

## 1. Permission to Land!

After many months of planning and fundraising we were delighted to finally depart for Sri Lanka and discover where 'Before Language – exploring universal phrases of music and movement' would take us, both artistically and culturally. Through generous support from friends, family and believers of our work we were thrilled to deliver good news to our partners that we would be joining them in Sri Lanka. Our trip would see us research and develop how music and movement can be used to connect cultures, by delivering workshops focused on the exchange of our artistic languages through three separate organisations: The Ocean Stars charity in Batticaloa, The Serendipity Trust in Galle, and The Music Project at one of their bases in Kurunegala. Alongside this work we would travel between many parts of the country to research the artistic approaches of musicians and performers through observing their work and discussing their processes as well as to gather artistic inspiration that could be developed in to a performance piece which touches upon the anthropology of dance and ethnomusicology, soon to be premiered in the New Year! We wanted to arrive there with an open mind and therefore tried to let go of our pre-conceptions and expectations as far as possible.



## 2. Embracing the Kandyan Elements

One Costa coffee at Heathrow Terminal 4, an eight-hour flight, one stop in Qatar, a further five-hour flight and a four-hour drive later, we arrived in the serene hilltop city of Kandy considered to be the cultural centre of Sri Lanka. The sight of monkeys, palm trees, fresh coconuts and giant lizards accompanied by sounds of fresh running streams, children happily playing at school and the cacophony of horns from 'flexible' three-wheeler 'Tuk Tuk' drivers, was a vibrant enough atmosphere to keep us on our toes despite lagging eyes. That evening we visited the Kandyan Cultural Centre to watch an array of traditional dances including the famous 'Kandyan Dance' and masked 'Devil Dance' from the South amongst integral drumming cycles learnt through aural tradition. Occasionally the sound of the two-headed hand-drum, the Dholak, blended a little too well with the unyielding monsoon rain on the tin roof but the Hakgediya, a conch shell used as a horn, pierced through with enough self-satisfaction! A call to prayer amplified over the whole city drew us to the Temple of the Tooth, where Buddha's tooth is guarded. Here we reached a ceremony of disciplined musical ritual, sounding

spacious drum calls outlined by the wondering line of a trumpet. Absorbed in Sri Lankan culture we were full-to-the-brim with artistic inspiration, fuelling our eight-hour car journey across the country to the East Coast where we would begin our workshop itinerary and in return, share our

## 3. Setting Sail

In the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka lies the former capitol city of Sri Lanka, Batticaloa - home to a tender community who have been vastly affected by both the 26-year civil war and the Tsunami of 2004.

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The Ocean Stars Trust teachers

## (Continued)

In a binding mass-effort to re-build shattered lives, several inspirational organisations exist and thrive from a collective optimism. Amongst them is The Ocean Stars Trust founded in 2005 by UK based Sri Lankan, Dilanee Bunter. The Trust offers communities a route out of poverty through a range of educational and livelihood projects, currently supporting thirteen nursery schools and over 200 children in the Batticaloa area. Providing teacher training and peer support schemes with teachers in the UK, Ocean Stars Trust promotes the sharing of best practice between the countries. This is where Music Off Canvas slotted in – our workshops would offer 30 nursery school teachers a cross-cultural sharing of music and movement as a tool for social understanding and integration. As this was our first workshop in Sri Lanka, we were eager to find out how the participants would respond to our cross-arts experimental performance style, cross-cultural topic and interactive creative tasks. We introduced ourselves through the performance of a small piece inspired by the sounds and movements of Japanese, German and Ugandan cultures. This was a way of sharing our art, highlighting the universal nature of music and movement and setting the scene for activities to follow. None of the participants had seen nor heard the western classical flute, oboe or contemporary dance before, thus it was very touching to witness our sounds and gestures so immediately affecting them. It was apparent that a wealth of exchange was to follow. Although perhaps a little perplexed by the experimental style of our work, smiles around the room exposed a sense of intrigue, paralleled with fear of what activities were to come!

“Close your eyes and listen to the sounds in the room” was the first instruction. In an activity designed to highlight sound as a universally accessible element of music, we endeavored to create a unique musical texture through the participants’ copying of sounds from their environment. The ‘tsssss’ sound of the air conditioning seemed a popular choice... in fact the only choice and despite exploring further access routes, it soon became clear that such creative exercises were completely unfamiliar territory. From that point onwards we focused on one very important detail; as passionate artists of complete creative freedom the greatest gift we could share was to develop and enhance their creativity through the encouragement of individuality and diversity in perception and through this we would be improving their accessibility to connect with others on a universal plane. Improvisatory responses on the flute and oboe to the miscellaneous sounds of shaking of bangles, footsteps, whispers or laughter soon began to establish that even the smallest sounds could be of musical significance and could reveal personal identity too.



The Ocean Stars Trust teachers exploring creativity

Soon enough, the whole room was inventing rhythms through body percussion and vocal improvisation, accompanied by the blossoming of smiles. Back to closed eyes, but this time an exercise in awakening the imagination. Movement specialist Niamh McKernan guided participants through the creation of a surrounding bubble, filled with colours, textures, sounds and smells unique to each individual. The teachers slowly freed up to confident, whole body movements in exploration of the bubbles’ existence. Two hours later and the teachers were creating their own music and movement pieces in groups, albeit tentatively. Our workshop plan had been turned on its head by focusing on the one detail, but the exploration of a new direction, purpose and exchange of knowledge had planted some very important seeds that was to inform the rest of our time in Sri Lanka.

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(Continued) The next day we arrived at St. Cecilia's Girls National School, slightly nervous about the expected 150 children! Heart rates returned to normal as the Saturday morning brought in an enthusiastic 50 children. Some tear-jerking moments arose as we were ceremoniously presented an all singing, all dancing "Circle of Life" from The Lion King and introduced with such sincerity and care to the teachers and pupils of the school. Informed by our previous day's work, we had altered our workshop plan to accommodate for the potentially reduced levels of creativity. We discovered that their ability to respond to copying tasks was outstanding, most apparent in their extraordinary rhythmic uniformity during 'call and response'. Thinking of their own ideas however was more of a problem, but we found that persistence was the key as we relentlessly coaxed group creations. The performances were very interesting to watch - we were intrigued to see how much of their material was original and confidently presented or pasted together from workshop exercises. There was a real mix in levels of creativity but as the music teacher said, they had engaged with the arts "in a totally different way".

#### 4. Full Steam Ahead!

The jolting motion of the Sri Lankan train was accented by its tired and rickety clunk and as though aged or weary, it often slowed to a stop at stations for up to an hour at a time. Carrying us through such spectacular views through the central Hill Country for eight hours however, was hardly a drag. We travelled through tea plantations scattered with Tamil tea pickers performing their distinct skill, rode hills ranging from 'Teletubby Land' to Alpine contours, chased clouds to the mists of the summit level and even passed a humorous mockery of the 'Hollywood' hillside sign this time displaying 'Edinburgh' in honour of the Scotsman James Taylor responsible for the success of 'Ceylon Tea' in the 1860's



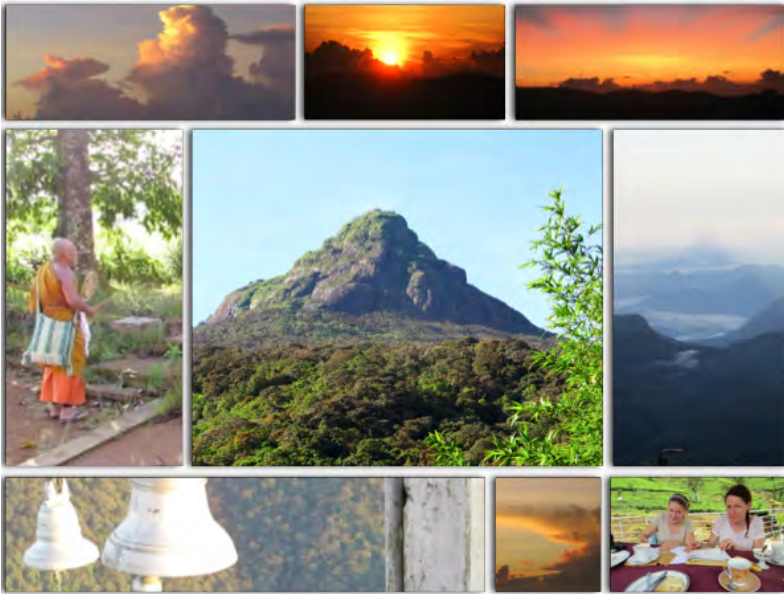
#### 5. Understanding Territory

When we arrived at our destination, another two hour 'Tuk Tuk' journey dropped us at 'Adam's Peak' - a rock formation near the summit which in Buddhist tradition is held to be the footprint of Buddha, in Hindu tradition the Shiva and in Islamic and Christian tradition that of Adam in the Garden of Eden. It was a good job we arrived in the darkness, as a 7359 ft. tall conical mountain towering above us may not have been a sight to encourage the seven-hour hike that followed our two-hour nap!

Our final afternoon in Batticaloa was spent visiting the Ocean Stars Trust office where the life and affects of the charity became even more powerfully communicated. The space was tiny but the walls were covered in pride. Star stickers representing nurseries, pin-dropped on to a map of the area resembled the expanse of their work and photomontages of volunteers and trustees shined as pinnacles of hope. It was here that the remarkable Ranchan, manager of Ocean Stars Trust sat with us as we ate beautifully prepared, fresh seafood and shared his real and raw story of the Tsunami. With knowing eyes he spoke of a folk tale passed through the generations, of a male wave chasing a female wave at sea, believed to cause complete destruction when they meet. Our artistic inspiration began to ripple...



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(Continued) As a site of universal significance across the Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Catholics, Muslims and six ethnicities of a previously civil war-torn Sri Lanka, we felt it was important for our project to understand and experience a physical place which could connect Sri Lanka's people beyond cultural differences – something we wanted to replicate through our offerings of music and movement. It felt like a place of harmonious sanctuary and the sunrise described exactly that as we watched the sky change through a whole spectrum of colours in absolute silence. The only sound to be heard was the deep resonant bell from a Temple on the Western side, ringing out over a shadow of the mountain, cast upon the landscape in

opposition to the rising sun. Upon our descent the sounds of the landscape awoke and the music of waterfalls, birds, crickets and monkeys formed a structured symphony as the distant sound of a drum came in to play. An orange-robed, Japanese monk bowed and passed with drum in hand, striding through his daily journey to the peak. Exhausted but buzzing from such an experience, we made our way back to base and sat down to a large glass of freshly squeezed fruit juice and put pen to paper to write our "Wish You Were Here" crowdfunding postcards.

## 6. Finding an Approach

We arrived in Galle following an extremely hot and long car journey from Adam's Peak through the hill country, winding our way past the outskirts of Colombo and down the coastal road. Chami, the driver for the charity and a generous, gracious person who looked after us exceptionally (even treating us to his mother's legendary curries which were truly delicious) greeted us at the Serendipity Trust Office. Later that evening we met Mary, an exceptional lady from England who dedicates six months every year to developing the English teaching methods in Sri Lanka through sharing experiential ways of learning.

The office came to life the next morning and we met Bec Lyons, the inspiring manager behind the charity as well as the other fantastic and dedicated members of the team, including Ravi who was to be our guide and translator for the day. We all four squeezed into the 'Tuk Tuk' to Kalahe Sri Sumangala School where we were taken promptly to see the headmaster! We were not in trouble, but simply respecting the custom for every visitor and pupil to stop by the head's office before going to class, no matter what time they arrive! Our strongest reaction to this workshop was one of surprise and we were struck by how difficult it was to encourage the children to react in an individual way to the tasks we set, or to come up with new ideas as individuals. We had previously experienced this with the teachers of Ocean Stars Trust, but perhaps one expects adults to struggle slightly more than children when it comes to freedom of the imagination! The five groups of students produced pieces in which the material was effectively the same, with the execution being the only varying element.

After speaking to Bec and Mary about our discoveries and hearing of their similar experiences in creative tasks we set about revising the workshop in preparation for Ankokkowala Sri Sumangala School the following day. In order to awaken their creative minds we tried an approach, which would provide them with a more tangible route to creativity. We asked the groups to think of landscapes or environments they were familiar with, and could therefore imagine, as inspiration for their pieces. This strong connection meant they were then more easily engaged in a creative process and the different groups' work became more distinctive as a result, even incorporating musical instruments. Our project direction was now affirmed with the promotion of using creativity to connect people, as its greatest asset.



## 7 Unchartered Territory

It was a coincidence to say the least when we received an email from the Smile Vocational and Educational Center for Disabled in Unawatuna who had found out about our special needs workshops through our website and happened to be just down the road from where we were staying! We paid a visit to Anusha Liyanage, the Project Co-Ordinator there who informed us that no music happens at the school currently and that they are still looking to appoint a music teacher. Fresh from our workshop that morning and with our instruments in our rucksacks, we were pleased to be able to play a little for the students. We encouraged them to move and dance with the music and even had requests for songs such as 'Twinkle, twinkle little star' and the English national anthem! Following two action-packed days in Galle, that night

we discovered a dip in the sea and an amazing seafood dinner on the beach cooked by locals was an excellent way to relax!



## 9. All Aboard!

Forget 80 days, an inflatable globe passed around a circle of 4-8 year olds at 'MILK!' took us on a whirlwind tour of music and dance from around the world, in two hours!



## 10. A Well-travelled Man

Whilst in Colombo we had arranged to visit the Arpeggio Creative Dancing Academy, which has been running for 20 years and offers talented students dance training at no cost. We were excited to meet the brains behind the Academy, Nilan Maligaspe who discussed with us his creative process, the logistics behind putting on the large-scale productions and also how he selects dancers from around the country. His focus is on providing students from underprivileged backgrounds the opportunity to train and we were intrigued to find out how he used dance to empower and connect people across various communities. It was evident that he invests a great deal of time, expertise and passion in to the Academy.

## 8. Cultural Assembly



Knowing that the choir of the Elizabeth Moir International School would already have a passion and understanding of music came as a welcome comfort. As the earliest ones to arrive, we welcomed one-by-one, choir members from Sri Lanka, Lithuania, Korea and the UK. With multicultural participants, we decided to take the risk of reverting back to our original workshop idea - presenting the sharing of music and movement through exercises in cultural exchange as a tool for social understanding and integration. This would allow us a greater perspective on the project's direction – perhaps the cultural exchange was of greater significance in this environment or perhaps our focus would shift again to the promotion of creativity as a tool for social change? As a wealthier school, more advanced in the quality of their education, they had greater experience in arts activities. Creative tasks such as producing soundscapes, imaginary bubbles and improvisation were all accepted with confidence. Composing and choreographing however, still came as an unfamiliar task! Their creations were all unique, developed, and highly collaborative with an excellent integration of sound, movement and cultural influences. We were pleased to see that they had shared new stories across their cultures, discovered how to connect through music and movement and learnt that their artistic voice has value. We had been able to achieve our goals and now understood how important it is to fully research and understand the resources, backgrounds and values of the workshop facilitators and participants before finding a workshop purpose.

# 11. Young Adventurers

**UK's Music Off Canvas conducts workshops**

The pioneering UK based arts group Music Off Canvas are now in Sri Lanka bringing their popular 'Before Language' to groups and individuals.

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After deflating the globe from our around the world adventure with the children of 'MILK!' we hopped into our awaiting van which was to be our tour bus for the next 36 hours. Settling in for the ride out of Colombo north towards Kurunegala we were struck by how quickly we had come to the final chapter in our project, which saw us working with the fantastic organisation 'The Music Project'.

Inspired by Venezuela's 'El Sistema' program in which over 3000 children are playing in orchestras and music is used as a catalyst for social change, the Music Project already gives over 500 children the opportunity to learn an instrument. Their motto 'The Healing Power of Music' underlines their goal of integration and social inclusion for children all over the country and we were excited and privileged to be able to work with their students in our final two sessions.

Our contact from both MILK! and The Music Project workshops was Saluka Kotagama, an admirable lady who organised our schedule for these two days and even managed to get us a mention in the Colombo Sunday Times. Saluka kindly offered us accommodation at her mother's in Ibbagamuwa near the city of Kurunegala and we arrived just after 7pm to find over ten dogs barking at our heels, luckily we had been warned! Here we were

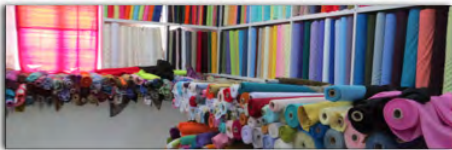
warmly welcomed and fed more wonderful Sri Lankan feasts whilst looking out over the acres of surrounding Paddy fields. We settled into our rooms and followed the movements of geckos on the ceiling until our eyes closed. Following a deep and well-earned rest we loaded our things back into the van, said our goodbyes to our lovely host and headed to the workshop for The Music Project, quickly stopping by the office on the way to select some percussion instruments for the session.

The following day at the school gates we were greeted by 38 children, eagerly awaiting our arrival and keen to say their 'hellos'. The group was split in two in order to give them more space and freedom to create, however this meant that to begin with we unwittingly had a small audience of children watching from the other end of the hall, reluctant to leave and curious to see what would happen! We were so well supported during this session by the Music Project team who were fully involved in the activities and encouraged the children to try what we were asking. It was inspiring for us to see this as so much of the learning process lies with the teachers and their willingness to be immersed was refreshing. While the children had learnt the technical aspects of playing an instrument and were impressive to watch, the integration of music and movement came less naturally.



Using an activity in which the children were encouraged to create their unique sound with a movement that complimented it was just one way of discovering how we can connect across art forms. Soon enough the room was filled with a splendid assortment of individual sounds and motions, with each repetitive pattern finding its place within the growing machine - we had created a monster! Then each group set to devising their pieces, and became completely engrossed in the creative task. It was clear walking around the room that new ideas, visually and aurally were coming to life through an entirely new experience. All we needed then was an audience and all the pieces were performed confidently and with assurance to the other groups and the various staff who were around. Despite needing a few pointers to make all the musical material unite as one, this was a minor distraction and they were quick to take direction and implement our suggestions. We left the Music Project with a feeling of elation at what the children had achieved, tinged with sadness in the knowledge that we had given our final workshop in Sri Lanka. By offering the children something new in a creative and fun way, we had been rewarded with a generosity and richness in cultural exchange that we could not otherwise have foreseen. There is no doubt that the final sessions had been adapted and informed by the discoveries we made along the journey, showing just how valuable research and development is for new project ideas. These experiences will shape the future of the project, which will offer 'Before Language' to similarly culturally conflicting communities in the UK who could benefit from further cross-cultural understanding through creating in the universal languages of sound and movement.

## 12. The Final Leg



Close-by the legendary Pinnewala Elephant Orphanage nestled in the hills, was the Millennium Elephant Foundation – a smaller and less commercial venture where we were personally introduced to some friendly mammals, even taking a short ride on an elephant. Content and exhausted by all we had encountered, we headed back to Colombo to try and make sense of everything, even almost mistakenly smuggling a cockroach through customs!

Throughout our tour we were constantly surrounded by inspiration for music and dance elements of our piece, but also visually there was an abundance of interest to draw from for the creation of the signature canvas to be produced alongside the piece. We struck gold when we were dropped off outside 'Fashion Fabrics' in Colombo – over four floors with reams upon

reams of cloth of different patterns, textures and colours. The hardest job was narrowing our selection down to what we would be able to carry!

Our last afternoon was spent meeting musicians at the Commonwealth business seminar for musicians organised by the International Federation of Musicians and Musician's Union in partnership The Commonwealth Resounds! - an association which linked our project to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held in Colombo from the 10<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> November 2013.

A celebratory cocktail on the beach went down a treat to the sound of two locals singing a traditional Fishermans' folk song whilst reflecting on some amazing experiences.

## 13. Journey's End

We would like to thank every supporter and partner of the project for enabling the research and development phase of this project to happen. We now have several exciting creative months ahead where we will be collating our inspirations to develop a new performance piece, which will tour alongside future workshops. We invite all of you to join us for the World premiere on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2014, where you will be able to relax in comfortable cushion corners surrounded by subtle scents of spices and beautiful Sri Lankan materials. Watch an exclusive introductory film about the project followed by the performance piece which features a live creation of our artists' canvas, all accompanied by delicious Sri Lankan-style drinks and nibbles.



## 14. Save the Date!

--- ✂ ----- PIN ME UP! -----

Music Off Canvas - Before Language UK Premiere  
 March 7<sup>th</sup> 2014, doors open at 7.30pm

Chisenhale Dance Space  
 64-84 Chisenhale Road  
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