

The Formation of the Soundcastle Community

Story & Stats

Story:

Lockdown 1 Spring 2020:

UK live community music paused | Singing banned | 90% of musicians lose most work overnight | Stay home | Stay Safe.

Community music is a sector full of vibrant, generous, creative people who thrive on connectivity and creative music making. Spring 2020 saw these people at home, many with none of their usual creative outlets and most with careers on pause. Soundcastle noticed some brilliant community music practice appearing online but also the conversations around practitioner isolation, anxiety and lack of energy were becoming more and more visible both on and offline. As advocates for practitioner and community wellbeing, we felt a responsibility to create a space to bring this community together and to connect our amazing sector through pop-up events, videos and a zoom professional development programme.

As responsive practitioners, coaches and facilitators, we are constantly exploring what creates a 'safe' space and the balance of when to steer and when to be responsive to community need. We designed a flexible framework for The SC Community and watched it grow and evolve throughout 2020.

Within the Soundcastle Community there is a refreshing honesty about our shared difficulties and vulnerabilities as artists, as well as everything that is wonderful about creative music making!

July 2020:

Thanks to emergency funding from Arts Council England, Soundcastle launch The Soundcastle Community and The Music & Wellbeing Programme 2020 | Quickly over 200 members are welcomed through the virtual doors.

The SC team continued adding topics, hosting live events and recording video interviews with practitioners and academics alike. We faced many challenges; tech fatigue in the sector, people's hesitation to join another 'social' platform and how to offer something unique, whilst complementing the offers of our peer sector organisations.

As The SC Community grew we were also developing and delivering

Music & Wellbeing 2020 - a live digital CPD

programme created for a diverse pool of practitioners who all identified as within their first 10 years of community practice. We offered bursaries to practitioners to support in reflecting on the journey and recruited an amazing group of 21 music makers from our three core regions; London, Bristol and the South East.

'Truly a safe space ... that connection with other musicians up and down the country is quite vital and makes me feel like I'm not alone.'

Stats:

After multiple surveys, reflective tasks and focus groups we are delighted to share the following statistics across 5 key themes that evidence both need and demand for The Soundcastle Community and the Music & Wellbeing Programme.

Reporting themes:

1. Development of skills in music facilitation for positive mental health and wellbeing
2. Improved reflection and collaboration
3. Soundcastle's meaningful engagement with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic workers
4. The programme provoking new thinking
5. Enhanced practitioner wellbeing



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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



1. Development of skills in music facilitation for positive mental health and wellbeing

Soundcastle believe that ownership is key in communities feeling truly engaged with their creative output and this has a direct correlation with the impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

**Positive
Feedback
100%**



All attendees were highly vocal about how their music facilitation skills had developed throughout the 6 months. The combination of cross-regional group sessions served to inspire thinking around skills development and the smaller regional sessions gave people a chance to experiment in a truly safe and held environment. In addition, the one to one coaching sessions gave a private space in which many practitioners challenged and developed their thinking around their personal skill set.

Soundcastle believe that ownership is key in communities feeling truly engaged with their creative output and this has a direct correlation with the impact on their mental health and wellbeing. *'After our last Soundcastle session about ownership ... I became aware that all the most successful activities in my sessions included some elements of ownership as part of their success'.*

'I really enjoyed the last session of looking at how really simple exercises can be used to help create a safe space, an environment of deeper understanding and learning whilst also not putting anyone under any pressure'

We intend to continue monitoring the impact of the collective reach of these facilitators and to host events to bring the group together again to share practice and how their community groups are responding to new ideas and approaches.

'Having joined as an amateur in community music ... I am in the right place to grow and reflect. I was lovingly given permission to listen, hear, soak up, read, acknowledge'

2. Improved reflection and collaboration

We put reflective practice and collaboration at the heart of the programme as we believe that these two elements are absolutely essential in supporting the development of healthy, balanced and creative practitioners.

**Positive
Feedback
100%**



Reflective practice was a new practice to some of the group members, well established by others, however every attendee noted that they developed their skills in this area.

**'A hugely
cathartic
experience'**

With a coaching approach embedded in Soundcastle's practice, we encouraged actions to be developed from reflection.

This led to responses such as: *'I had a virtual interview for something I had never done before and I asked for advice beforehand on the community. I got so much interesting and helpful advice from people in experienced positions and I got the job! That sort of support in this area has never been around for me before.'*

Another told us that: *'Taking the time to really listen as a facilitator, and adapt my lesson plans according to those attending, this was something I really got to put into practice last night as I ran my first workshop alongside the Barbican.'*

Whilst some actions were very immediate, others were considering more about long-term impact of new thinking, *'It has allowed me to think a lot more about adapting and reacting as opposed to sticking to a strict plan; it has shown me the many benefits that can occur when you as a facilitator are enjoying yourself'.*

'That kind of energy is infectious, and it is now something I want to carry with me through the rest of my career'.

3. Meaningful engagement with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic workers

Positive
Feedback
100%

We did an active social media call out for practitioners from diverse backgrounds to join us, as we are conscious of both our organisation and the community music sector being predominantly white, which isn't representative of the communities with which we work.



We are constantly developing our inclusive recruitment priorities, identified as part of our *I'm IN* diversity audit with London Music Masters. We are happy to share that 8/18 recruited practitioners and 2/6 facilitators on the regional teams identified as being from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

We were very conscious of ensuring meaningful engagement, through our programming, content and facilitation.

In practice this included interviewing diverse practitioners for our YouTube events such as Connecting Chats (interviews with community musicians - hosted by Fernando Machado) and Book Club (interviews with academics and researchers - hosted by Hannah Dunster and Gail Macleod). This was, and continues to be, hugely important to us as we diversify the Soundcastle team and seek to support emerging practitioners from diverse backgrounds. One of these was a Book Club with Diljeet Bhachu exploring 'What is 'ownership' when working in a tradition that is not your 'own' nor that of the group?' to which one of our attendees responded: *'Listening to Diljeet Bhachu was really enlightening on the fine line between cultural appropriation and respectful facilitation'.*

'I currently face various challenges in my working life ... after attending a session with Soundcastle, I feel good and joyful, learning and sharing. I feel appreciated and loved without judgement in a space for music'

'No barriers at all. It was so lovely to meet people who are not judgemental, lovely and acceptable. My first language isn't English and I face so many barriers in everyday life, but none of that ever happened in Soundcastle. I felt free to express myself.'

4. The programme provoking new thinking

Reflective practice is at the heart of the Soundcastle approach and we made space, particularly in the regional sessions, for practitioners to take time to question and explore their own personal approach to music facilitation.



'It has helped to give me more confidence in my ideas. This forced me to take some risks which was both a little scary and welcome at the same time!'

A key reason for devising this programme was to provoke new thinking, or to enable practitioners to explore thoughts that they may not have time to do in their day to day lives.

As educators and coaches it is always an interesting challenge to navigate the balance between sharing information and opening space for personal reflection and development. It's an area that we focussed on extensively in the planning and seemed to resonate with the group:

'One thing I really like about the way you do things is that you manage to put across a lot of complex ideas and information, without doing so in a way that causes me information overload.'

For some facilitators the impact was subtle changes to practice, such as *'I will aim to push the boundaries of an activity more'*; for others it was more about direct action; *'I have a lot of self limiting beliefs about music and my abilities with teaching / facilitation, and over the years they have prevented me from pushing myself in these areas, even though I am so passionate. During this course I had a business idea that I plan to pursue in the new year to do with music facilitation. I really think Soundcastle had a lot to do with that!'*

*"I will always assume someone else knows better than me and have spent years and lots of money searching for a qualification that will convince me of my own competence. The brilliant thing about this was that you didn't try to indoctrinate us into delivering carbon copies of a set working model. Instead, it was about **empowering us** to trust our own instincts and be brave about trying new things whilst being prepared to make mistakes.*

This was exactly what I needed!'

5. Enhanced practitioner wellbeing

Soundcastle define wellbeing as referring to all holistic elements of a facilitator's practice; their relationship with their mind, body, finances, instrument, community and peers. It is intrinsically linked to their resilience to serve the communities that they collaborate with.

**Positive
Feedback
100%**



All too often isolation and lack of support can lead to practitioners losing motivation, feeling alone in their challenges and ultimately delivering work of less quality or ultimately leaving the sector.

Practitioner wellbeing was a core motivation for the creation of The Soundcastle Community and the Music & Wellbeing programme.

The feedback on how this programme supported wellbeing has been overwhelmingly positive and is clear evidence on why we need to be delivering and expanding this work in 2021 and beyond. *'It can be really easy to get sucked into the 'goal' and forget to enjoy playing / experimenting with yourself and others. That's been an incredibly positive realisation and has helped my wellbeing a lot.'*

'I have learned different things in terms of wellbeing and creativity. As a practitioner, I have to take care of myself by stretching and by reflecting with a healthy body and mind, and plan my course in a safe place, bringing a positive energy to participants.'

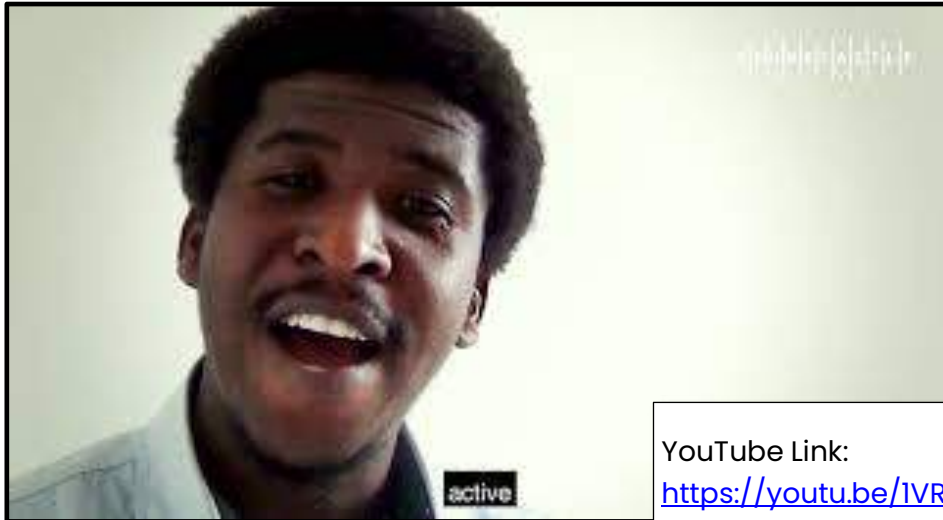
This report is an insight into an ever evolving community landscape. To find out more you are welcome to come and join us: <https://community.soundcastle.co.uk/> or you can check out some of our content on YouTube: <https://youtube.com/soundcastleteam>.

'It feels like something the industry has been crying out for and I really appreciate that wellbeing is held at the heart of it all.'



Video & Images

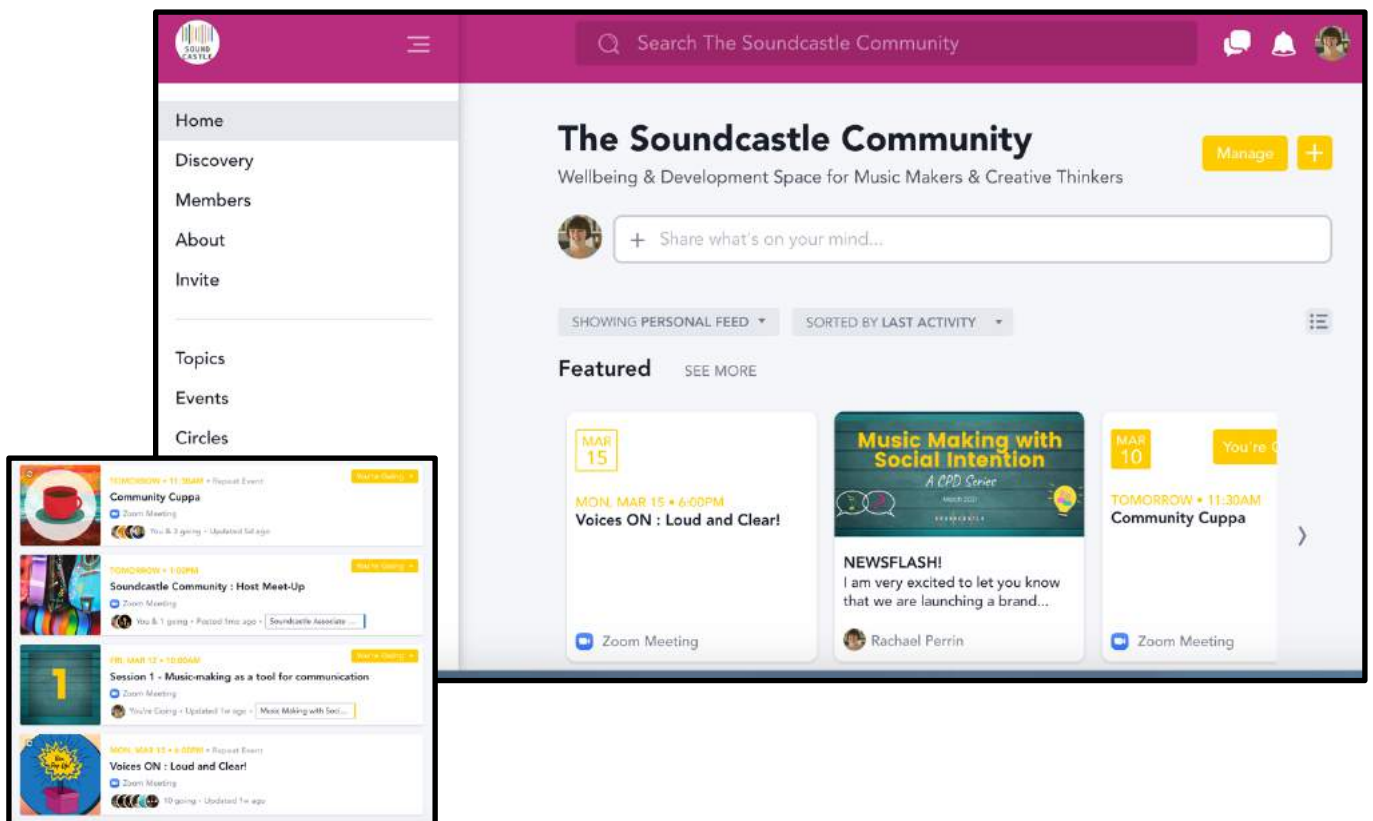
This video is a 7 minute insight into what The Soundcastle Community is all about, from the perspective of current community members...



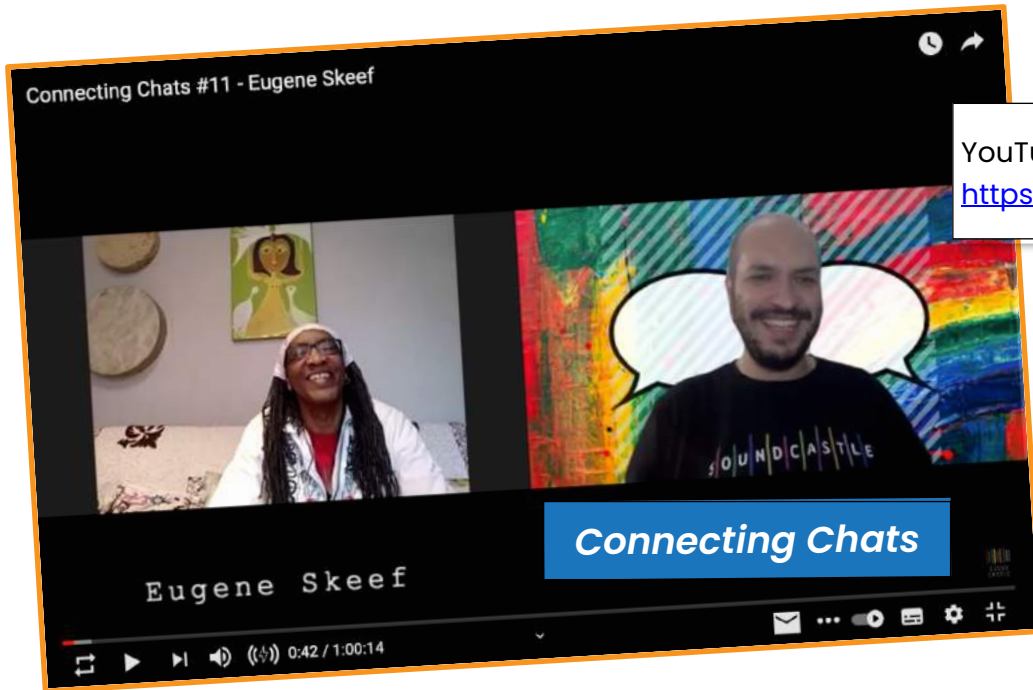
YouTube Link:

<https://youtu.be/1VRb26h4ykc>

Here's a snapshot of the main activity feed within The Soundcastle Community, followed by some of the topics we explore and our current events series:



Also below are links to some other video features of the Soundcastle Community.



YouTube Link:

<https://youtu.be/MoylvTGcGZ0>



YouTube Link:

<https://youtu.be/ee75bVPnvpA>



YouTube Link:

<https://youtu.be/AuaVs70FTwM>