

# Tots at ten



**Christopher Walters** finds out what's next for Chamber Tots, Wigmore Hall's ground-breaking early years project, now in its tenth year

**H**ERALDED BY the sound of shakers, chime bars and the odd tantrum, Chamber Tots has arrived kicking and screaming at its tenth birthday. Alongside the inevitable celebrations, Wigmore Hall's learning department is using the occasion to give the project a thorough audit, the first stage of which was a recently-published research report by Dr Susan Young and Dr Victoria Rowe of Exeter University. The report summarises what has been achieved by the project since it was first developed, as well as giving a snapshot of the experiences of some of the current Chamber Tots.

'Essentially, the research has helped us focus more clearly on what's really special about the programme,' says Wigmore Hall's director of learning Ursula Crickmay. 'Going into the report, we were very much informed by the current trend of seeing music as important in terms of promoting other areas of learning. The report's conclusions reminded us that music is intrinsically valuable and an essential part of a rounded education.'

One of the report's objectives was to measure the levels of engagement among participating children. This was quite a task, as over 1,000 nursery and reception-age children in 11 London boroughs have been given the opportunity to hear live music, learn about instruments and take part in creative musical activities since the project began in 2000. Young and Rowe used careful statistical analysis to arrive at the conclusion that 'a sample group of children were mostly engaged... and some children were very engaged for a majority of the time'. Another of the report's conclusions was that 'the programme provides children with enrichment experiences that would not normally be available to them: the activities and performances by high-quality musicians and the participatory concert occasion at the Wigmore Hall. Enrichment and quality of musical experience are important benefits of the programme.'

Crickmay is quick to pay tribute to the researchers. 'The value of having Susan Young on board with her wealth of experience has been immense,' she says. 'The report has opened us up to new ideas that will take Chamber Tots forward into the future, as well as bringing a new level of rigour to our existing processes of self-reflection and evaluation.' Her comment about new ideas refers to two of the report's more critical observations, namely that the creative use of music technology had not particularly been brought about by the

project, and that the use of outdoor play could be developed more.

To show how these elements might find a place in the Chamber Tots programme, Crickmay outlines the structure of a typical session, which has evolved gradually over the last ten years while essentially remaining true to its initial design. 'The first part lasts half an hour to 45 minutes, with introductions and games featuring singing, listening and percussion,' she says. 'Key learning areas include pitch, dynamic and tempo; these used to be dealt with in separate sessions but are now merged and explored together. Simple songs like "Bear Hunt" [by project leader and composer John Webb] can give thematic grounding, with scope for learning through repetition and varying the elements. The use of percussion can also develop; at first the focus could be on starting and stopping together with scope for greater complexity later on.'

All this is followed by an hour's free play, which has been part of the design since 2003 but was developed significantly in 2007 to



Of all the participating boroughs, Westminster and Hackney are most closely affiliated to the project. Westminster Children's Service commissions Chamber Tots to run regular early years practitioners' training days, and Hackney Music Service runs Chamber Tots INSET days.

ALL PHOTOS BY WWW.BENJAMINHARE.CO.UK

involve improvisation and instruments. Workshop leaders and visiting musicians can guide the children towards musical play, but there is freedom to explore painting and other non-musical activities. According to Crickmay, this is the part of the session that could best incorporate the report's recommendations; one possibility would be to use technology to record moments of free play. 'Free play with art materials can easily be labelled as creativity, while musical free play can often be seen as noisy and disruptive,' she argues. 'Making quick recordings of this kind of music-making can help children step back from what they've produced, as well as providing continuity by linking in with other work and play sessions.' Such recordings would fit naturally into the final part of the session, a ten-minute summation that includes goodbyes, more singing and the sharing of any ideas generated during the free play.

Ideas for incorporating outdoor play will be drawn from experiences in previous sessions. 'During one free play period, a visiting musician played a large cymbal outdoors,' says Crickmay. 'By alternating loud and soft sounds he was able to encourage the children to approach cautiously and then run away – an example of a creative way to incorporate outdoor play into the project.' The plan is to develop such activities into a more mainstream part of the programme.

Crickmay emphasises that much is required of the musicians who participate in the project. 'We demand a lot of them,' she says. 'As well as being able to play to a high

standard they must be able to improvise and work creatively with the children. At the audition they have to perform two pieces lasting no more than five minutes in total – not easy – and join in with various games and improvisations. We find that these high demands result in the musicians integrating more fully into the project.' Investment on the part of the musicians is repaid by specialised training and, more recently, the same players being booked each year, which allows experience and knowledge to grow while providing continuity. Workshop leaders also receive training, and the whole experience serves as professional development for the early years practitioners who work in the various affiliated settings.

But what about funding? Ten years is a long time for an education project to have been up and running, but, in the current climate, is it long enough to guarantee survival? The answer appears to be yes, at least for now; Chamber Tots is one of the few programmes that can afford to plan for the next two years, regardless of change of government or other destabilising factors. Part of the reason for this is that, since 2007, the project has used a funding model that requires the various boroughs and settings to invest financially in order to participate. Crickmay says, 'The project always worked better for the settings that really took it on board, and the new funding model seems to have encouraged more of them to do just that.' Perhaps it is unsurprising that financial investment leads to a desire to extract as much value as possible.

Crickmay believes that 'working with the various London boroughs helps the project access worthwhile settings. It can also help provide a sense of continuity beyond the project itself.' Since many of the participating children speak English as an additional language, such close links with the borough music services can enhance these children's Chamber Tots experience; for example, in Westminster, an English-as-an-additional-language specialist has been hired to assist with the implementation of this year's project.

As for the future, Crickmay is grateful that she is able to look ahead at all. 'Having secure funding for the next two years gives us the chance to really think about the next step,' she says. As well as working to implement the research report's recommendations, her next plan is to develop the evaluative process by videoing a number of the sessions. It seems that one of the project's greatest strengths is its ability to look honestly at itself and its achievements, which, combined with a sustainable funding model, should see it become increasingly influential in London's early years settings. Meanwhile, some of the very first Chamber Tots are about to start their GCSE courses; let's hope that some of them have chosen music.

For more information about Chamber Tots and a range of other learning activities, visit the Wigmore Hall website, where the research report can be downloaded in full.



[www.wigmore-hall.org.uk](http://www.wigmore-hall.org.uk)