

Federation Bells Workshops and performance 'Ringing in the Galaxy' PHS August - September 2022

Outline of the Performance Ringing in the Galaxy

Wednesday 7th September 2022 at 12:30

The audience seated on the west wall of the gym. The Yr 5/6s sounding the gym wall as the audience was seated.



The performance day was a joy! From the start of the bump in at 8:30am until the securing of the stage space on the 3:30pm school bell, everything felt easy and calm, yet excited and uplifting. Pete, Elissa and I were grateful to the parent helpers who assisted us to set up two hundred bells around the perimeter of the performance space, and to pre-set the numerous groups of instruments required for the student's performances. Richard and Robert did a super job setting up sound support in the gym and all the tech required for live streaming the performance.

Genevieve arrived at 10am with her harp and rehearsed with the Preps. Gen then assisted with the sound check and worked on some improvisations with Pete and Elissa playing the Fed Bells.

When the audience was admitted to the gym to be seated, they entered into a space already alive with activity and sound. Pete had worked with the Yr 5/6s in an exercise of listening and responding. Students made sound gestures of tapping, scraping and schmeering chopsticks against the MDF surface of the gym wall. The patterns of sound were passed along the one hundred students who were lined up 'playing' the gym wall 'Mexican wave' style, and then by following the leader's cue, they moved this activity onto the bells.

When the audience was seated, the students exited the rear of the gym to make way for the Preps as they commenced their 'Bell Run'. All of our three hundred and seventy students were involved in the Bell Run which created cascades of ringing bell sounds hanging in the air as children ran past striking the bells with chopsticks. Chopsticks were chosen for this activity as they were lighter than the bell mallets which, had they been used, would have made a much louder sound, and possibly, due to the number of concurrent ringing bells, this would have pushed our comfort zone for listening.

After the Yr 5/6s concluded their Bell Run, all the students filed back into the gym and were seated for the performance. Our two MCs for the performance, Tom and Rudi, did a fantastic job announcing each item. As each Neighbourhood moved into position, they described what the Neighbourhood's soundscape was about.

The performance began with the Preps, and with the whole community joining in, singing 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star', and concluded with the whole school singing Björk's song 'Cosmogony'.



Gen arrives at PPHS with her harp, and rehearses with Pete and Elissa. Our Performance MCs. Elissa directs the Prep Chime Bar Constellation'. Peter and the Yr 5/6s perform the Butterfly Cluster sound scape. The Yr1s complete their Bell Run.

The following description is a reflection about the performance which was shared with the school community in **Talking Point 15/09/2022**

In the same way that all the different parts of the Galaxy make it a world of wonder, so too every contribution to our Bells Performance, be it a performing one or a valuable supporting role, enabled a magical creative experience. Thank you to everyone who was involved in the performance, and thank you to all our families for supporting the Federation Handbells/Percussion Workshops.

There were many performance highlights on the day, and the Home Group teachers and I marvelled at how well the students performed. The students' focus and attentive listening through out the performance really impressed everyone. The softest whispers of rustling paper or chains swirling on the rims of bells, the subtle vocal hiss or delicate 'ting' from a tiny brass cymbal could all be heard, not just as individual sounds, but as an amassed shimmer. When we give our attention to hear and feel sound in this way, especially in a live context, we allow our bodies and brains to take 'time out' from their busy habit patterns. A moment of listening can go a long, restorative way.

I'd like to give a 'shout out' to our Bells Concert production crew. It's fantastic that parents and carers, who are not able to attend assemblies or concerts in person, can join in and share the experiences of their children via the Live Stream. Some folk could tune in at work, others had the concert running while they were baking, and some 'checked in' in between serving customers. It's exciting and inclusive, and with each performance event, our crew has the opportunity bring you to school online. The students are learning just what it takes to make this happen. Bravo to Cleo and Miles for their great roles as 'roaming choir mic' operators. The gym's acoustics are perfect for resonating bells and afford a lush, lingering sound world for those of us present in the gym. However, our camera mics are not able to capture all the detailed sounds which were made in different areas of the gym, and this is where Cleo's and Miles' contributions were so valuable with their Bluetooth roaming choir mics. Live Streaming is one of the good things to come out of the pandemic! We are all learning on the job, and are very lucky that Richard and Robert enjoy solving technical challenges, and can share their expertise with the students. Thank you to all.

After the 3/4Ngh1 performance of the Perseus Black Hole, Peter and Elissa performed a short improvisation on the quarter tone bells. The quarter tone bells have a tuning that that is not pure in pitch, their pitches rest somewhere between the conventional tones and semi-tones of western music: they are the pitches which hide between the black and white keys of a piano. Although the students didn't perform on the quarter tone bells, we still had quarter tones pinging everywhere as most of the augmented instrumentation for the concert was made up from 'found objects' which can be played as instruments. Hearing pitch bend, especially when placed beside tuned sounds, is an aspect of contemporary Classical composition which has been vastly explored in recent decades.

*It was an absolute delight to welcome the harpist Genevieve Fry to our school. I have been dreaming of bringing Gen to play for our students for years, and now that she is no longer a chef, and our gig didn't get cancelled due to COVID, it has finally happened. Gen added plenty of improvised magic throughout the performance such as twinkling Milky Way stars and mysterious low tremolo sounds to evoke the planet Mars. The sound of the Preps voices singing **Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star** with Gen's harp went straight to our hearts and if that didn't 'get you', then the warmth of all the students and audience singing along a second time was embracing. We were equally moved by the whole school singing Bjork's stunning song*

***Cosmogony.** The Neighbourhoods sang their creation story verses beautifully. I loved the contrasting*



vocal quality as we moved from the bright young voices of the Preps, to the older timbre of the Yr 3/4s, then back to a lighter quality again for the Yr1/2s and the more mellow warmth of the 5/6s. It brings home just how much the children grow and change in 7 fleeting years. Precious indeed. The bells and harp accompaniment were equally sublime. The whole school sing Cosmogony

Reflections from the visiting artists

Elissa Goodrich

'What an incredible, whole-school engagement of music, imaginations and the galaxy.

It was a privilege and a very inspiring project to be part of - To both watch and learn from Deb on how to dream big, huge, galaxies, and at the same time reach children at each level to engage in music making and their creative world-play. And to also have the opportunity to contribute to, and to learn

from Peter in exploring some of the vast possibilities of percussive sounds making with the Federation bells and with found/made objects. I found the culmination deeply moving, a celebration of all the children involved, and in the Universe of stars and planets and black holes dreamt up by the participants!

Peter Neville

'The students were wonderful to work with and the final performance was absolutely overwhelming in both its scale and the beauty of what the whole team achieved!! Please say a huge thank-you to everyone at PHPS for their warm welcome, engagement and help.'

Genevieve Fry

'Congratulations everyone on such an innovative, informative and captivating concert. Absolutely loved it.'



At the conclusion of the performance, each Neighbourhood presented Peter, Elissa and Genevieve with drawings, reflections and notes of appreciation.

Learning outcomes and skills learnt

The inspiration for 'Ringing in the Galaxy' was to provide a fantastic and memorable experience for the students. Even though I had the iconic Fed Bells, innovative and playful collaborators: Pete and Elissa, and the template of the Galaxy to explore, to make this experience meaningful, and therefore memorable for the students, and to maximise the learning potential for each child, we gave the students the keys to the spaceships and followed their lead. The destination was a Galactic soundscape to share with our community. The 'what' and 'how' could be explored through students' ideas and a multitude of sounding objects, and their imaginations allowed the 'real' to interact with fantasy. We found that learning areas would not stay in traditional boxes, and that joy lay in the magic of fluid thinking. Indeed, the more we questioned the impossible with 'how can we make it possible?', the more we understood that everything is connected and not a case of 'us here on earth' and the Galaxy out there. The Preps 'got it', 'we are made of star dust', they told me. We were curious, excited and motivated, and we were all learning together.

In her book 'The Music Advantage', Dr Anita Collins, a music teacher and researcher in brain development and music learning, summarised how the brain processes music both in the moment, and over time, as researched by neuromusical researcher Stefan Koelsch: '...the brain extracts information from music sound, analyses it, compares it with other music, puts it all back together and then responds to it while also extracting meaning and emotion from it... this is done without high levels of conscious thought - it just happens as part of our supercharged auditory processing.' Dr Collins goes on to describe the additional cognitive task of working out how you, as a member of a

musical ensemble, contribute and fit into a bigger musical picture. I frequently say to the students 'this music activity will take your brains to the gym'.

In our Galactic sound explorations and group improvisations, it was exciting to witness how students were thinking and responding to sound. When students named what a particular sound made them think of, for example parts of a Black Hole as explored by the Yr 3/4s, they were instantly eager to share what a journey into a black hole might look and feel like. Descriptive words like, misty and gassy (as visually things would be blurry), slow motion, scary, peaceful, dark, stretched light, and the possibility of seeing the Galaxy from inside the black hole, provided them with a pallet of gestures for exploring their instruments. As students played with sounds, individually and in groups, they assigned them to aspects of an approach to a black hole. Their thinking went deeper as they aimed for a more authentic sound representation of the journey. How would they sound space dust, the brilliance of stars, the slowing and stretching of time and the catastrophe of entering their destination? Did the students need additional and different sounding instruments? How many things were happening simultaneously and would they need concurrent layers of sound? They had to consider tempo, volume and pitch, and assign someone to coordinate the sound events. What would the choreography of the soundscape look like? The students were researchers, composers, listeners, evaluators, decision makers, leaders, followers, collaborators and in time, would be performers. They needed persistence to push through tricky developmental phases, and the confidence that challenges could be solved. The students had to memorise the sound scape, know their role, and listen carefully to control their contribution. They were focussed, not just briefly, but as a group over several minutes, because they were invested in making this a truly awesome listening experience. The Yr 3/4s were proud of what they achieved, and so stoked that they had the loudest and most impressive sounds of the Galaxy which really boomed in the gym: tam-tam gongs are always a winner with the students.

Indeed, every Neighbourhood presentation believed that they had an extra special something that no other Neighbourhood had, which of course they did, but the students felt this because these sound pieces were their ideas and sound arrangements, and no one else's.

The Galaxy project enabled students from every year level to share their understandings of the world around us, and reflect on how human activity has made our planet fragile. 'Ringing in the Galaxy' was not just a music project, our students had a platform to express how they feel and think about the issues that will impact on their futures. Yes, it is fun to clank stainless steel objects together as a sound-picture of space junk, but underpinning that was a huge discussion about how much space junk humans have polluted beautiful space with, and what are we going to do about it? These are big issues for our young folk, but the Yr 1s were passionate to find a solution and ask the question that seems impossible, 'How can we clean up the junk in space?'

Similarly, when the Yr 2 Neighbourhood chose Australian Indigenous Astronomy as their Galactic response we began to understand that by thinking between fields of knowledge, we would find ways towards a better future. By beginning to understand the Indigenous concept of the 'Cosmoscape', the interconnectedness of the land, the night-sky and water, we learned that there is a natural and spiritual balance to all things which needs to be respected. The idea that what is on earth is reflected in the night-sky, and that the night-sky mirrors the earth, even when distilled in the simplest of ways, enabled the Yr 2 students to view human activity on earth through another prism, and to ponder the question 'Where to from here?'

It's almost impossible to identify all the learning that happened in the Bells gig as it was an opportunity for learning growth on so many levels. The unique sound of the bells, their vibrance and vibration, opened a responsiveness of ears, eyes and body unique to each child. Through ensemble experiences, students gained a sense of how personal motivation could inspire a group, which in turn could impact on another group: a mirror on social motivation. All the skills, and more, listed for the Yr 3/4 Black Hole were demonstrated for every Neighbourhood's response, and these, although necessary for musical collaboration, are of course skills that are built on for all areas of life long leaning and experiences. I never imagined that a Fed Bells gig would lead to such huge discussions about a sustainable future. But, of course it did, for everything is connected.