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**Ashmount School  
Accessible Ensemble  
Pilot Project:**

**The First Year**

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**Elle Williams  
BSc (Mus), MA Mus, MISM  
MUSICAL DIRECTOR**

# Ashmount School

## Accessible Ensemble Project



April 2023

This document reflects on the first year of an accessible music ensemble project in Ashmount School, Loughborough sponsored by Leicestershire Music. Written by Elle Williams, Musical Director, it details the aims, processes and outcomes of the project so far and through critical reflection, sets the scene for its expansion over the coming academic year. Music Therapist, Ceri Adams contributes a section considering creative music making with profound and multiple learning difficulty (PMLD) students.

### Staffing

- Abi Steady -Deputy Headteacher, Ashmount School
- Elle Williams -Musical Director, Ashby Music School Ltd.
- Ceri Adams -Music Therapist
- Shaun Crate -Volunteer Music Assistant & Percussionist
- Tanvi Muir – Volunteer Music Therapy Assistant for group sessions, Improvising Jazz Pianist
- Kirsty North -Communications Lead, Ashmount School
- Faye Moore -Music Co-ordinator, Ashmount School
- Ben Sellers -Project Supervisor, Transformance Music & MEHEM (Music Education Hubs East Midlands)

### Funders & Supporters:

- Ashmount School
- Leicestershire Music
- Digit Music
- Transformance Music
- MEHEM (Music Education Hubs East Midlands)
- Music For All
- Ohmi Trust



## Contents

Background.....	4
Project Plan.....	5
Initial Stages.....	6
Composition Phase.....	8
Performance.....	9
Evaluating Aims.....	10
Positive Outcomes.....	14
Challenges to Address.....	17
Music with PMLD Students by Ceri Adams...	19
What Next?.....	21
Conclusion.....	22

### About the Author...

I'm Elle Williams, a Specialist Musician for people with additional needs. I have worked freelance as a peripatetic instrumental teacher in Ashmount School, amongst other settings, for six years. I work as a multi-instrumentalist focusing on creating a safe space for students to learn at their own pace, guided by their individual expressive preferences. Improvisation is at the heart of my practice; I believe that valuable learning experiences can be established through creative play. I am a classically trained graduate musician with a background in performance and community music practice. I am a trained Musician in Healthcare and leader for hybrid music technology and instrumental projects in special educational and secure settings. I am a Company Director at Ashby Music School Ltd. I was recruited to this project as Musical Director in April 2022. Find out more at [www.ashbymusic.co.uk](http://www.ashbymusic.co.uk)



Ashmount School in Loughborough, Leicestershire caters for students aged 4-19 years with severe and profound learning difficulties. Ashmount School was ideally placed for initiating this project; it leads the Loughborough Learning Alliance supporting other schools with curriculum design and training teachers in Primary, Secondary and SEN settings. The research and development resources available, along with the high value placed on the arts within their offer to students will ensure that the legacy of this project is far-reaching. Prior to this project, there were no accessible music ensemble opportunities available to students in schools within the region; this pioneering project was the first of its kind and supports Ashmount School's Platinum Artsmark journey.





## THE NATIONAL PLAN

### Background

This project was initiated in response to challenging conversations in May 2021 between Ashmount School and Leicestershire Music. Changes to The National Plan for music education in 2022 place increased emphasis on all children and young people having access to instrument learning and creating music together. On evaluating provision, the school's leadership team and Leicestershire Music identified that although there was already opportunity for group singing within Ashmount's 'Singing and Signing Choir' and some instrumental work within curriculum music and peripatetic instrumental lessons, the school's offer for instrumental ensemble playing was both less developed and less inclusive. Existing ensemble opportunities were "somewhat tokenistic" for students with more complex needs and could be improved by achieving more in terms of accessibility, technical development and creativity.

As a leader in both teacher development opportunities and curriculum design, Ashmount School identified that there was more they could do to upskill classroom staff to deliver curriculum music. With the appointment of specialist music teachers in SEND settings seemingly in decline, some non-specialist staff were encountering music teaching for the first time. This presented an increasing need to inspire a new generation of teachers with the skills and confidence to deliver music 'musically'. Offering a more culturally authentic and genuinely accessible experience to all, especially those with the greatest access needs, was a challenge that Ashmount School felt they could overcome both within their own setting and others through their support with curriculum design. Abi Steady proposed a JPD (Joint Practice Development) model to develop pedagogy and resources where bigger risks could be taken by professionals working together, creating greater resources than individual settings could achieve in isolation. The work would be experimental, reflective and in-situ, offering relevant development opportunities directly in response to the needs of the students and staff.

In assessing skills, competencies and roles of existing staff recruited to the project team, it became apparent that a musician would be required to lead sessions and shape the ensemble towards the high quality experience and performance the project demanded. From this, classroom teachers could benefit from specialist musical knowledge and approaches to inform and enhance their own offer.

### The 2022 national plan for music education update

*"...sets out the government's vision to enable all children and young people in England to:*

- *learn to sing, play an instrument and create music together*
- *have the opportunity to progress their musical interests and talents, including professionally."*<sup>\*</sup>



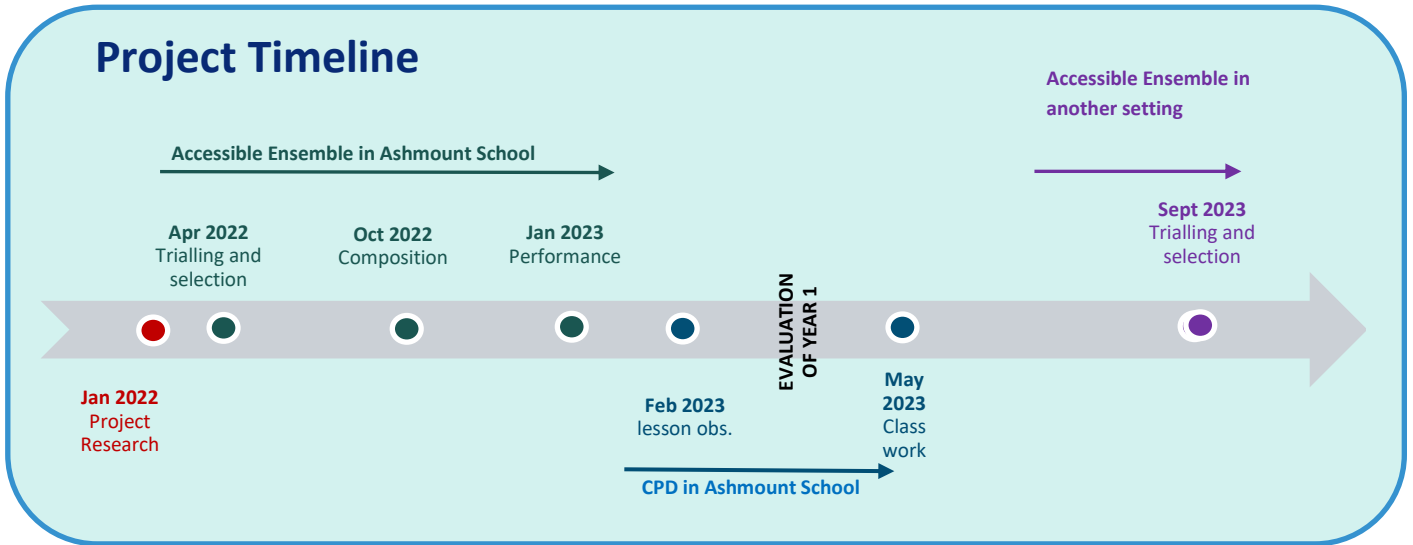
<sup>\*</sup>From: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-power-of-music-to-change-lives-a-national-plan>

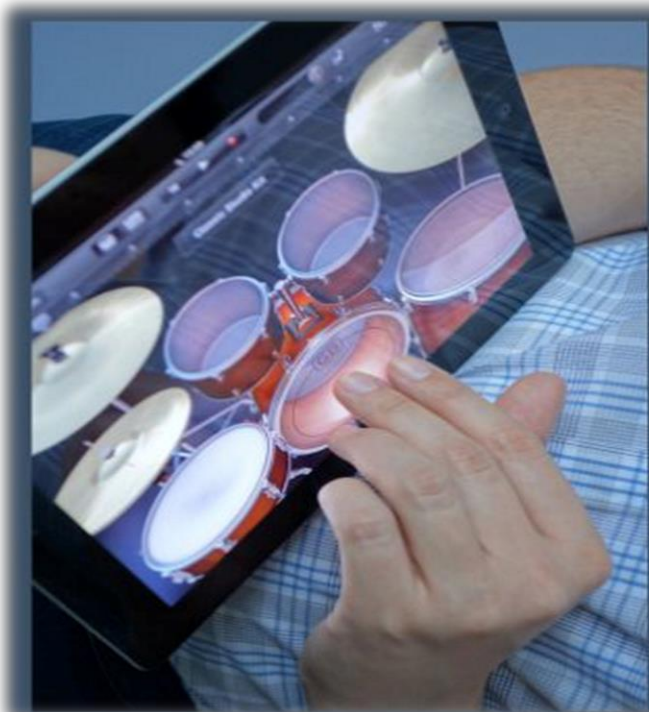
Through considering the revised National Plan for Music and assessing current provision in Ashmount School, the following aims and project timeline were proposed...

## Aims of the Project

1. To create an accessible ensemble in Ashmount School leading to a performance.
2. To use the ensemble's work as a basis for CPD to enhance the school's music curriculum.
3. To spread the reach of the project into the wider school and beyond, creating a model for it to be reproduced elsewhere.

## Project Timeline





## Initial Stages

Prior to my involvement in the project, Abi Steady in partnership with **Leicestershire Music**, had initiated reconnaissance work around accessible instruments and students who were interested in being involved. Ben Sellers, Kirsty North, Shaun Crate and Ceri Adams had worked with students on a 1:1 and small group basis to trial different digital instruments and sounds, identifying those which might be a good fit in terms of accessibility and appeal.

Digit Music, Transformance Music and The Omni Trust had also been invited in to school to deliver inset training on using iPads and accessible interfaces.

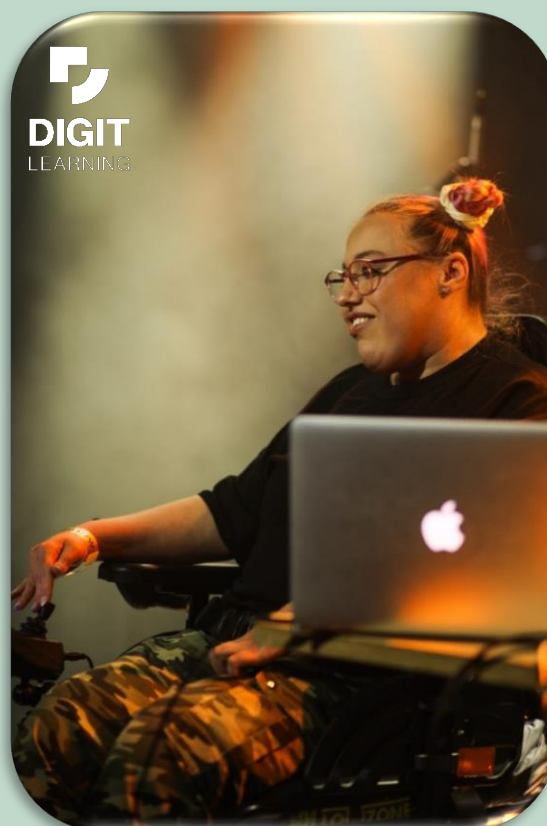
Musicians with disability and creative industry employers had been showcased to promote the arts as a genuine career option for students in special education, providing role models and responding directly to The National Plan's intention that students should be able to follow their musical desires, both educationally and professionally.

## Jess Fisher

Musician, Digit Learning

*Hi my name is Jess, I'm the learning coordinator for Digit learning I have a love for making music. I first started making music in a group called the Able Orchestra and now I make music and perform my own original songs using Digit's instrument Cmpsr. As well as that, I'm very passionate about being able to help and support other young people discover the joys of creating music by helping deliver in workshops. There's nothing more rewarding than watching the overflowing joy on young people's faces after they've made music together!*

Jess showcased her work with Cmpsr in a performance and workshop for our students.





## Selecting Digital Instruments & Apps

By April 2023, the school were already in receipt of numerous digital instruments on loan from The Ohmi Trust; some had proven popular in trialing with students, some less so. I streamlined our armoury to feature instruments that were easily accessible to a range of our students. I wanted instruments primarily designed to be accessible rather than those coincidentally so. It was important that they were simple enough to be used by non-specialist classroom staff confidently later in the project. Though Ableton was available, I chose to use iPads (funded through **Leicestershire Music**) for their relative simplicity, familiarity for both staff and students and ready availability. GarageBand and Thumbjam apps became firm favourites in light of their wide range of realistic, high quality instrument sounds and adaptability- both had a good range of features with user-friendly presentation. Some students enjoyed playing directly onto the iPad whilst others enjoyed using Cmpsr by Digit Music as a controller. Instrument 1 by Artiphon was a popular choice which uses its own iPad app providing various instrument sounds with an easy to use interface. Students enjoyed the Orba, also by Artiphon, particularly the drum sounds which are high quality and give haptic feedback which when held in the hand, appealed to many students.

## Trialing Phase

I used notes taken from previous trialing sessions and recommendations from classroom staff to form a list of potential participants. I considered my existing instrumental students in light of their potential to transfer skills and experience from their 1:1 instrumental tuition to this composition-based ensemble project.

Initial sessions with the digital instruments involved pairs of students who were invited to choose instruments which looked or sounded appealing. I sometimes demonstrated instruments briefly, asking them to join me or take over. Many were inquisitive enough to wade straight in to independent exploring. Intentionally, there was little structure to these sessions; I listened to what students created and shared from their explorations, observing their approach. Most sessions culminated in us all playing together, allowing me to see students interact with each other. Everyone participated enthusiastically in this- some of our improvised pieces lasted for several minutes before reaching a conclusion. Shaun played the Cajon, helping to maintain the pulse. I joined in a supportive role with piano or guitar if I felt further 'musical safety' was required, though this diminished rapidly as the students gained confidence.

Over five weeks we observed the pairs working, progressively introducing small amounts of instruction and seeing how they responded- whether they worked this into their improvised playing, and if so, how. Shaun and I selected ten students (four traditional instrumentalists and six digital musicians) to go forward to the next phase of the project.

**Our 'Pilot Group' was selected based on a combination of the following attributes;**

- an interest in the project and will to engage with and explore the instruments
- ability to form and share ideas within the group (with or without assistance)
- potential to replicate a note, chord sequence or rhythm
- an interest in ensemble playing and ability to observe basic conducting cues

## Composition Phase

### September 2022

The ten students were divided into three sub groups, each with the potential to perform as a 'complete' ensemble on its own. Those playing traditional instruments were spread across two of the groups, complimented by digital instruments. The third group comprised younger students who worked well together and gave valuable insight into designing classroom activities for their age group and learning stage.

Each sub group worked on creating a short composition which would later form a section of the finished work. Students in the first sub group devised a simple sequence comprising two chords which was then taught to the other groups; this became known as 'Intro Music', at first intended to be an introductory section, but later to become interspersed throughout the piece. We used 'Intro Music' at the start of each session as a settling activity and it became a vehicle for teaching conducting and experimenting with using different tempi, textures, dynamics and cueing players in or out.

'Raindrops', 'Spooky Music' and 'Dreams' were the results of the sub groups individual composition work; each began with using their names, at first tapping or clapping out the syllables to form rhythm sequences and then 'orchestrating' them using our instruments. I encouraged students to experiment with different sounds, octaves and playing techniques in presenting their 'musical signatures' before layering them up to create a piece of music within each sub group.



Students were invited to decide how their section should start/ stop, the order of players joining etc. We then extended these musical signatures to create a more elaborate B section for each and worked on attaching these ideas together.



### October 2022

Our ensemble started to take shape; I added the two older sub groups together from the start of each session, asking the younger sub group to join us in the last twenty minutes. We continued to use 'Intro Music' as a grounding exercise at the start and then listened to each group's individual contribution.

Using Rondo form with 'Intro Music' returning between each other section became an obvious structure for the work. I suggested the form, though encouraged students to decide the order they would like other sections to run in. We tried different options and then voted for preferences. The group decided on the following structure for 'Autograph':

*Intro Music – Raindrops - Intro Music - Spooky Music - Intro Music (with iPad drums) - Dreams - Intro Music x 2*

## Performance



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### *January 2023*

Final rehearsals leading up to the performance were staged in the school hall using the school's sound desk and PA system. Richard Green, a class teacher fulfilled the role of sound and lighting engineer. We used stage lighting to create a sense of occasion for the performers and audience who comprised their classmates, teachers and representatives from **Leicestershire Music and Orchestras Live**. We used the performance as an opportunity to collect video and audio recordings, student interviews and staff feedback to inform the next stages of the project.



### *February 2023*

Weekly sessions with the ensemble continued, building on material composed along the way but not used in the debut performance. Our material consisted of a longer, extended chord sequence where we started to experiment with different chord arrangements amongst the group, introducing chord inversions. Students opted to continue using the instruments they chose at the start of the project and are worked to create longer, more developed solo lines over the top of the extended chord sequence. One of our initial, younger students had lost interest at this stage and left the ensemble in pursuit of other activities, though left a legacy through her contribution to 'Autograph' and materials arising from it.

A new sub-group of three students were recruited to the project – they had asked to be involved in response to seeing the performance. They started in choosing and exploring their instruments ready to begin composing music of their own and are learning 'Intro Music' They will be integrated into the main group when confident, allowing the recruitment and expansion process to start a new cycle.

### *March 2023*

The CPD component of the project has started; I have spent the remainder of the Spring term observing classroom music lesson delivery alongside our Music Curriculum Lead Faye Moore. This will provide a reference point regarding skills and competencies of teaching staff with delivering music , areas where provision might be improved and where material from the accessible ensemble project can be used.

## Evaluating Our Aims

### 1. To create an accessible ensemble in Ashmount School leading to a performance

At the end of this first year, we have achieved this through a successful performance of 'Autograph', a piece composed entirely by our pilot group of students. Below is an evaluation of the challenges and outcomes of this phase of the project. The later aims regarding creating CPD resources and extending the project to other settings will be evaluated in due course.

#### Identifying and Addressing Accessibility Challenges

The question of how to make this project accessible to the most diverse range of students was presented by Abi from the outset of our planning. As a musician, my response was that in order to achieve the highest quality *musical* outcome, our pilot group need to be capable of achieving the highest quality *musical* product possible. This meant creating a work with clear identity and integrity that could be reproduced reliably in real time as a performance. The work needed to form a solid foundation to the project by having discreet sections, clear form, a reliable sense of pulse and secure harmonic structure. From this foundation, others would be able to contribute meaningfully by adding to it creatively in a range of ways.

A 'top down' model, working with more able students first was agreed as a way of pursuing the highest quality musical outcome for all; the more reliable the work was, the more opportunities could be created for those with more complex needs. In employing this 'top down' method, we have been able to address some, though certainly not all accessibility issues at the end of the first year. The pilot group, though representing a range of physical access challenges, generally comprised higher-functioning students able to communicate and reproduce their creative ideas, follow instructions, work well within a group with minimal assistance and work 'in the moment' as determined by our selection criteria at the end of the trailing phase.

We identified and responded to accessibility challenges in the following areas, expanded on below:

- *Physical access to instruments*
- *Visual and auditory challenges*
- *Proprioception*
- *Cognitive and processing challenges*
- *Engagement*



#### Physical Access to Instruments

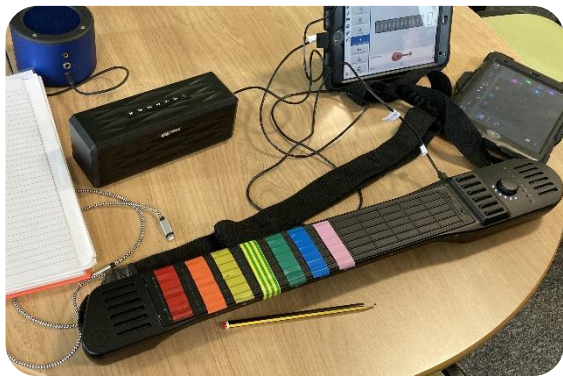
Several students in the pilot group present with physical disability; one is a wheelchair user, another with limited use of their hands, another with challenges to fine motor control. We chose to use Instrument-1 laid out lengthways on a table, as opposed to playing using a neck strap like a guitar; this enabled students to use both hands more securely- one chose to 'tap' notes with one hand whilst holding the instrument still with the other. Thumbjam on the iPad was used successfully with the 'span' expanded to give a bigger playing surface for each note, leading to greater precision and confidence in playing their part where dexterity or steadiness were compromised.

## Visual and Auditory Challenges

We used a colour-coding system to identify notes across all instruments. The scheme deliberately copies that used for Boomwhackers and Glockenspiels. Continuity was important looking ahead to classroom music makers getting involved; a red note would always be a C regardless of which instrument it is played on- no adaptation or translation would be required between instruments, so consonant, rewarding sounding harmonies could be created easily without the need for in depth music theory knowledge. Colour coding provided an accessible way for students a way to reproduce parts by 'matching' when working with letter names is not possible, maximising engagement opportunities.



A student who had chosen to work with Instrument-1 had visual impairment and struggled to use coloured dots. We adapted by using coloured tape to form bands across the fretboard, denoting more clearly the playing surface for each note or chord. Several of our pilot students had proprioceptive challenges; we could increase the sensitivity of Instrument-1 through its app to detect more subtle pressure. Another chose to play directly onto the iPad using GarageBand where she



could achieve the consistent volume and sound she wanted, regardless of differing pressure being applied. We found using Cmpsr with GarageBand enabled students increase their expressive capacity by varying the attack and dynamic of the notes (feature unavailable on Thumbjam using Cmpsr as a controller). A beginner left-hand dominant ukulele player favoured playing a conventionally strung ukulele turned upside down- this meant that he could use any available instrument without needing a specific one. He demonstrated an incredible skill in being able to mirror chord shapes and string patterns from his more experienced, right-handed ukulele partner.

We encountered few auditory challenges with our pilot group; none were hearing impaired, though several were noise sensitive. Shaun and I were careful to set individual speaker volumes to a reasonable level and avoid pops and crackles caused by unplugging active instruments. In rehearsals, we worked on increasing dynamic in our group playing through gradual crescendos and any more sudden loud passages were prepared and expected. Moving our work into the hall for the dress rehearsals and performance allowed us to work with the sound desk and PA system for the first time. We practiced similar care here, ensuring that sudden loud sounds were avoided.

The group responded very positively to being able to hear their instruments louder or amplified for the first time, many commenting on how different or exciting they sounded. Our traditional instrumentalists had to work close to microphones for the first time, adapting positions to play into the microphone or in some cases, avoid hitting it with the bow! We spent time listening to each instrument played in this new, louder way before playing together as an ensemble. Our rehearsals and then performance were progressively a little louder each time to acclimatize students within safe limits- we were also mindful of not overwhelming our audience!

## Cognitive and Processing Challenges

Whilst most students were able to maintain their part in time with the other players, there were two examples of us needing to accommodate difficulties. The first was a drum part designed by a student initially with the Orba then transferred onto GarageBand's drum machine on the iPad. We had worked on him playing in real time in rehearsals to varying effect; some attempts being more successful than others. The musical and creative qualities of his contribution were high and an important component of the performance, though Shaun and I decided that as part of the rhythm section, it needed to be reliable enough to enable the rest of the ensemble to stay together. We adapted our approach by setting up a drum track he had designed, to be triggered by pressing play when directed during the performance. His attention was absolute; he watched attentively, triggering the drum track reliably and then stopping when asked. He enjoyed practising this element of the performance and it appeared to elevate his status within the group, "I have a really important part now don't I?"



Another student had designed a more complex chord sequence to play during 'Dreams' which she pre-recorded and triggered in the same way. She was able to play the less complex 'Intro Music' sequence in real time, so she was still able to effect a valid, creative contribution to suit her needs in both sections. More recently, in our sub group of new starters, a student with cognitive processing delay who struggles to work in the moment is working on creating samples of highly creative melodic work to record and then trigger in performance.

Visual prompts have been intentionally kept to a minimum; there have been short excerpts of melodies notated simply by letters (a student was required to learn another's composition as part of the performance) and we have more recently used coloured dot notation to explore a more complex idea, the 'extended sequence'. The group have favoured 'learning by doing', committing both individual parts and the overall structure of the work to memory. We practised the piece building up in stages to reinforce the order as well as using signing in my conducting for each section. In the composition stages of the project, I penciled down key ideas from each student's work each week to use as a prompt to get them started again in the following session, though the students were generally able to retain more detail than I was, so soon became responsible for their own part. The group members helped each other recall ideas meaning that very little content was lost from between sessions.

In the earlier stages, we encountered a few challenges to student focus, most notably in the excitement of working with iPads (often perceived as a 'reward' by students) and in introducing new and interesting controllers and instruments. Shaun and I addressed this in two ways; by allowing plenty of exploration time in the first instance and then by restricting functionality in designated 'work time'. The common availability of and familiarity with iPads meant that students were automatically confident in both using them... and wanting to test out all of their apps/buttons/sounds!! We intentionally slowed down students' approach in exploring these, encouraging them to stick with a certain instrument interface or sound for long enough to determine whether or not they liked it and could elicit the effect they wanted from it, rather than hastily discarding it in favour of more and more choices.

Limiting choices by asking students to choose between two they had previously shown preference for was another way of refining our efforts. With certain students, Guided Access settings on the iPad (locks the screen at a set point and limits functionality of buttons/menus) was an asset, as was the ability to cover over buttons on the Cmpsr unit (updated version now features a lock facility). There was a balance to achieve here between restricting options enough to get working, though not too much to hamper creativity or direct an outcome. Lack of resistance from the students and their increasing engagement in working together suggested we'd achieved an effective compromise here.



## Engagement Challenges

The emergence of 'Intro Music' as an area of common competency across the groups was invaluable for positive engagement; on coming together as a large group for the first time, every student was able to join in and contribute fully from the very first moment. All were primed and set up for success; everyone knew their part, when we would start and finish and what they expected the music to sound like. They were sat within their smaller groups, amongst familiar players and sounds, yet part of a bigger picture.



'Intro Music' was an instant success- the look of joy and achievement from every student and adult in the room was immeasurable! For the first time, our pilot group students with their varying access challenges, had experienced meaningful ensemble playing on an equal footing. This success inspired them to work hard in our coming activities; this positive first 'big' experience instilled trust in me as their leader and conferred safety and belief in their cohesion as an ensemble. 'Intro Music' intentionally features no melody line, providing a basis to be improvised over by students who may not wish or be able to reproduce a fixed part later in the project.



The Rondo (ABACA) musical form of the piece was a conscious creative decision and a deliberate engagement strategy. It ensured that each member of the group would never be idle for too long, reducing their potential to lose concentration; everyone had a role in the 'Intro Music', so even when other sub group's ideas were in play, it would only be a short time before they'd be cued back in again. Additionally, 'Intro Music' was distinctive and bounded, so momentary lapses in concentration could be re-aligned within the safety of this less demanding passage. Rondo form offered an obvious way of attaching together the sections in a musically interesting way; variety balanced with the reliability of a familiar section reappearing, like the chorus of a song.



Shaun and I had debated the idea of teaching all of the students to play all of the sections, though dismissed it upon realising how much would need to be memorised by each performer and the potential therein for confusion! Students could be more confident with less variety of material to play and their status as 'expert' within their own section was a strength that should be retained. We briefly tried running one group's composition directly into another, without 'Intro Music' inbetween. Musically this proved too challenging for the group at this point; maintaining integrity through the 'jump' was difficult and students didn't seem confident or convinced by it. The relative stability and predictability of 'Intro Music' which was technically easier for them to transition from and to remained their preference, so we carried this forward.

As a group, we had devised a signing system, based on Makaton signing to signal the transition between each section. Preparing the ensemble early enough for the section ahead with one hand and maintaining conducting with the other hand were personal challenges which took practice to perfect! I considered using other visual cues like boards held up to indicate section changes, though decided that keeping player's attention on me was more important for the continuity of the music.

## Positive Working Relationships

Shaun and I were fortunate in being able to work with a group of confident, well-adjusted students who are exemplars of the ethos of Ashmount School. Interaction between peers was always positive and supportive—particularly in light of the minimal staffing available for sessions. The group responded positively to suggestions and worked hard to impress at every stage.

Beginning with pairs of students in the trialing phase enabled Shaun and I to get to know students and their preferences well, building positive working relationships from the outset; we identified students who needed help in voicing their ideas and choices and became attuned to them being communicated. Shaun’s background as a volunteer in the school had enabled him to work closely with students; he advocated for their previous musical experiences and skills, sharing details that the students themselves may not have felt confident in sharing with me at this early stage in our relationship.



Shaun’s percussion work, most notably his Cajon playing was invaluable in providing stability in group work, leading by example and inviting less confident or inexperienced players to feel safe within the music. There was a real sense of investment and shared capital from all of the students right from the outset; everyone wanted to succeed, both individually and collectively.

Staff visiting our sessions have embraced the opportunities presented to work in new and interesting ways.

## Trialing Group Sizes and Session Lengths

The model suggested in planning by Ben Sellers (Supervisor) whereby small groups would first compose music before being added together to form a single, larger group was an excellent strategy for positive engagement. Students had the experience of expressing themselves musically and experimenting in the safety of a small, familiar setting. Shaun and I could welcome and celebrate each contribution, nurturing confidence to present ideas in a bigger group, with each student working as a musician in their own right.

Smaller group situations were advantageous for teaching technique with the instruments; students felt more confident in taking risks in a more contained setting. Where we improvised together, smaller groups enabled Shaun and I to ‘hear’ and appreciate every part in the music, offering encouragement, guidance and praise where required. As we added the groups together, students already had a good idea of what their instrument could achieve and were excited to show it off to others, many of whom wouldn’t have seen or heard it before—this worked to give every student identity as a musician and a sense of pride in showing off their work and sharing their discoveries.

Students worked well in 20-30 minute sessions during the trialing and composition phases; there was enough time to welcome and settle before leading into creative time. We ended each session either with showing our work or playing together which students enjoyed. The session length extended to 60 minutes when the whole group assembled together; the first 30-40 minutes was the two older sub groups converged before bringing in the third, younger group for the last 20 minutes. This gave the older students time to try different options within their work, discussing and voting for their preferences. The younger students who couldn’t remain focused for as long, were able to enjoy a fresh, productive opportunity where our ideas were already fairly secure and rehearsed. Younger students did have less creative control over the structure of the composition as a whole, though their discreet ‘Dreams’ section remained a prominent feature, enhanced by additional solo material provided by older students. Final rehearsals before the performance were kept similarly short and engaging, with a couple of run-throughs of the work each time.

## Agency and New Opportunities for Students

We have sought to address the deficit in creative instrumental ensemble opportunities in Ashmount School identified prior to the start of this project. Some of the pilot group had previously been involved with choral or ukulele groups and curriculum music sessions though none had participated in an instrument-based creative project before.

The colour-coding system for notes offered an 'easy' approach to composition; no prior knowledge of note names or scales were required and 'choosing colour patterns' presented a familiar activity that all felt comfortable with from the outset. In trialing sessions, some students extrapolated musical interpretation from colour choosing, commenting that "red, orange, yellow looks good, but ....sounds better".

Students were able to exercise agency and feel equality in every stage of the process; selecting instruments and sounds in the trialing phase, designing chord sequences and melodic material in the composition phase and then voting to determine the work's overall structure. This was the first time some students had been given the opportunity to work with a tuned instrument, and for some, their first experience of group playing. For most, this was their first opportunity to be part of a musical performance. Students who were unaccustomed to taking a leading role in other areas of school life did so for the first time with complete commitment and without question. A teaching assistant who saw the performance commented,

***"...something that stood out for us was S. Seeing her up in front of an audience performing and looking so happy and confident was fabulous to witness. She's usually so self-conscious and uncomfortable. She really enjoyed taking part and spoke so positively afterwards about it to me..."***

JN, Teaching Assistant, Ashmount School.

My position as a 'new' collaborator with some students brought the benefit that I had no pre-existing idea of their strengths, competencies or typical behaviours; I was unaware of what kind of role new students were likely to take, hence the whole spectrum of opportunities was available for them to create their own musical identity and find their place within the ensemble.

## Legacy

The cultural capital created by this first stage of the project is considerable and far-reaching. For our pilot group, the experience of instrument learning, playing collectively within a peer group and presenting their own ideas in a performance will remain in lasting memory. Forming and sharing individual musical identity, on equal footing has been both uplifting and empowering and has allowed our young people to experience the expressive potential of the arts. A lasting legacy will remain in the increased likelihood that participants will continue to engage in other creative and cultural activities both in school and beyond in wider society.

Our performance was a first for the audience too; the first time that some students had seen any kind of musical performance given further weight by coming at a time where, after Covid-19 restrictions, gathering together in the hall was still a novel occurrence. We had worked hard to build a real 'sense of occasion' for everyone; the ensemble played with digital instruments on microphone stands, arranged like an orchestra sat in sections with me conducting at the front.

We used the school's sound system and stage lighting with Richard Green working as our sound engineer. He responded sensitively to the student's playing, adjusting levels to ensure every student's individual 'voice' was heard during the performance as it had been in composition. I wanted to achieve a professional set-up, elevating the status of our musicians to that of the role models they have seen on the stage or screen. We practiced performance conventions like standing/turning to the conductor before the performance and again at the end to receive applause, imparting a culturally authentic experience for all involved.

Feedback from students captured by Kirsty North immediately after the performance is represented in the word cloud (right). Student comments were overwhelmingly positive; all students expressed that they had enjoyed the project sessions and performance. Although some had felt nervous prior to performing, they had been excited to perform and valued the experience overall, many wanting "to do it again!"



Our efforts captivated the audience,

*"Class 5 loved seeing the performance, it was amazing to see how the pupils were really engaged and focused. They all seemed really excited to be showcasing the new skills they had learnt..."* AM, Class Teacher

*"I sat with class 11 and watched the performance yesterday afternoon. The students watching were all engaged and happy. One of our students who doesn't always like being in the hall, managed to stay and was engaged for the whole session and was showing a lot of happiness through vocalising and facial expressions for the whole performance."* JN, Teaching Assistant

The excitement created by the performance has inspired audience members to get involved; we have started to accommodate interested students in our new starters group as Ashmount's ensemble continues to grow,

*"I have had 4 pupils in my class show a great interest in joining the music production since the show and there appears to be a real buzz about the performance."* AM, class teacher



## Technical Development, Knowledge Building and Creativity

In group working, emphasis has so far been on developing ensemble playing skills and composition with less attention given to technical development. Students would now benefit from building confidence and technique, giving them a broader toolkit of creative options. Technical development has been easier to achieve for students receiving weekly tuition on traditional instruments where their work in lessons has invariably been able to support project work. For those working with digital instruments, this has been more challenging to achieve; in the trialing phase, we were very much 'getting started' with basic technique which could now be expanded upon. I plan to schedule time for pairs/ small group work in the next phase to address this imbalance.

Shaun has identified a talent for drumming and percussion in one student who he has worked 1:1 with to transfer skills to the Congo drum. He can now play a basic pattern and has successfully brought this into sessions, offering a different sound to the group. We will benefit from new samples courtesy of Digit Music and their Global Sound Culture pack which we have been given in exchange for showcasing their instrument. This will offer more creative opportunities to both ensemble and classroom work. As other groups bring different instruments and ideas, the soundscape will change, presenting increased creative opportunities for all.



Composition methods so far have been rooted in either rhythmic representation of names or in choosing coloured dot sequences. I will expand on this by encouraging students to create chord inversions within their sequences and introduce basic music theory ideas (degrees of the scale, major/ minor tonality). This will give students confidence in exploring melodies in a less confined, more organic way. We have already begun to choose and experience different time signatures in our work to enhance variety.

## CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS

- Technical Development, knowledge building and creativity
- Expanding ensemble participants
- Meaningful inclusion and awareness for PMLD students
- Creating resources and disseminating 'Autograph' into the classroom

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## Expanding Ensemble Participants

We have started to recruit new players to our ensemble in the form of the smaller 'side group', additionally existing groups within the school will be well placed to access future, larger scale performances. Classroom activities in our forthcoming CPD work will teach sections of the work to more students, starting with our basic chord model, 'Intro Music' which also offers the opportunity to create improvised melodic lines over the top. As we develop new material, we will continue to produce sections with solid, clearly defined chord sequences to offer space for both improvised and fixed melodic contributions from all students.

## Meaningful inclusion and awareness for PMLD students

As we extend our musical offer to PMLD (Profound and multiple learning difficulty) students with increasing access challenges, we need to consider and address what constitutes 'meaningful' inclusion for this group. It would be all too easy to fall into the trap of offering the 'tokenistic' approach identified in researching the project, albeit with digital instruments as opposed to classroom percussion.

In this next phase, we aspire to create greater connection between cause and effect for PMLD learners, making more explicit the link between playing and hearing/ experiencing. Using video to this end will be our starting point. Widening the range of instruments we work with will be essential in the next stage. Many of our PMLD students already work with eye gaze technology in their day to day work and some have used the Eye Harp in Music Therapy.

In Autumn term 2022 Ceri Adams (Music Therapist) and Tanvi Muir (volunteer musician) led a group for five students with PMLD using an improvisational model of Music Therapy. Although this was a Music Therapy group, the sessions were led with the wider ensemble project in mind. Music technology such as the CMPSR midi controllers, Soundbeam, and iPad apps including ThumbJam, Keezy and AUMI were used alongside traditional acoustic instruments. Classroom Support Assistants (CSAs) who attended these sessions alongside the students have since continued to use Music Technology with the same group, in a different guise. We're looking forward to incorporating this work into ensemble performances in the future.

## Ceri Adams

BA Music - University of York (2013) , MA Music Therapy - Anglia Ruskin University (2016)

**Ceri is Ashmount School's Music Therapist. Ceri uses music to support with the pupil's engagement and wellbeing. She loves this job as it enables her to use her skills as a musician to connect with others. Originally a flute player, Ceri loves discovering new music and instruments!**



### **Music with PMLD students**

*by Music Therapist, Ceri Adams*

*In my experience as a Music Therapist for young people with PMLD, a relational approach has been essential to their engagement and understanding of cause and effect. This involves being attentive and responsive to changes in the person's facial expression, vocal sounds, body movements, breath, direction of gaze or changes in skin tone. These changes may be subtle and it can take time to build up understanding of each individual. Talking to those who know the young person well, and taking time to analyse video recordings after sessions can help to develop this. The young people's responses can then be used to help direct the music. For example, a person's rocking or foot movements could set the pulse for the music. It is equally important to observe the signs that the student no longer wants to engage (frowning, turning away, or appearing to 'go to sleep'). This aim is to amplify the student's sense of control over the music, and put their voices as centrally as possible.*

*This was the approach used in our pilot Music Therapy group which involved five young people with a range of complex needs. All group members appeared to be responsive to music, with varying levels of awareness ranging from an individual whose music making appeared largely unintentional, to an individual who was able to use yes and no arm bands to make simple choices about instrumentation and demonstrated clear awareness of gaze-based conducting (smiling and laughing as I began to play when he looked at me).*

*The iPad app AUMI proved particularly helpful for one of our group members with very limited hand movements. The app enabled her to use small head movements to play a cello sound which she could see being activated on the screen. The only limitation was that there appeared to be some initial confusion with Eye Gaze software, as AUMI is not activated by gaze but has a similar appearance. The Eye Harp was also accessible to her however (as far as I could tell) the range of sounds available was more limited. Thumbjam was useful for those with limited hand movements as they could make a sound easily, although some under hand/ under elbow support from CSAs was required for individuals so that they could release the sound.*

*Two of the individuals in the group appeared less responsive to the music technology instruments, when compared to traditional acoustic instruments. Possibly, the vibratory feedback from the acoustic instruments was more alerting for them. Some of the music technology instruments (e.g. CMPSR, Orba) do provide haptic feedback but this is currently a much smaller sensation than can be achieved with a guitar or piano. It may be worth trialling a large speaker on a resonance board to enable them to feel the music as well as hear it. This was not possible with this group due to space constraints, but could be of importance particularly considering difficulties with vision and hearing that may be present for some with PMLD. Another option could be to incorporate other haptic feedback tools such as the Woojer Strap Edge or HUMU Augmented Audio Cushion.*

*For the majority of group members, vocal sounds were one of their primary forms of expression. Often, I respond to these with my own voice to create musical babbling exchanges. This is something that can be achieved by a confident and responsive CSA by listening to the shape of the vocalisation and singing a similar length phrase back, or simply singing the student's name back to them. CSAs reported that they felt the use of the app 'Keezy' had been effective. In these sessions we played primarily acoustic music but recorded some of the student's vocal sounds throughout the session using the Keezy app. This allowed us to play looped recordings of the student's vocal sounds back to them. In the ensemble context (where composition is a key part of the experience) I wonder if it might be possible to expand on these ideas and perhaps use the shape of these vocal sounds as the basis for a melody?*

*PMLD students may be able to take a simple role in conducting the music in ensemble sessions. One activity consistent in all our Music Therapy sessions was 'show me when to play'. Here staff would play in response to an individual's spontaneous vocal sound or clap. Students with a higher level of awareness were able to use gaze to this effect by looking at the person or instrument that they wanted to hear. In a mixed ability group, it may be possible for the ensemble to begin playing after a cue from a PMLD student.*

Thinking to the next phase of the ensemble project, I have compiled the following list of anticipated challenges and practical ideas to support bringing PMLD students into the ensemble.

<b>Anticipated Challenges</b>	<b>Potential Solutions</b>
<i>PMLD ensemble members are likely to play their music differently each time.</i>	<i>Include improvised sections within a wider piece. Some ensemble members may add sound effects which fit over the top of pre-composed music. Soundbeam switches could be used to activate pre-recorded sections of audio and/or video.</i>
<i>Group members may have large wheelchairs, and medical equipment which takes up space in the room. Using stands to hold iPads, or instruments such as Eye Harp (Eye gaze) adds to the floor space required which may limit their usage in smaller spaces.</i>	<i>Access to a large space to work in</i>
<i>Music technology based instruments may have less resonant properties than acoustic instruments resulting</i>	<i>Use of a larger speaker with a student sitting on a resonance board. Use resonant acoustic instruments (e.g. guitar, piano) alongside music technology. Trial other haptic feedback devices.</i>
<i>Medical needs may take precedent during an allocated performance time. This can impact staffing for other ensemble members, as those who have been supporting in sessions may suddenly be needed elsewhere.</i>	<i>Use of video recordings from sessions so they are still virtually present. Have reserve support assistants who are prepared to support with music.</i>
<i>Access to directional speakers in a performance context</i>	<i>Carefully consider speaker set up so the sound is coming from a speaker next to them rather than the main PA system.</i>
<i>Translating relational approach to a performance context. From an audience perspective, can we make it evident that the PMLD ensemble members are influencing the music?</i>	<i>Play a silent reel of video recordings from sessions during performance to capture facial expressions from rehearsals. Have a live streamed video amplifying facial expressions and body movements which happen in the moment on screen. Verbally interpret the music prior to performance e.g. 'we start a rhythmic section as N claps' or 'when C looks at the conductor we start to play'.</i>
<i>Many students with PMLD have slower response times. How can space for them to respond be created in an ensemble context?</i>	<i>Do dramatically contrasting sections of music help? Is there scope for some slower, sparser sections of music?</i>
<i>Performance environment may inhibit or change the way they engage (e.g. bright lights move attention away from music).</i>	<i>Trial different performance setups that are most suitable for young person. Accept that their response in performance may be different. Consider the role the change in sensory environment signals to the young person that they are involved in a performance.</i>
<i>Being able to listen to the voice of a more subtle communicator in a wider ensemble.</i>	<i>Students with PMLD to have a responsive CSA supporting them and advocating for their musical input when appropriate. Avoiding making assumptions about musical ability based on physical presentation.</i>

	<i>Record sessions and analyse individual responses where possible.</i>
<i>Helping to develop students understanding of what is happening.</i>	<i>Use of a familiar piece of music at the beginning and end of the session. Ceri can provide backing tracks or chord sheets for her songs 'Together' and 'Never Stop' to be used to this end for anyone who requests it.</i>

### Creating resources and disseminating 'Autograph'... into the classroom and beyond!

I am in the process of creating a score for 'Autograph' as a basis for disseminating it into the classroom. I will create resources both in staff notation for those able to use it and more accessible visual formats (i.e. Figure Notes or colour sequences) in addition to sound recordings and backing tracks. Our work to date has generated a vast array of photographs, videos, sound recordings, feedback testimonials and staff interviews. Ben Sellers working with MEHEM has recruited a video artist to work these into a promotional video documenting our journey so far. Additionally, training videos will be made for use in staff training from these raw materials.

Beyond Ashmount School, Shaun and I have been invited to speak about our experiences with this project at MEHEM's annual conference in June 2023, enabling us to spread the ideas and method behind our work here to a bigger audience of both SEND and mainstream settings who support additional needs.

### ....what next?

#### There are exciting developments on the horizon...

- I am transcribing our composition, 'Autograph' for use in developing materials to expand the reach of our composition to ukulele groups/class groups in Ashmount School with the hope that they will become involved with mass performances.
- Weekly student and staff ukulele groups have been established alongside this project by Ceri Adams. Ceri is also planning to run her sessions using accessible technology for PMLD students in the Autumn term.
- Ben Sellers has arranged a video artist to work on producing a promotional video from the footage we have gathered. This will contribute to materials to use in the coming stages.
- Shaun and I have been asked to showcase this project at the forthcoming MEHEM annual conference in June 2023. We will present the outcomes of this project alongside practical information to encourage/ enable other settings to create an accessible ensemble of their own.
- Shaun has been asked to promote himself as a musician with disability; we currently have a funding bid in consideration for a side project to train him as a drum and percussion teacher in Ashmount School. This will yield enormous benefits for Shaun both personally and professionally. Additionally, enhanced value will be achieved in developing further expertise to train students for the accessible ensemble project who work with drums and percussion.
- Digit Music have asked Ashmount School to partner with them in showcasing their educational offer as early investors in their Cmpsr instrument. In return for free use of their newly developed Global Sound Culture Sample packs, we will provide video footage and feedback to assist in their research and development.
- Preparations have begun to launch this project into another setting from September 2023 with the intention of being able to work towards a massed performance alongside Ashmount School in the future.

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## Conclusion

In response to our intentions at the start of this project, this first stage has yielded great achievement; we have established an accessible ensemble in Ashmount School where students have been given agency and autonomy, leading the way at every stage in the creative process. They have been encouraged to develop and explore creative musical identities of their own and work together as a group to compose and perform 'Autograph', a work which is truly 'their music'.

Through supported co-creation, every student's individual 'voice' has been celebrated and heard within the context of corporate playing where they have collaborated on equal footing, despite their various and complex access challenges. This has enhanced the status of our young people, enabling them to lead, experiment and influence their own learning. This project exemplifies the ethos that creative endeavours for young people with additional needs should place them at the front of creative steering; the project should be done *by them*, rather than *for them*.

A composition-based approach was invariably the right choice for this group in terms of accessibility, identity and ownership. A more prescriptive, traditional approach where young people work alongside professional musicians in collaboration, rather than being the creators themselves, though valid in its own way, didn't seem like a suitable vehicle for this project.

The 'Top Down' method working with more able students first has enabled us to create a high quality musical product with potential to involve students with wider access challenges on a level suitable for their needs in future. The model has also highlighted the gulf between musical opportunities commonly available for the more able and the lack thereof for students with very complex needs, presenting an obvious area to be addressed in our coming work.

We have certainly managed to surpass the "somewhat tokenistic" offerings referenced earlier for some students with complex needs, though this represents the tip of a huge iceberg that needs addressing from multiple perspectives. To progress our offer, we must consider the term 'accessible' from all angles; physical accessibility, engagement, musical identity and intent, ensuring our most complex learners really can participate and contribute creatively and on an even footing.



**Ashmount School Accessible Ensemble**

An in-school accessible ensemble with a focus on composition and nurturing Disabled educators.

MEHEM have commissioned a documentary film about our accessible ensemble project. It forms part of their award-winning 'Resource Balloon' and is available, alongside other inclusive ensemble projects at:

<https://www.uprisingballoon.com/inclusive-ensembles>