

## A Queen's Honour for the UK's Music Man

*The Music Man Project is an award-winning, world record-breaking international music education service for children and adults with learning disabilities. It provides accessible music tuition leading to inspirational public performances. It was founded by Churchill Fellow and Peace Ambassador for People with Disabilities, David Stanley. A recent recipient of an honour from the Queen, David explains how his life's work has brought peace to vulnerable communities across the world.*

On 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020 it was officially announced that I have received an award from Her Majesty the Queen in the 2021 New Year Honours List. There are many categories, but mine was "Medallist of the Order of The British Empire for Services to People with Special Needs". The award recognises 20 years of teaching people with learning disabilities and my role as founder and CEO of The Music Man Project. I started in 1999 when I taught a friend with Down's Syndrome which led me to establish a weekly Music School for people with learning disabilities. I promised my students that one day they would play the Royal Albert Hall. 20 years later, 200 of my Music Man Project students from across the UK performed my original production "Music is Magic" at the Royal Albert Hall to an audience of 3000 people. Supported by massed choirs, orchestra and celebrity guests, the concert was the largest ever celebration of accessible music-making in the UK.



*Music is Magic at the Royal Albert Hall, 2019*

Whilst it was lovely for my achievements to be recognised by my country, the biggest reward is that it will open more doors for me to create even greater opportunities for this once-forgotten community in the future. I feel re-energised to campaign with even more vigour for accessible music education and inspirational performance opportunities for all. There is no doubt that music plays a vital role in well-being, social development and learning for people with disabilities - my work is the subject of PhD research at the Royal College of Music into this very topic. People with learning disabilities face huge obstacles, be that poor mental or physical health, discrimination, hate crime, dementia, poverty and loneliness. Most cannot change their plight by themselves and they face an abyss; one day they could be living safely and in relatively good health, the next they could be alone with no money, no control and no way of changing their future for the better. All it takes is cutback to services, the death of a family member, discrimination or health complications. In these cases, stability and peace is a pipedream.

Peace means many different things to different people, but I have always found my music helps students and their families find an inner peace, despite all their extraordinary challenges. It is fundamental to everything I do at my charity. A testimonial I received in 2012 still brings a lump to my throat every time I read it:

*“For someone who would scream with fear when more than 4 people gathered in the room to someone who has sung solo in front of 1500 people at the London Palladium is a gratitude that I can only bestow on David because he was the one who made this possible. I can only say that without David my daughter would still be sitting in the corner of the lounge getting more fearful and frustrated with life, leading me into a deeper and darker place wondering if there was ever going to be any good come into hers or my life.”*

**Parent**

Clearly this mother was not at peace. My music gave her daughter a sense of purpose and a way out of her despair which, through patience, education and opportunity resulted in life experiences and achievements that no one could have dreamed were possible for this young lady.

In 2018 I taught children from Special Schools and adults from care homes in the Indian city of Bangalore. During all my international trips I teach for 3-4 days, culminating in a concert for the local community to showcase the progress of my new students. When I told local teachers in Bangalore about this plan, they respectfully explained that they thought I was trying to achieve the impossible. After all, a complete stranger from another country teaching new music to people with learning disabilities who speak a different language is pretty ambitious. Achieving this in just 3 days and then putting on a public concert in a foreign country was understandably felt by some to be totally unrealistic. My promises on the first day were greeted with utter bemusement!



*Public concert in Bangalore, India*

However, the power of music to bring people together knows no international boundary, language barrier or cultural division. Music is a universal language of peace. The Bangalore concert played to hundreds of people and was a resounding success. The performers sang and played their hearts out with great joy, and the same teachers who greeted my arrival with polite pessimism couldn't believe what they witnessed after such a short amount of time.

*"The most joyous time we have ever had. We couldn't believe how much they have opened up. They have spent their whole life being told to be quiet."*

**DIYA Foundation, Bangalore, India**

These new members of the Music Man Project family continue to sing my songs to this day. They have a practical way of challenging negative attitudes towards their disability. All their happy faces showed me that their achievements on that special day brought them much joy, pride and peace. In that moment, their challenges of poverty, healthcare, discrimination and disability were just a little easier.

In February last year, I travelled to the Philippines to teach in the fishing town of Estancia. The region had been devastated by a typhoon in 2013 and the community was only just beginning to recover. Just a month before my trip, the region was hit again by another typhoon, although thankfully not as powerful as the first. The children's mental and physical health were poor, and my visit was part of a new venture called 'Music and Medicine' delivered with a nurse from the UK. Squeezed in just weeks before the global pandemic, I taught mainstream primary school children, a special needs class and children with learning and physical disabilities in a remote rural village who hardly ever left the one room that was their home, let alone the village. On this occasion, it was I who gained a deep, inner peace. Surrounded by extreme poverty and suffering, I witnessed the most amazing people and culture I have ever experienced. It brought me closer to humanity, to peace and to love.



*The Music Man Project in the Philippines, 2020 (video)*

## COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 Pandemic had a huge impact on the world's disabled community. We all need routine, stimulation, education and opportunity. We all need care, friendship, affection and hope. We all need peace. To appreciate the plight of those with a learning disability, multiply these needs by a thousand and combine them with confusion and anxiety about what pandemic, social distancing and lockdown actually means. Add their increased risk of isolation, loneliness, depression and dementia and you get closer to how they are feeling right now. Consider too their physical frailty. Most people with learning disabilities have underlying health conditions. For many, even the most innocuous illness becomes a death sentence. Then there is the unreliability of vital care, medicine and equipment that comes with a lockdown, and the choice between inviting a potentially infected carer into your home or going to hospital. Pressure on family increases significantly and breaking the unique bond between client and carer can be devastating. Hopefully, you have a fit and caring family to support you. Thousands of people with a learning disability face all this alone. To complete the picture, add the horrible thought that if you did contract the virus you might be at the end of the queue for a ventilator or not treated at all because of your disability.

As March began, I looked forward to performances at the House of Commons, Birmingham's NEC, a special presentation to Camelot (The UK National Lottery) and the first concert of our "Music is Magic on Broadway" preview tour. Then the restrictions put in place for the COVID-19 pandemic took everything away. Our students were trapped inside their homes as the world was gripped in fear and confusion. I was determined that this virus would not stop our global campaign for accessible music education and inspirational performance opportunities for all. Perhaps this could even be an opportunity?

As soon as the UK lockdown began, I put in place a programme of online teaching called #MMPWired. We provided Zoom rehearsals, Facebook live sessions, YouTube videos, video calls, virtual concerts, podcasts, blogs and I even visited the doorsteps of my local students to sing and play. I am immensely proud of how our community has adapted to the challenges of lockdowns. My music teaching has actually reached thousands more people around the world through all these digital platforms. Thanks to funding from the UK Government, we were able to deliver £6000 worth of new musical instruments for isolated families to play at home. Although I returned to in-person teaching for the second half of last year, with all the rules and regulations that entailed, we are currently back at home once again running online lessons. See my blog ["The Music Man Project's COVID 2020 - A Video History"](#).

Our digital services have provided a lifeline for thousands of people and prevented a mental and physical health calamity for this vulnerable community.



*#MMPWired – David delivers virtual teaching from his home in the UK during lockdown*

One young lady with a learning disability has found our online music sessions particularly helpful. Her mother is being treated for cancer, so the whole family has a lot to cope with during this difficult time. The mother sent this message shortly after listening to Music Man Project regional director, Jenny Hitchcock on Facebook live:

*“My treatment was finished by 4.50pm and I got into trouble because I was out early, so we had to wait in a freezing cold car to sing along with “Music is Magic” and “Join Together” before we could come home. I wonder what the people waiting in their cars in the car park were thinking and whether they wondered what we were doing! Sharon thought it was all brilliant. Thank you for putting smiles on all our faces during these difficult times. Music certainly is magic...”*

**Parent**

Many people have asked how this has been achieved. I always tell them that The Music Man Project delivers music education rather than corrective music therapy. Our emphasis on performance as the purpose of our music-making remains the most vital motivation for us all. If pushed to identify the most fundamental ingredient of our family, it would be high expectation. I believe in myself and I believe in each and every one of our amazing musicians.

I have many dreams for the future. In the years to come I will continue my global campaign for accessible music education and inspirational performance opportunities for all, regardless of disability or disadvantage. I want to connect vulnerable people of the world, country by country, through song. I always hoped for a performance at the Royal Albert Hall and it took 2 decades to achieve. Duplicating my education service around my country and the rest of the world was beyond my wildest dreams. Having sought out similar services for my Churchill Fellowship, I can confidently say that The Music Man Project is uniquely distinguished by our original music, by the scale of our productions and by the global duplication of our teaching model. I would love to publish more of my music so that in decades to come people will sing and play music that tells a story of peace and hope for a once-forgotten society. I would love a purpose-built music facility in the UK as our official headquarters and the only specialist music education and performance centre for people with disabilities in my country. I would love to return to the Royal Albert Hall with even more Music Man Project regions, and I would love to take some of our amazing musicians to perform on Broadway and to give a presentation at the United Nations.



*Dan, resident drummer at the Royal Albert Hall, 2019*

May I wish you all peace and hope during these difficult times. I urge everyone to think of the most vulnerable people in the world, who not only suffer but have no way to relieve this suffering themselves. We have come a long way in providing better access, equality and understanding of people with learning disabilities but the journey to peace is far from over. We must provide them with opportunity.

They will surprise you and teach you something completely new.

In the words of many of my most famous song titles:

*“Have you ever stopped to think that if you join together and follow the magic of music, then you can have it all? There will be highs, lows and middles, but with peace and hope, we can make a difference, note by note. When united we stand, then together we are strong!”*

David Stanley BEM

Global Challenge Peace Ambassador for People with Disabilities



*Ruby at the Royal Albert Hall, 2019*

For more information please visit:

[www.themusicmanproject.com](http://www.themusicmanproject.com)

[www.themusicmanblog.com](http://www.themusicmanblog.com)

[The Music Man Project's YouTube Channel](#)