

Think Tank

Music, End of Life, Grief and
Loss, March 2024



ANGIE LEE-FOSTER, PROGRAMME
MANAGER CREATIVE HEALTH

Overview

ThinkTanks are curated, facilitated discussions held at Britten Pears Arts' unique sites at Snape Maltings and The Red House, involving a broad range of cross-sector stakeholders exploring specific themes. This interdisciplinary focus may include academic, health, social care, arts, culture and fundraising sectors aiming to embrace a wide range of perspectives and stimulate fresh thinking on contemporary topics in the arts, health and wellbeing. Through connecting worlds, exploring cultural differences and establishing a common language, our ThinkTanks facilitate knowledge exchange, contribute to culture change and lay foundations for research, project development and collaborations. Through these events, Britten Pears Arts aim to be a strong voice in changing landscape, helping shift culture away from siloed thinking to co-creation so that arts, health and wellbeing can flourish and be embedded in research, policy development, training and delivery.

Context for this ThinkTank

In 2024 Britten Pears Arts is exploring the theme of Compassionate Communities in relation to end of life, grief, and loss across all strands of our activity. Working closely with St. Elizabeth Hospice we are planning a series of activities and music programming to help build compassionate communities, to acknowledge the under-recognised, least spoken about, and often overlooked significant human experiences of serious illness, ageing, dying, caregiving, and loss. We plan to explore this through music programming, community work, heritage and archive, volunteering, training, environment, and visual arts.

We recognise that music plays a vital role in processing grief and giving voice to the expression of loss. For this ThinkTank brought together leading artists, practitioners, and thinkers to explore the role of music and the arts in this process. The discussion generated a wide range of perspectives, stimulated fresh thinking, and seeded ideas for the future.

Participants

Facilitated by Katherine Zeserson, co-curated with Angie Lee-Foster. With support from Rosa Stuttle, Lucy Eve-Wright, Christopher Hilton, Jeanette Ferguson and Julia Mael at Britten Pears Arts.

Delegates: **Emily Levy**, *Composer/Musician, Part of 'Me Without You', premiering at Aldeburgh Festival in June 2024;* **Dr Guy Peryer** *Senior research fellow, NIHR Applied Research Collaboration - East of England;* **Joe Sawyer** *Consultant in Palliative Care, St Elizabeth Hospice;* **Gary Ansdell** *Music Therapist/Researcher, Exeter University;* **Phillipa Anders** *Self-employed: coach, advisor, volunteer, writer;* **Dr Hazel Harrison** *Clinical Psychologist;* **Tom Herring** *Artistic Director, Sansara;* **Alistair Comery** *PhD Student - Graduate Research Assistant, University of Bath - Centre for Death and Society;* **Dr Helen Loth** *Music Therapist, Cambridge Institute for Music Therapy Research & Arthur Rank Hospice, Cambridge;* **t. i. k.** *(they/she) Artist/Vocalist*

We began with a prompt question: What is your perspective on the role of music at end of life, in grief and in loss?

From this starting point we covered a wide and rich field of enquiry, sharing professional and personal experiences, touching into deep feelings of sadness, joy, collegiality and care. Unlike with some of our previous ThinkTanks, we didn't attempt to structure our creative thinking into specific action plans immediately at the end of the second day; but rather left we a number of vivid ideas, questions and possibilities for future research and practice development that colleagues will be continuing to discuss and build over the rest of the year. Overall, we were in strong agreement that music has an important role to play in palliative care, bereavement and grief, and that benefits of music in these contexts are often not fully realised.

What follows here is a snapshot of the reflections we shared and ideas we explored.

“Music affords us a space where it can be easy to access each other, the difficult things we experience and express the forgotten beauty. Music is a performance of humanity and an unlocking of possibility”

Everyday uses of music enable people to live well and die well. It provides solace, sometimes a distraction, and mediates the space between life and death, Music can be a comfort and a consolation as well as a doorway to memory. It can offer a kind of auditory hand holding. The benefits of this can be seen not only for those at the end of life but also for professionals supporting them.

“Music does not conform to the scientific language of outcomes and risk, it is a template for offering connection, interaction, possibility - it is a gestural language. Music is a gesture of reaching out”

Even at the end of life there can be joy and pleasure. Music embodies this paradox - as a medium it can be a portal for expression of life's contradictions. Music holds tension and doesn't try to resolve it. It can contain the joy and the sorrow of life and death as well as offering us respite and recollection.

Music can help 'slow the tempo' at the end of life and curate a space that allows time and care. Because music bypasses our perception and goes straight to the auditory cortex it has such a deep resonance within us for memory and recollection.

“Dying is a communal event. Music can be a vehicle for mediating this journey. Music can help us tell the story of our lives and connect to each other”

Music has a significant role in how we gather and perform ritual as individuals, as communities and in wider society. It can be a means of spiritual expression and a way of holding a sacred space. There is an enigma in death, an uncertainty. There is a narrative about vanquishing death, but the social process of dying resonates with a search for meaning and an acceptance of impermanence that can be voiced through music, beyond our conceptual ideas and perceptions.

“Music voices the beauty of unknowing”

Often a vital part of the ritual of death is through chosen music at funerals which sometimes become anodyne - we could expand that to think of music more of an expressive soundscape. We could re-explore raw more traditional ways of expressing grief such as keening¹. Voice can be a medium for expression, a means of mutual exchange and recognition. Perhaps music can offer us something to help us grow into our grief rather than getting over our grief.

Music works to co-create a space for understanding, exploration and expression. We can feel at our most alive through music, especially through collective practice and singing. We can think of the act of making music together as a social activity coming together in a different way using voices to engage and feel touched or touch others without physical contact. We are shaped by those we have lost, and we can chart our relationships through musical exchange.

“Music, in ways you can't define somehow gives you some guide for life.”

For some, music can be a safe space and constant companion, helping to navigate grief, personally and privately, helping memory and moments live on. We can build our own box of memories through music, through collating our own playlists helping us tell our stories of love and loss. Music can be a lifelong biography.

¹ The word keening originates from the Gaelic caoineadh meaning “crying”. The keening women (mnàthan-tuirim), paid respects to the deceased and expressed grief on behalf of the bereaved family. Keening was a vocal ritual artform, performed at the wake or graveside in mourning of the dead. Keens are said to have contained raw unearthly emotion, spontaneous word, repeated motifs, crying and elements of song.

“Perhaps we need a communal and collective playlist: music to die for gathering our stories and musical memories both for ourselves and those we have lost.”

Music works on a public and private level; it is at the axis of the individual and society. Through the temporality of loss, we reconstruct a past and a future. Music has a trajectory of its own and we just intercept this at different points. It sits outside of our temporal structure, moving out of the rigid structure of time.

"Music is part of the thread of life. Part of the colour and texture of memory."

Choice over whether music is part of our process at end of life and through grief is vital. We all need a safe place to suffer. Sometimes it is the space between silence and sound and voice which is paramount. Music is complex, ambiguous and contextual. It is important to remember that it is not ethically neutral and can be intrusive or triggering.

“Music is an invitation to communicate not an intervention”

**For more information on this ThinkTank, or to share your thoughts on the role of music in end of life, grief and loss, please contact: Angie Lee-Foster
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