From the darkness comes light: Music as an agent of catharsis, resilience and learning following the Christchurch earthquakes

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Abstract

Following the devastating earthquakes that rocked Christchurch on 4 September 2010 and 22 February 2011, I wanted to do something positive and respond in a way that would form part of the healing process and which, in the fullness of time, could also serve as part of the record of the extraordinary events that the people of Christchurch were experiencing. The result was my third symphony – Ex Tenebris Lux: From the darkness comes light – which was performed, one movement per year, by the symphony orchestra of the Christchurch Schools’ Music Festival with myself as conductor. In 2015 the symphony was performed in its entirety and performers from all four years were invited back to take part in the final performance as well as to talk about how the project had helped them make sense of the situation. Many also were able to discuss how they had progressed musically during that time, another positive by-product of their involvement in the project.

It is widely documented that music is highly beneficial for a child’s learning but it also has significant healing powers, so a significant reason for composing this piece was to use music as an agent of healing, to help the children involved in the music festival (and the audience) confront the repercussions of these terrifying times and to reflect positively on their own experience. Their comments, reactions and suggestions were an integral part of the creation of the symphony. This paper traces the project from start to finish and explores the issues raised by the children taking part, as well as illuminating my own reflections on creating a work with a purpose beyond entertainment.

Biography

PATRICK SHEPHERD works as a composer, conductor, performer, researcher and teacher. He is well-known for his work in the community and with young people and is currently Musical Director of the Christchurch Schools’ Music Festival and a music critic for The Press. His works have been performed in the UK, USA, Germany, Russia, South Korea, China and Australia as well as regular performances and broadcasts in New Zealand. Patrick is an Honorary Antarctic Arts Fellow and much of his current creative work relates to trips there in 2003 and 2016/17. He also researches the medical condition synaesthesia (altered sensory perception).
All change starts with a distant rumble at the grassroots level.
Dr Tom Coburn (US Senator)

Overture to disaster

In the early hours of 4 September 2010, the residents of Christchurch and surrounding districts were woken by a 7.1 magnitude earthquake which caused widespread damage. Disturbing though this was, the city took comfort in the fact that no-one was killed and while aftershocks (more than 11,000 in the first two years) became part of daily life, disrupted routines were soon referred to as “the new normal” and the city thought the worst was behind it. However, at 12.51pm on 22 February 2011 all that was to change. A 6.3 magnitude earthquake hit the city and, although smaller in magnitude than the original earthquake, it caused a catastrophic loss of life with 185 people killed and many more injured. In addition, thousands of residents were displaced from their homes, many becoming “earthquake refugees”, seeking sanctuary in calmer and less volatile locations. Those residents left behind were faced with the task of rebuilding their lives which often meant lengthy and stressful negotiations with the Earthquake Commission (EQC), a New Zealand Crown entity primarily designed to provide insurance and support to residential property owners. Port-a-loos (chemical toilets) lined the streets of mainly the eastern suburbs, the New Zealand Defence Force guarded the CBD, schools and businesses were closed, sports fixtures were cancelled and there were few places for concerts to be held, even had traumatised residents felt comfortable in a crowded venue at this time. All this amidst a backdrop of thousands of aftershocks, the most psychologically crushing of which came shortly before Christmas 2011, leaving stunned residents wondering if it would ever end. It was a common sentiment that the earthquakes were really “out to get us” and the psychological impact this was having on the residents – and particularly their children – was becoming all too apparent.

Genesis of an idea

After the earthquake in February 2011, I wanted to do something positive and respond in a way that would form part of the healing process and which, in the fullness of time, could also serve as part of the record of the extraordinary events that the people of Christchurch were experiencing. As a composer, I have written many works in response to a wide variety of stimuli, but never in relation to an event such as this where I was a participant, albeit rather unwilling. The Christchurch earthquakes presented me with an opportunity to respond directly to an event that was unfolding in front of me. It became increasingly clear that the severity and fluidity of the situation, along with the growing social implications, would not only affect Christchurch for many years to come but also the entire region and, economically, the country as a whole. With this realisation came another, that the primary driver for the work should be the benefit of others, using the power of music to heal and build resilience in a community that was shattered by natural disaster. Music has long been acknowledged to have strong social, cognitive and social benefits, including, “physical relaxation and release of physical tension; emotional release and reduction of feelings of stress; a sense of happiness, positive mood, joy, elation… [as well as] a sense of greater personal, emotional and physical well-being.” (Hallam, 2010, p.21). I was used to writing music designed to stimulate, engage and entertain an audience but this was an entirely new lens through which to approach my compositional process. Ex Tenebris Lux: From the darkness comes light (Symphony no.3) came about as a direct result of the Christchurch earthquakes and, like the earthquakes themselves and the subsequent aftershocks and social disruption, it was a project that from its inception was to last several years.
Next steps – truly understanding what “magnitude” means

Many a true word is spoken in jest, so the aphorism goes, and as I watched the developing media reports, I remember saying something like, "What am I going to do, write a symphony or something?". Gallows humour for sure but in the face of a deepening sense of helplessness I did use music to help process what was going on around me by composing the song Elegy for a Fallen City. Composed in a matter of days, Elegy is a short song for solo voice and piano (later scored for choir and piano) and it tells of how, at precisely 12.51 on 22 February 2011, a magnitude 6.3 earthquake struck the city, with the resultant loss of life, widespread damage and symbolic ruin of fallen statues and iconic buildings. It was always going to be a piece occupying a short window of "popularity" as the people of Christchurch did not want to remain in the moment of the tragedy and the desire to move on and out of the abyss was – and still is – strong. Elegy was fairly widely sung by schools and community groups, even reaching as far afield as a fundraising concert in Sydney, and it served its purpose – it helped document the event in a cathartic way. Interestingly, Wellington music teacher Gary Wilby used Elegy as a way of working through the anxiety of students in his class following an earthquake that struck Wellington in November 2016:

What we needed was meaningful time and what I needed was an activity with meaning. Then while driving to school I remembered Patrick Shepherd’s response to the Christchurch earthquake in the form of his composition – ‘Elegy for a Fallen City’. That’s it, I would teach it to my music classes the first day back. We would learn to sing this piece, his song. Here was a music response to the earlier devastation in another city but one still in Aotearoa, a place which had even sent some of its young to our school following their dislocation a few years previously.

The students are no longer sitting ‘isolated’ at their desk. They are huddled more closely together around their teacher and a piano. Learning the words, the story, re-constructing images (walls, spires, birds, clocks, sirens, statues), recalling people, learning the tune, relating experiences of the previous few days, becoming familiar with the accompaniment – singing the song ‘Elegy for a Fallen City’. Some were also encouraged in the next few days to improvise and or write their own composition.

(Gary Wilby, personal correspondence, 2017)

Wilby touches on an important point that Schweitzer (2017) raised around social isolation in today’s youth culture reliant on YouTube, iTunes, iPhones and MP3 players, stating, “these resources mean that individuals listen to recorded music in isolation more frequently than they attend live performances or make music together in the community; this represents a loss.” (p.60). Wilby and his students instinctively knew they had to come together; Wilby understood his duty of care that day and that music was one of the best conduits for that, echoing Schweitzer’s view that, “Music, when incorporated into the art of pastoral care, can assist individuals to have a renewed sense of hope in the midst of struggle and trauma.” (2017, p.50).

Composing Elegy helped me to focus and rationalise my thoughts but it was only on a very personal level – the situation demanded more and I felt a sense of community engagement was missing. I have always regarded the relationship one builds with the intended performer as being one of the most fulfilling aspects of being a composer, working together to achieve a common goal but the composing of Elegy was definitely not that; this was the composer several steps removed, commenting from afar at precisely
the time when connectivity was needed the most. I was beginning to understand the true meaning of the word “magnitude”, that in this case it not only referred to the severity of the earthquake but also, in its broadest sense (after the Latin “magnus”, meaning great), the enormity of the implications for Christchurch on every conceivable level. With that realisation came the formation of the project that was to occupy much of my time over the next four years.

Methodology – in times of crisis, you work with what you’ve got

As a creative artist, I am always intrigued as to how ideas initially present themselves before they develop, transform and finally reach fruition. Conversely, there can often be roadblocks where the project stalls or aborts. In my experience, it is a rare thing indeed for a project to reveal itself in its entirety at the start and remain virtually unaltered by its close. It is far more common for a work to evolve, developing a life of its own, often veering off in a direction that was not part of the original concept. Rather like a parent, an artist is responsible for bringing their “child” into the world but their “creations” soon begin to exert their own sense of purpose, character and independence. To non-artists, this may seem an utterly fanciful comparison but, in my experience, it is very much a palpable actuality. For Mozart and artists of his stature it may have been common for their artistic creations to present fully formed – and remain so through to completion – but that is far removed from my own arts practice. Not so with Ex Tenebris Lux: From the darkness comes light. It presented to me fully-formed as both a creative work and a research project simultaneously and the “who” and “what” was clear from the outset, moving “with the flow of new ideas and strong feelings” (Sacks, 1995, p.241-2).

I knew that using the power of music was the ideal vehicle to chart the recovery process, something borne out by Walsh, who states,

> Suffering can be transcended in creative and symbolic expression through the arts. Music … can release sorrow and be uplifting, restoring spirits to carry on. Finding ways to express the experience of trauma and survival through writing and artwork can facilitate resilience. (2007, p.210)

I had just the right group of performers in mind for whom this would be of maximum benefit. An isolated “one-off” composition like Elegy was not going to capture the complexity of the situation nor engage at the deeper level that was warranted so, while Elegy had helped me cope, whatever was to come had to have, at its core, the purpose of helping others. Involving an orchestra would mean reaching a much larger group of people, a body that Walsh describes as a, “multifamily community support group [with] ideal contexts for exchanging information, sharing painful memories and feelings, providing mutual support, and encouraging hope and efforts for recovery.” (Walsh, p.211)

My experience of being affected by the earthquakes paled into insignificance in comparison with the challenges faced by many others so in order that this response be as authentic as possible, the project needed to be informed by the people directly affected by the earthquakes and it had to specifically target their well-being and recovery through meaning and understanding. Walsh highlights this as a key factor, stating, “coming to terms with traumatic loss involves making meaning of the trauma experience, putting it in perspective, and weaving the experience of loss and recovery
into the fabric of individual and collective identity and life passage.” (Walsh, p.209).

It also became clear that the timeframe would stretch over a matter of years, not days or weeks. Ideally it would culminate in a public performance so that everyone could come together, united by a common goal in acknowledging that a page had been turned and the participants and their families had moved on, even though day-to-day it may not have felt like it. It seemed not only logical but also supremely important to come together in a public place to recognise that we had not only survived, but also thrived.

The solution was to use a phenomenological approach to tell the story of Christchurch and its people, reflecting on the lived experience of those affected and the unique circumstances in which they found themselves. As van Manen asks, “Aren’t the most captivating stories exactly those which help us to understand better what is most common, most taken-for-granted, and what concerns us most ordinarily and directly?” (1990, p.19), producing “action sensitive knowledge” (Ibid, p.21). I was also able to bypass the plethora of scientific, seismological data (there was a plentiful supply of this relating to the Christchurch earthquakes alone) and focus on the distinctly human stories. By allowing people to tell their story, while also being part of a parallel one (the retelling of their lived experiences through music), my intention was to provide an opportunity for catharsis and healing.

As a music educator, it seemed obvious that the people I would want to work with most would be children and the medium would be music. I have been the conductor of the symphony orchestra for the Christchurch Schools’ Music Festival since 2005, and the festival’s musical director since 2013. The aim of the festival is to promote music-making in primary schools across the Canterbury region and engender a love of music in young people. Each year, the festival involves thousands of children in a remarkable event over three nights, achieving an unparalleled standard in singing and instrumental music performance for this age group. As well as teaching the children performance skills and the discipline of regular practice, rehearsals, self-reflection and improvement that go hand-in-hand with that, there is a strong educative focus exposing the children to different genres and types of music. The social skills involved in these activities have also been shown to be vitally important a factor that has become even more important in the aftermath of the earthquakes. Johnston (1920, as cited in Southcott, 1990) suggests that a child, “must be taught to express himself freely as an individual, but quite as essential is it that he shall learn to express himself as part of a group.” (p.125). Johnston’s opinion is quaintly expressed and, with additional reference to the feminine gender, very relevant regarding the need for community cohesion following the dislocation, isolation and uncertainty brought about by the Christchurch earthquakes.

Utilising my particular skill-set, I decided to write a symphony and, in my capacity as the orchestra’s conductor, rehearse and perform it. While doing so, it was important to involve the performers in discussions around its development and their own personal journey. Walsh and McGoldrick suggest that healing and resilience can be facilitated by, “shared acknowledgement of reality of [the] traumatic event, [and] losses,” along with “the shared experience of loss and survivorship”. They also mention how active

If this project was going to succeed, it needed to be a catharsis for them as well as acting as some kind of benchmark by which they could measure how they had moved on, emotionally and musically. I wanted to help build resilience in the children, something Associate Professor Billy O’Steen identifies as a necessary character-trait for success in children’s everyday life circumstances (Smart, 2015). As a music educator I’m conscious that, for the learner, the incremental steps of musical progress are often miniscule and recognising personal development is not that easy for the individual concerned. The symphony would provide some of those indicators of progression, if nothing else but for the realisation that one could not play something three years ago but now could. The emotional and psychological healing, however, is far closer to the heart of this project than the acquisition of technical facility.

Exposition and development – crisis over, the work begins

Before I even picked out a melody at the piano there was one compositional decision that I had to make as it would affect the entire organisation of the project – was this going to be a piece by the children or for the children? If it was going to be by the children, then I would be using their actual musical ideas to shape the piece, “framing” their music in a larger structure; if it was to be for the children, their written and spoken ideas could shape the piece and I would write the music that reflected that. The pitfalls of the former are typified by Coleman (1931) in her treatise on writing a children’s symphony:

One of the disadvantages of this method of making symphonies from children’s themes is that in many cases a very good tune has to be discarded because it cannot be made to fit into the general plan for the symphony. Several of the best melodies submitted by the children for example, two lovely little gavottes by Margery G. – could not be used in this particular work, though they were of greater musical value than many that were used. (p.55)

I did not want to be in the position of rejecting children’s musical ideas given the healing and inclusive nature of the project. Nor did I think that the process would be conducive to a cohesive end result, Coleman again offering a thinly disguised caution when she described her method of selecting musical themes that her children had handed in to her when she embarked on the new symphony:

Some of the children’s melodies… were given in staff notation. Sometimes a little scrap of soiled and rumpled paper that had been carried all day among marbles, chalk and other odds and ends… There were about seventy-five or more handed in before Christmas.

(Coleman, p.47-48)
The title came straight away – *Ex Tenebris Lux: From the darkness comes light*. It is the title of a bronze statue by Ernest George Gillick in the foyer of the Christchurch City Art Gallery that I had long admired and it summed up perfectly what I wanted to do; taking people from a dark place and moving them to a place of hope. I decided to write a movement a year, giving me the option of three or four movements depending on how things went, and when the work was finished all the players who played in it would return to perform it in one “super-orchestra” as part of the festival or in a separate concert.

In 2012 the orchestra performed *The Fallen Cathedrals*, which was about how the city had lost both its cathedrals and included a quotation from Debussy’s piano piece *La Cathedrale Engloutie* (*The Submerged Cathedral*) (Fig. 1).

The images of the two cathedrals were amongst the most powerful following the earthquake and the decisions (or, rather more accurately, indecisions) around their respective remediation are still proving problematic six years on. I deliberately avoided anything that sought to recreate noises or effects from the actual events as I felt these would have been too disturbing and quite genuinely frightening for the children, so my planned movement based on the seismographic image was left until last (entitled *Magnitude 7.1*, it became the first movement in the completed symphony but was the last in performance order, premiering when the whole symphony was completed). Supporting the educative aims of the festival, I also introduced some contemporary techniques (Fig. 2) which shows the brass striking the mouthpiece end of their instruments with the cupped palm of their hand, thus producing a “plopping” percussive effect. The children genuinely enjoyed doing this and found it fun, something that was also a key part of the normalisation and recovery process.
Two streams working in parallel

With the performers now actively engaging with the material during rehearsals for *The Fallen Cathedrals* and thinking about their experiences in a different and somewhat sanitized context, I introduced the research component. Having gained ethical approval from the University of Canterbury’s Human Ethics Committee, I proceeded to ask the performers to write short responses to the following questions:

- How does *The Fallen Cathedrals* make you feel? What does it make you think of?
- What part(s) of *The Fallen Cathedrals* do you like best? Why?
- What part(s) of *The Fallen Cathedrals* do you think is/are the most effective? Why?
- The symphony is not finished yet. What do you think should be included in the other movements?

It became immediately apparent that when doing a similar thing later on I would get far better responses if I interviewed them or recorded their thoughts in a less formal way, which I duly did. The performers were also asked to make suggestions for the other movements so I could plan ahead and, hopefully, write music that related more directly to their experiences.

The themes emerging from these initial questions were as follows:

- disbelief
- feeling overwhelmed
- sadness (for themselves, their families the city, and for those that died)
- sadness but then feeling happy and/or optimistic
- tiredness
- the importance of the cathedral(s)
- people and the city rising up after the earthquake
- rebuilding the city
- the thrill and excitement
- being scared or tense
- feeling calm, thoughtful, emotional or mournful
- hope for the future

Their thoughts around how the symphony should progress were as follows (verbatim quotations are italicised and the actual outcomes are next to each one in square
parentheses):

- partisan responses around “good/interesting” parts for their particular instrument e.g. “More parts for flutes, because it sounds really good/they sound beautiful”, “Lots of timpani”, “tune for the tubular bells (endless rests)”, “more trombone solos” [I ended up doing most of these]
- “easy notes” [a nice try for an easier life, I suspect on the part of a first violinist]
- more quick movements/faster beat [yes, all three of the subsequent movements were quicker]
- “less long notes” [I suspect this was a more accomplished player wanting harder stuff]
- a reminder of life before the earthquakes [I think that was inherent in The Fallen Cathedrals anyway and by the time we embarked on the next movements, there was a tangible sense of urgency in the city to move on so I did not do this]
- a happy/joyful/peaceful/upbeat/fun ending [I thought I had done that but in their final comments at the conclusion of the project they didn’t seem to agree]
- “city of light” [I toyed with that idea but didn’t get anywhere with it]
- “funeral march” [this became the movement about the Student Volunteer Army]
- “Dramatic stuff” [all of the following movements were but, as I said previously, I had to be careful how and when to introduce this type of writing]
- “More intense stuff” [as above]
- “The last movement should symbolise the rebuild” [I liked the idea but I could not make it work]
- “Lots of parts in minor keys!” [this certainly happened, so an easy one to comply with]
- “Something that reflects people helping each other, and people rescuing people who were trapped under the rubble. [helping each other was covered in The Student Volunteer Army; I did not think it was appropriate to deal with the gorier side of the tragedy]

The next movement to be performed was entitled Like a Scene from a Movie, because one phrase that kept coming up from their and other people’s earthquake experiences was that it was unreal, like watching a movie but suddenly finding yourself in one. I emphasised that surreal feeling by building the work around a trumpet tune (Fig.3) reminiscent of a Hollywood blockbuster disaster movie:

![Fig.3 trumpet tune from Like a Scene from a Movie](image)

This eventually became the final movement and in acknowledging performers’ comments around a positive ending, I did rewrite a couple of passages for the final version in the completed symphony.

The third movement, The Student Volunteer Army, acknowledged what was one of the most significant things to come out of the earthquakes. Tertiary students from around the city, under the leadership of Sam Johnson at the University of Canterbury, set up the Student Volunteer Army, which went out into the community and helped people in need, shovelling liquefaction and working long hours to help get the city back on its feet.
The organisation has since become an internationally recognised model for community crisis response.

The conclusion of the symphony, *Magnitude 7.1*, was the riskiest as it included the whole orchestra stamping to give the impression of an earthquake in a shock ending, having lulled the audience into a false sense of security with 12 calm tubular bell chimes signifying noon on the day of the 22 February earthquake (Fig.4). As I explained earlier, I left this until last and it was not performed until 2015, four years after the 22 February earthquake. I felt vindicated when one performer commented:

*Patrick told our groups that he didn't do the earthquake first as he thought some of the children would get quite scared as it is very real, like a real earthquake. If that were to have happened there would have been a lot of people scared and worried that it was a real earthquake. Because we're not so scared now shows that we have grown stronger and braver.*

The performers predictably enjoyed doing this as it created a sense of fun around something that had hitherto been very frightening for them, exorcising their demons or facing their fears. One performer summed it up brilliantly by saying, *"It is better to be the earthquake than to be in the earthquake."* They also had to keep the effect secret for maximum impact of scaring their parents in the audience and, indeed, I received no complaints at that time. However, I did receive one complaint much later on, expressed in a casual chat one day following a conference presentation I gave on this project. Apparently, some audience members at the concerts had been upset by the use of projected images that accompanied the performance, especially those of the Student Volunteer Army clearing liquefaction in suburban streets. It brought home to me how raw the whole experience still was for some people and how confronting some of these images continued to be well after the fact. I had assumed (wrongly) that they had been absorbed into our psyche and we were now "over it" – some were but some, quite
clearly, were not.

**Once the dust has settled comes the aftermath**

August 2015 saw rehearsals commence for the performance of the symphony in its entirety later that year. Following on from my previous attempt to solicit suggestions and idea from the performers, I enlisted the help of a research assistant to take them off in groups during rehearsal to share their thoughts in group discussions. These were recorded and later transcribed. They were also given felt pens and asked to express their thoughts on large sheets of A3 paper; these responses were not directed in any way. I was pleased that many of the things I had intended to come out of the project had and, predictably, some had not but the key aims of providing a platform for catharsis, resilience and personal growth were there. The symphony had given the performers something to which they could look forward to the following year and something they could measure their own personal development against. In some respects, it allowed them to have fun with something that had hitherto terrified them, and given them an opportunity to voice their fears in a non-threatening environment. In many ways it abstracted something that was very real for them and, in that format, they could process it more easily, as demonstrated in the following responses:

- *It’s like reading an autobiography because it’s like someone’s life except it’s the life of Christchurch,*

- *It’s like a celebration and also a reminder. It’s reminding us of the hard times we’ve been through and it’s a celebration because we’re getting past those. It rises up something in me, it makes me feel very courageous but also sad because of the people who have lost loved ones or homes or stuff.*

Since the completion of the symphony, several of the performers asked me if I was going to write an extra movement, a typical comment justifying this suggestion being, *“the fifth movement could be about what is happening now and how we have recovered as a city and as a family of Christchurch”*. I had no plans to do so at that time as I felt that the symphony was about a well-defined series of ideas responses occurring within a set timeframe. Any additional movements would have meant another year built into the rehearsal/performance schedule with the inherent risk that when the time came to do the full symphony it may have lacked relevance or, at the very least, immediacy. As it turns out, the slow recovery of the city meant that I need to have worried on that score but I did also have a time limit within the concert programme of around 12 minutes and I was at that point with four movements. The comment did, however, show a heartening trend of positivity and how the children were intent on looking forward in a very optimistic way. I realised that the project had been a success as the children were beginning to look forward to a new Christchurch and participating in the symphony had made them aware of the journey they had been on, that out of darkness does, in fact, come light. Walsh (2007) talks of hope being essential for recovery, stating, “Hope fuels engines and investment to build lives, revise dreams, renew attachments, and create positive legacies to pass on to future generations.” (p.210). Walsh also goes on to say that resilience “involves mastering the possible, coming to accept what has been lost and cannot be changed, while directing efforts to what can be done and seizing opportunities for something good to come out of the tragedy” (Walsh, p.210).

One of my favourite responses was, “*It lets people react to the music rather than telling people how to feel.*” This surprised me given how prescriptive the titles were and how,
essentially, the performers had told me how they felt and what they wanted, but what I found telling in this statement was how the symphony had served to allow people to react in ways that meant something to them.

Regarding the identification of educative, musical advancement, “It is cool to see how far I have come as a musician,” was gratifying and, “Last year in the Student Volunteer Army I found some parts hard but this year I can play them more easily,” was just what I wanted. One of the trombonists summed this aspect up beautifully by saying:

I remember when I was in Year 8 in The Fallen Cathedrals there is a trombone solo, I couldn’t play it but the other trombonists could. I can remember sitting there thinking ‘I want to play the solo’ because it is so beautiful as the solo makes it happier and continues on to the lighter part of the movement. And now I can play the solo it makes me feel like I have grown as a musician throughout the four years.

I sensed a tinge of irony in the statement, “I’ve got better at counting,” as I suspect this may well have come from the tubular bells player who wished for “less rests” during my initial inquiry. Some responses demonstrated total understanding of the intended musical journey:

I really like the title because it is pretty much how we have coped with the earthquakes, going from the darkness and despair of quakes and not knowing what to do to growing from the experience and growing as a community and making good out of it. Now when you go round [sic], there’s paintings everywhere and it’s like they’ve made good from it.

and,

It’s about going from the darkness and despair from seeing our town being destroyed but the light is how we coped with it, how we transformed the town and how they have made it good out of the ruins and how we have come out of it even stronger as a community.

and finally,

Even in the darkest and toughest of times there is still hope; that definitely applies to Christchurch.

Conclusion

While I truly wish that the earthquakes had not occurred in the first place, creating this symphony with the input of the children, helped me to provide a powerful accompanying narrative – both musical and textual – to the situation around us. I felt that I attained a clear sense of purpose in my work, not just ars gratia artis but rather a palpable imperative to use music as a tool for learning, catharsis and resilience. As a researcher, it allowed me to get closer to the lived experience of people in ways that I could not ordinarily have done, hearing their stories and listening to how they viewed their world which physically, emotionally and psychologically, lay in ruins. In terms of education, it has been a truly humbling experience to be part of children’s lives growing up and acknowledging how something you have done has helped them make sense not only of a natural disaster but also their own development as a musician and as a person. I can find no better validation of the project than in the following words of one of the children: “It makes you want to persist in everything you do even though it may be hard.”
References

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