting a whole new group of people. Once I was in, within thirty seconds, I felt completely at home. I felt safe, really welcome.

I didn't have a clue what to expect from the rehearsal session. If I remember correctly, we just jammed at that first one. It had been ten years since I'd played music with other people.

Walking home that night, I was thinking, 'I'll definitely be doing that again' and wrote the date of the second rehearsal in my weekly planner calendar when I got in.

The experience had been very positive, immediately beneficial. I'd found something that I wanted to be a part of. I knew that the orchestra was going to be important to my recovery.

In some ways, at least at that early stage, the musical side of things was secondary to the recovery side. It was a place I could go every week and meet other people in recovery. So I kept going. In four years I think I've missed three rehearsals.

ROGER (musician): I remember being very anxious on that first night. I was mostly nervous about my musical ability and the idea of playing in front of other people which I'd never really done before. I was used to playing at home on my own, in the style of Pink Floyd, Radiohead, that kind of thing. Even then, I was very rusty. I'd never worked with an orchestra before. Playing as part of an ensemble was a new stage of learning for me.

As I remember it, we spent that first rehearsal working on rhythm stuff, using some percussion. It was just a bit of a jam to get into the swing of it.

NICK (musician): I remember walking to the first rehearsal and thinking, 'This should be interesting.' There was no apprehension. I don't really get nervous about playing music. If anything, I was excited. It sounded like a very interesting and unique thing to get involved with. It seemed like another good thing to do as part of my recovery.

I play most instruments and primarily I'm a drummer. But I turned up to that first rehearsal without an instrument. I probably picked up a bit of percussion that was lying around or maybe I played keyboards. As time went on, I concentrated on playing parts of a drum kit and the keyboards.

MOLLY: My memory of that first rehearsal was that everybody was very trepidatious. Or maybe that was just me.

NICK: At the start, Patrick Harrex was the conductor. He was older than our present music director, Conall Gleeson, and his approach was more improvised. Patrick was very considerate, very gentle. He had a knack for getting everyone focussed and involved.

We would knock ideas around and Patrick would draw something out of those ideas. He might pinpoint a few bars where there was a good groove and we'd work up something from that. Or he'd work with a flipchart. He might write down words for certain feelings and invite us to create something musical around that. Or it might be a place name. Gradually, we'd hone those musical ideas down into what it was we were trying to convey. The first piece we worked on was called 'Road' which was a metaphor for the journey of recovery and we worked with some of the feelings that people had about that journey. We were expressing our emotional experiences through the music we were creating.

MOLLY: From the start, the idea was to compose our own pieces. To play pieces that were already known, we'd have needed musicians who could read music. Then it would have become about the quality of how that music is being played. We didn't want to play Stravinsky and then be compared to other orchestras that were playing Stravinsky.

At the start we had a piano which was already there in the church. We might have had one or two percussion instruments. Then people turned up with their own guitars. Nowadays, we have a cupboard full of instruments. At the very start, we were completely unfunded.

For the first four weeks it was about getting to know each other and improvise until something took shape. Patrick would conduct and get people to interact with each other. That approach has remained consistent throughout. It's a bit like making a massive stew. You've got a tiny bit of oregano. Someone has provided the beef. Someone brings the tomato sauce. There might be only a pinch of oregano in the stew but it wouldn't be as good a stew without that pinch. The conductor's job is to make sure that the beef goes in at the right time, when the tomatoes go in, and when the herbs are added.

Our first piece 'Road' ended up being twenty minutes long. As we went along, the music would be written out as a list of instructions, with cues for when particular musicians needed to come in. It can't be notated because most of our musicians don't read music. As time went on, it became easier and easier for the musicians to instinctively know what would sound right.

ROGER: The way it worked with the composition of 'Road' was that Patrick guided us every step of the way, allowing us all the space to express ourselves musically. It started out as a few chords with a bit of percussion and grew from there.

With each piece we write together, it becomes more adventurous, more expansive. We've worked with film, animation and poetry. It's always growing. The latest piece we're working on is close to an hour long.

MOLLY: In one sense, New Note is a democracy in that everyone has their say and is encouraged to contribute to the creative process. I run it but everyone involved feels like they are a part of it. The musicians take pride in saying, 'I am in the New Note Orchestra' and they are the best advocates for it.

The conductor is the person who has the final say in a musical sense. He makes all the musical decisions and everyone defers to those decisions.

Before Conall took over as musical director at the beginning of 2017, Patrick worked as our conductor for nearly eighteen months. He was pure improvisation. He never brought a musical idea into the room. He would think in quite an abstract way and he used flip charts a lot. He might say 'Let's think about leaves blowing. Think about how that makes you feel.' Then the musicians would respond. Or he'd say, 'How do you feel about Brighton? Think about the sea, the Downs, the North Laines...' Then

it was a question of how to translate those thoughts into music.

After eighteen months with Patrick at the helm as conductor, Conall Gleeson became artistic director at the start of 2017. His role is much more of a musical director. He comes with musical ideas in his head and will show the musicians what he has in mind by playing them on the keyboard. Then he might say to Roger, 'Play something gently around this...' And someone might suggest a bass line which works. So it builds and builds around Conall's original idea into something bigger.

CONALL: I'd been to see one of the orchestra's earliest concerts at St. Luke's and was very impressed by what they were doing and by the whole New Note ethos. I could see that there was something unique about a musical project that was about working with people in recovery where there was a shared artistic vision that had high expectations of itself. Clearly, there was a lot more to it than a bunch of people getting together to play music. As I'd been head of music at the University of Brighton for several years, I thought I had a skill set that could lend itself to the orchestra.

Initially, I approached Molly to talk about the possibility of a joint project between the university and New Note. The project worked out so well that Molly asked me if I would be interested in staying on. By the time I arrived, the model was already working.

The first piece I worked on with the orchestra was Portraits Of Brighton. There were only one or two musicians who could read music but that wasn't particularly important in terms of developing our pieces. We have two phases in the making of our work. The first phase involves a lot of experimentation and improvisation. At that stage, we're just exploring the range of sounds we can make and developing a sense of rhythm. At the same time, we're developing new material. That early phase in a

composition is the most fun. It's a very playful environment.

As we get nearer to the actual performance, when we're working towards a more and more refined execution of the music, there's a lot more pressure on the musicians.

ROGER: At the start, we would do a 20-minute check-in before rehearsal where people could talk about how their weeks were going, that kind of thing. Very quickly, Molly realised that all of us were either doing recovery meetings or getting other kinds of support and that the orchestra rehearsals were an environment where we didn't need to get into our personal stories. Besides, playing music was therapeutic enough without us getting into all that.

With New Note, we might not be addressing our addiction issues or our mental health upfront. If you like, we're coming at it from a different angle, a more creative angle. A good rehearsal can make me feel good for the rest of the week. A couple of days before the next rehearsal and I find that I'm always looking forward to going.

NICK: From the first rehearsals, I knew that this was something I wanted to stick with. Generally speaking, I tend to stick with things and I like to be a real part of it. Apart from enjoying being at the rehearsals, I could see that it could be an important part of my recovery. In the early part of my recovery, I would sometimes go to three or four meetings a day. At those meetings, people essentially sit around and talk about themselves. That's the process. It was very refreshing to have something like the orchestra where, first and foremost, it was about the music. We could leave our stories outside the room.

MOLLY: In that early period, the numbers went up and down. We averaged out at around eight or nine for a

while. Then it grew to a solid core of around twenty people.

Occasionally, musicians drop out for various reasons. Relapse plays a very small part in people starting with New Note and then opting out. What sometimes happens is that people join the orchestra and stabilise within their recovery, then they go off and do other things whilst remaining part of the recovery community. Of course, some go off and come back.

NICK: It was very different from the rock'n'roll world I'm familiar with, where there's so many egos flying about, arguments breaking out, people turning up late. It's so refreshing to find yourself in an environment where there's hardly any twattishness in evidence. Now and again, there'll be minor fallings out between musicians. For example, I've been known to get the hump because somebody is playing too loud. You usually get one who is forever turning his amplifier up. Sometimes I let my feelings about it simmer. Other times I speak my mind. But losing my temper is not a regular occurrence. In my four years with the orchestra, it's probably happened twice. As a group of musicians, we take it seriously. We are punctual and we take the music very seriously. That might surprise people but they forget that we are all in recovery. It's very rare that people are out of it when they turn up for a rehearsal. I've seen it happen maybe half a dozen times in four years. When that happens, it needs to be dealt with, obviously. But it's always dealt with compassionately and delicately. Anyone who is clearly struggling with sobriety will be signposted to the appropriate local services.

ROGER: It can be challenging when people turn up to rehearsals and they are still in their madness. That can be disruptive. But it hasn't happened too often. Of course, when it does happen, it needs to be addressed. We're in

recovery and we can't be playing alongside someone who is stinking of booze.

One of the great things about New Note is that the doors are open to everybody who is in recovery. Even if you've never picked up an instrument in your life, you're welcome to come along. We'll find a way of getting you involved in the music. Provided you can count, you can start out playing the bells or a bit of percussion and develop from there. If you've got the desire to learn an instrument, Molly will get someone in to teach you. Right now, we've got someone who started out playing a bit of percussion and now she is learning to play the cello.

CONALL: As a musical director, I'm happy to work with whatever is in the room. The way I look at it is that everybody is able to make a sound. Some people are able to create a greater range of sounds but everybody can make something that can be utilised. In rehearsals, I'm always pushing people in terms of their own personal boundaries and what they can achieve with their instrument.

In rehearsals, I see myself as a collaborator and I feel it's important for me to respect all the members of the orchestra for their musicianship and their ideas. Whatever their levels of musicianship, I see them as equals. They all have something that's worth exploring.

When we are performing to an audience, my role is more that of the traditional conductor – keeping time, marking out where we are in the score, cueing people in and out, giving direction that way.

MOLLY: One thing we learned early on is that, if you want people to feel like musicians, you have to invest in high-quality instruments. In the first year of New Note, we had a lot of instruments that were rubbish, basically. When Conall came on board, we had a meeting with Dr Alice

Fox who had written a book about inclusive arts and who, as part of The Rocket Artists, works with people with physical disabilities and mental health/learning disabilities. She invests in high-quality art materials because she wants people to feel like artists, rather than feel they are in some kind of playgroup. That really resonated with me – the idea that we hand somebody a quality instrument and they will respect it and value it. So, these days, we take a great deal of care in choosing our instruments and how we handle them.

NICK: As musicians in the orchestra, there's always a big element of peer mentoring in what we do. Early on, there was a guy who played percussion alongside me. When he first came to the orchestra, he had absolutely no musical experience. So I would teach him the ropes. Within a couple of rehearsals, we built up a really solid musical rapport. We also had a good laugh, always egging each other on, taking the piss out of the others, making up nicknames for people. Me, him and another guy were always the ones being told off like naughty schoolboys. To be fair, there's always a lot of humour flying around but, as the next concert approaches, we tend to get more and more disciplined as a group. It gets more and more serious.

CONALL: It's not often that I need to tell the musicians to behave, to remind them that we are there to work. But I do like to set a bar, a bar that stretches. I always keep in mind that our ambition is to be ambitious. We're not there to rest on our laurels. The idea is to keep stretching, keep testing new ground, whilst making sure that people feel supported, that they don't feel vulnerable. They've already had enough vulnerability in their personal lives. I don't want to add to that in any way. It's important that New Note is a place where, as musicians, they're able to feel secure in themselves as individuals. So they're being

pushed artistically while, at the same time, being made to feel comfortable.

MOLLY: We played our first concert at St. Luke's on 15th December 2015. A few days before, I remember saying to the vicar, 'Nobody is going to turn up.' He said, 'I think you're going to be very surprised.' People had been ringing him up, telling him they were really excited about it. That first show was a sell out. We performed a 20-minute version of Road. Also on the bill that night was a local concert pianist Helen Burford.

NICK: In the lead up to that first show, I was pretty relaxed about the whole thing. I had an inkling that it would be well attended. All the musicians in the orchestra knew a few people who could be trusted to turn up. Also, people are generally supportive in the recovery world. I had a strong feeling that it was going to be a great night but I don't think I was prepared for just how emotional it was.

DAN: I felt very nervous at that first concert and, at the same time, very comfortable. Playing in front of a crowd, we were exploring new ground. But the audience loved it. After that show, my self-esteem rocketed. I was learning that pushing myself out of my comfort zone was a good thing. In the early stages of recovery, I was really scared of relapse. I knew I wanted to push myself and develop, but I knew there was a danger in pushing myself too hard. Sometimes it's hard to find that boundary between not enough and too much, between what you can and cannot do. With that first concert, I felt I'd found where my boundary was.

MOLLY: That first concert was such a triumph. It was a landmark evening for us.

We'd proved that the musicians would turn up week after week to create this amazing piece of music. The feedback from the musicians was that playing music together was helping them in their recovery. We'd proved that local people would support us by coming out to see the orchestra play.

After that, nobody was telling me that this idea wouldn't work because, clearly, it was working brilliantly. Doors started opening up for us. When we were in dire need of a cello, two would turn up. When we needed a violin, four turned up.

ROGER: I remember feeling massively relieved that people turned up for that first concert. As they started streaming through the doors, I felt a massive weight lifting. It was going to be OK. We had an audience and it was clear that it wasn't just the usual recovery crowd that had come along to support; there were a lot of local people we'd never met before.

That was a big leap for us. It's one thing doing it in rehearsals; it's another thing performing to a crowd. The reaction was amazing. We'd proven that we could do it and that brought a huge boost in confidence for all of us.

MOLLY: Going into 2016, the plan was to keep going and play a concert every twelve weeks so that we were always building towards something. The most pressing concern was to get some funds in so that we could make it sustainable. The conductor needed paying. It was now a full-time job for me so I needed paying. There was no money from public donations or from corporates. Our money started coming from trusts and foundations, the Arts Council and the Lottery.

Through 2016, we did five concerts. There were four based around the seasons of the year which went really well. The other was our first and only disaster. We attempted a weird improv piece at a church in Shoreham.

We just turned up and made it up on the spot. It was pretty chaotic, with the audience wandering around, not really paying attention to what we were doing. I'm not sure what possessed us to attempt such a thing. What we learned from that was that the orchestra only really worked in a certain environment where people sat down and paid attention. It didn't work when we threw ourselves into someone else's programme and when we sounded like a complete racket.

ROGER: It was always important to us that the music stood on its own merits. We didn't want to hear, 'That's pretty good for people in recovery.' We simply want them to be blown away by the quality of the music. And we knew that was happening because people would come up to us after the concerts and tell us so. By the time we come to perform a new piece, it's completely ready, very polished. It wouldn't be out of place as the soundtrack to a good film.

DAN: As we went on to do more concerts, those events were a good way for me to gauge just how far I'd come in my recovery. That debut concert in 2015 was the first big landmark for me. The second one was when New Note was featured in a double-page spread in The Argus and there was a photo of me. That was the cue for me to be upfront and honest about my recovery with my employers who were incredibly supportive.

The third big landmark moment for me came in August 2018 when we played a TedxNHS conference at the BFI IMAX cinema in London.

That was a big deal for me. Before recovery, alcohol was my number one problem but I knew there was far more going on that I needed to address. During that time, I used to watch loads of TED talks in search of answers. It was a massive part of my life. To be performing with the orchestra as part of a TEDx conference was huge for me.

MOLLY: All our concerts have been special in their own way, but that TEDx performance was especially powerfully. We performed a section from our piece, A Sense Of Place, in front of a giant screen, in front of 400 people. People were crying. It was like a spiritual experience for a lot of people. We were so slick that night. That performance was a real mark in the sand for us as an organisation. That concert was the one that put us on the national map.

After nights like that, I can't help reflecting on what I'd been told when I was setting New Note up: that it would never get off the ground because musicians in recovery would be too unpredictable, completely unreliable. The truth is that I've never met a more committed group of people than these musicians.

NICK: Every concert we've done stands out in its own way. The audience are always a big factor. A lot of them are in recovery too. Often, after the show, there'll be a question-and-answer thing. That can get very emotional. Sharing your personal journey with an audience like that is very, very powerful. Just thinking about it makes me well up.

CONALL: I get a huge amount out of my involvement. When I look back on my first two years with the orchestra, one of the most satisfying things is seeing how they have all developed as musicians in that time. Seeing them grow in that way has been so inspirational. Then, of course, there's seeing how the orchestra continues to help in their recovery. When the musicians talk about their stories, they are so eloquent about their lived experience. They have great insight into the challenges of recovery.

The aim is simply to keep moving forward. Every performance we've done has been better than the last

one. The music is always stepping up. The challenge is to sustain that, bringing it to new audiences, continuing to reach out to people who will benefit from their involvement.

DAN: Four years with New Note has made a big difference to me, mainly in terms of the confidence to believe in myself within a community. It may sound like a simple thing but you can't underestimate the importance of having somewhere to go every week at the same time when you are in recovery. It's hugely important, at least for me, to fill up my time meaningfully.

Playing music again has been a massive part of my recovery. I can play music when I'm at home and then I've got New Note where I can play with other people as part of something I can contribute to every week. The orchestra has helped me reconnect with life.

ROGER: At every twist and turn with New Note, I'm reminded not just how far the orchestra has come in four years but how far I've come in my recovery. The two are inseparable really.

For the last four years, music has been vitally important in terms of providing a sense of community both within New Note itself and, in a wider sense, within the community of recovery bands in Brighton and the surrounding areas. In recovery, I need to be vigilant. I need to be doing something every day and music is a major part of that. I just love being a part of the orchestra and I won't be leaving any time soon. Apart from anything else, I'm really excited to find out where it leads to next. Who knows what will happen? Given Molly's drive and determination, I wouldn't be surprised if we end up playing the Royal Albert Hall at some point.

NICK: I guess New Note Orchestra was one of those great ideas waiting to happen. Now it's out there and it's working, it seems obvious. But, if it was that obvious, someone would have done it before. Traditionally, music has always been a great way of bringing people together. Maybe that's not recognised as much as it should be in this country. We undervalue music as a community thing and a healing force. As far as addiction goes, many people don't really understand it and they're scared of it. They see it as a choice, rather than an illness. We've got a long way to go. Hopefully, New Note is having some positive influence in that respect.

On a personal level, it's been wonderful to be part of something as wonderfully progressive as this orchestra, getting to know a great bunch of people from diverse backgrounds, each with their own story of recovery, of all abilities, all of us connecting through our love for music.