
Helping & healing

Pianist **Clare Hammond**'s experience of severe postnatal depression has led her to realise how music can heal by connecting people from all walks of life

As I washed my hands at the station I caught sight of myself in the mirror and was shocked by how composed I seemed. None of the people around me would have any idea of the stifling desperation and gaping chasm opening up inside me. I have been living with postnatal depression for over a year and, although I am now much better, it has been at its worst on days when I am performing. Pre-concert nerves usually induce a sense of flat detachment that dissipates a few minutes before I go on stage. When coupled with depression and the bizarre emotional turmoil of withdrawing from medication, they become toxic. I stride through stations unable to stop the tears running down my face, utterly distraught, and just so grateful that this particular state, at least, is temporary. Once the concert is over, I shall revert to a more stable depression that I can manage and that has, in many ways, become my 'new normal'.

This ability to adapt so readily to new emotional states is perhaps one of the more dangerous aspects of mental illness, at least in my experience. My second daughter was born in December 2017 and, initially, I felt that I was coping well. By February, I believed that my obsessive and perpetual thoughts about the conflict in Syria was a rational response to a terrible situation. In April, I started to read tracts on climate change voraciously and felt overwhelmed by a powerful and unnegotiable sensation of guilt. It was only in June, when the sight of anything (and, I mean, absolutely anything) triggered apocalyptic thoughts that I realised something was wrong. When walking through lush woodland in the Cotswolds, I would agonise over whether it would survive increasing temperatures over the next few decades. The sight of my gorgeous baby's chubby cheeks induced a sense of panic. How would we feed her if there was a famine? On public transport, I would feel wretched when meeting someone younger than me ('They have no idea of the pain that lies ahead') and marvel when someone older than me smiled ('How can they bear being alive for so long?').

I have suffered from Generalised Anxiety Disorder in the past and was able to deal with this with the help of a wonderful therapist, two courses of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, and one-on-one mindfulness tuition. Over a period of years, an overriding belief that I was failing and was inadequate had developed to the stage where it was exerting a powerful and extremely negative effect on my life. While I felt adrift throughout most of this part of my life, I could always sense the existence of the shoreline, or a harbour where rational thought resided. With postnatal depression, I was suddenly at sea in a storm with no idea which way was up or down, much less where the shoreline might be. It was terrifying

and the techniques I had learnt in the past were useless. I could only make progress with medication and am very grateful for the support I had when I made the decision to take [the antidepressant] Sertraline.

Gradually I made changes to my life in an attempt to deal with this new reality. The most unpleasant aspect of the depression was the overwhelming guilt, yet it is this that has led to some of the most positive developments. Growing up, I always had the sense that being a musician was an indulgence. I was 'following my dream' for my own sake, and providing entertainment for a privileged sector of society. I knew that people could be moved by music but was not convinced that what I was doing was of great use. After spending some time considering a change of career, I resolved instead to deploy the skills and experience I already have in a different context.

I started to develop my outreach work so that it became a vibrant part of my practice, rather than something I do occasionally from a vague sense of duty. I now have a partnership with Gloucestershire Music where I give recitals regularly in local primary schools. I do children's concerts, workshops and masterclasses wherever possible. I have also started performing in prisons locally and it is this that has been transformative.

At my first prison concert, the experience of getting an electronic piano through security (the screwdriver didn't make it...), listening to the clang of iron gate after iron gate reverberate through concrete corridors, and sensing the tension of adults in a confined environment was intimidating. I found myself in the chapel in front of over 100 men, some of whom were there primarily to have a laugh with their mates. I took a deep breath and started to introduce some etudes, wondering whether this was such a good idea after all. Fortunately, I had decided to focus on the human stories behind the music and this was my saving grace.

First we had music by Chopin, a Polish immigrant to France whose distress at the Russian occupation of his homeland was conspicuous and powerfully expressed in the *Revolutionary Etude*. A few eyes lit up, I could sense a new kind of attention and, after hearing the visceral charge of this music, an unexpected enthusiasm. Many were delighted to hear Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee*, a piece they all knew thanks to its recent inclusion on a television advert for fly spray. There were still quite a few men, though, who were not engaged – audibly so at times. I wondered whether Schubert's Impromptu in G flat major, essentially six minutes of *pianissimo*, was a wise choice.

I decided to take the risk. Schubert: a shy man who felt increasingly isolated as he grew older, particularly after contracting

“None of the people around me would have any idea of the stifling desperation and gaping chasm opening up inside me”

syphilis. In the last year of his life, unable to tell anyone why he was ill or that it was terminal, he composed the most astonishing music, both in terms of its sheer quantity and its beauty. This piece is one of the most moving from that time. You sense an acceptance of what lies ahead, despite the undercurrent of fear.

The men listened to the Impromptu without stirring. I was playing on a ropey electronic piano in a terrible acoustic to many people who had never heard classical music before. Some had had very little formal education and I had been warned that they may not be able to concentrate for very long. Yet, as they perceived that Schubert was a real human, they felt a connection to his music. Since then, I have learnt to choose my stories depending on the people in front of me. When performing the Impromptu to schoolchildren, I suggest that they close their eyes and imagine they are rocking gently on a rowing boat. In a women's prison, I made a split-second decision to tell them that I learnt this piece when my mother was dying from breast cancer. It was one of her favourites and we played it at her funeral. Almost everyone there gasped in sympathy and I suddenly felt that they were supporting me, not the other way round. Afterwards, I heard that one woman who was doing drug recovery work and who had described feeling numb for a long time, had felt a flood of emotion return to her as a direct result of the concert.

These stories create connections – between me and my audience, between listeners and a composer, from human to human. This is music's power and it is not to be underestimated. Recently, I visited a prison to participate in a workshop. One wing was on lock-down,

which meant that residents had to spend 23 hours of each day in their cells. The tension was palpable and relations between prisoners and the guards were strained. Yet when we started to play, and the women sang, the atmosphere was transformed in a way that would not have been impossible through spoken conversation. We were all there together, sharing music. It doesn't even matter particularly which style you play. I have performed what would be considered 'difficult' pieces of contemporary music in prisons. You do not need to dumb down to reach audiences who are new to classical music. You just have to present it on a human level. Having witnessed music's power in a prison environment, and for my own and other's mental health, I am now alive to it in everything I do. It gives me purpose that I lacked before and creates new meaning for me, in work and life.

However you relate to music – as performer, composer or listener – think how you can use it to connect with your communities, families, and people who need support or an escape. There seem to be so many threats on the horizon and it is easy to withdraw and to lose hope. Music touches us at a deeper level than words ever can. It is an expression of our shared humanity and a testament to hope. Use it.

Hear Clare Hammond in concert on 25 June at St David's Hall, Cardiff performing Guillaume Connesson's The Shining One with the Philharmonia and Jamie Phillips. It is part of a space-themed concert, and you can also try the Philharmonia's Virtual Reality experience at the hall on the day.

www.philharmonia.co.uk/concerts/soloist/1810/hammond_clare

www.philharmonia.co.uk/digital/virtual_reality_and_apps

'You just have to present music on a human level': Clare Hammond



© ULLA ARTHUR/EG2.COM

