

The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Report - 2023

Improvisation and Creative Music-Making Workshop for Wind, Brass, and Percussion Students

Pratik Gandhi and Bill Thomas

What is this research about?

The workshop was an opportunity for young student musicians to come together with their peers, more experienced musicians from the York University Wind Symphony, and professional composers, and explore alternative modes of music making on their instruments.

What did the researchers do?

To provide an opportunity for young student musicians to come together and engage in community-based music making, the researchers hosted a one-day workshop in collaboration with the York University Wind Symphony and invited two professional composers as guests to lead sessions. Recognizing that pandemic restrictions had resulted in inconsistent instrumental education in the classroom, and limited opportunities to play in ensemble settings, the researchers sought to create conditions for students with varying levels of experience on their instruments to be able to participate equally in exploring creative and collaborative ways of making music together.

The afternoon began with instrument-focused workshops led by volunteer student musicians from the York University Wind Symphony, allowing for a more personalized and low-pressure introduction to the day's activities. The remaining sessions were led by our two guest composers, Kevin Day and Cait Nishimura. First they shared their personal experiences as BIPOC individuals trying to forge careers in a field which had historically excluded people like them. These stories served to illuminate potential pathways into the field for any workshop participants who might be interested in pursuing careers in music. In the culminating session, the guest composers facilitated the collaborative creation of a semi-improvised piece of music,

What you need to know:

It is possible to design interactive programs that allow music students of various skill and experience levels to come together in a community-based music making activity and provide a meaningful and inspirational experience for all participants. Such programs may inspire younger students to consider their potential as future music students, composers, and performers.

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offering strategies for inclusive ways of contributing such that all participants were able to take some ownership over the result. The session was recorded and made available to participants after the workshop. The day concluded with a short performance of one prepared piece by the York University Wind Symphony, with community participants invited to sit in and experience the performance from within the ensemble.

What did the researchers find?

The main challenges the researchers faced was in ushering the project to fruition through challenging circumstances. This workshop was proposed and planned for fall 2021 but was postponed several times due to COVID-19 restrictions and finally took place in October 2022. A virtual version of the event was considered but the researchers felt that the opportunity to connect with fellow musicians in the same space was an integral part of the workshop. The postponements also caused changes to the structure of the day and affected the availability of the featured guests. Several factors contributed to limited registrations for the event from both CMST and local public schools, including teacher turnover since the onset of the pandemic, as well as continued hesitation from parents and students to sign up for additional commitments. Nevertheless, the feedback from the participants who did attend was overwhelmingly positive. In an anonymous follow-up survey, participants rated the experience very highly, especially the sessions led by the guest composers and the opportunity to play alongside university musicians. One participant noted the “relatability” of the guest composers, and appreciated being able to talk with a female student mentor about her instrument. The only constructive feedback was that the participants would have been able to more fully participate in the Wind Symphony’s short performance if they had received sheet music in advance.

How can you use this research?

The researchers encourage band educators to seek modes of instruction that enable fuller participation from a broader range of students, including improvisation and other non-notation-based models. The goals of the workshop were discussed in a webinar as part of the 2022 Community Music Symposium, and a recording of the webinar is available on the Helen Carswell website at the following link: <https://helencarswell.ampd.yorku.ca/webinars/> . A recording of the final workshop session is also available upon request.

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About the researchers

Pratik Gandhi is a PhD student in the Department of Music at York University. His research, supported by an Ontario Graduate Scholarship, examines the challenges of equity and representation facing composers of wind band music in Canada. Pratik is also a sessional lecturer in the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto, where he directs the Wind Symphony, and is active as a freelance conductor and adjudicator. Pratik completed undergraduate studies in music education and graduate studies in conducting at Western University.

Bill Thomas is an Associate Professor of Music in the School of Arts, Media, Performance & Design at York University, where he teaches music education classes and directs the Wind Symphony. He is a graduate of the jazz program at Humber College and holds Bachelor of Music and Bachelor of Education degrees from the University of Toronto, as well as a Master of Arts in Composition from York University. His research is focused around composition for educational settings and on wind ensemble performance.

Keywords

Wind band, youth workshops, music, music students, performance, composition, improvisation, representation, role models, peer mentoring, inclusivity, equity, access, community music

About the Helen Carswell Chair

[The Helen Carswell Chair in Community-Engaged Research in the Arts](#) is a partnership between York University's [School of Arts, Media, Performance and Design](#) and [Community Music Schools of Toronto](#). This partnership is dedicated to community cultural development in the underserved neighbourhoods of Toronto. We facilitate and conduct rigorous academic research which explores the benefits of community music programs and the links between music and learning. The goal of our work is to significantly benefit children from high-risk neighbourhoods and to fortify community music programs globally through publications and knowledge mobilization. We especially seek to engage and help drive new knowledge and practice to community-based groups serving children in the Jane and Finch community.