

# MusicFirst NI

## Unincorporated Association

## Trustees' Annual Report

## Year Ended 31 March 2023

The trustees present their report and the independently examined financial statements of the charity for the year ended 31 March 2023.

### Reference and Administrative Details

<b>Registered charity name</b>	MusicFirst NI (MFNI)
<b>Registered charity number</b>	NIC104806
<b>Principle office and registered office</b>	46 Botanic Avenue (First Floor) Belfast BT7 1JR

#### **The Trustees:**

Ms R C (Becca) Hopkins  
Secretary  
Mr P G Clements  
Treasurer  
Mrs H D Hogg  
Parent Representative  
Ms D Quinn  
Chairperson

#### **Management Committee:**

(In addition to the trustees above)

Miss S Giraudeau  
Tutor Representative

Miss C Owens  
Student Representative

### Structure, Governance and Management

#### **Governing Document**

The organization is an Unincorporated Association established under a constitution on 11 January 2016. The Association is governed by its Constitution, which also establishes the objectives and powers of the Association. No member is entitled to receive a dividend payment or any other return of capital from the charity. The charity's members hold no monetary liability in the event of it's being wound-up while he/she is a member.

MFNI is in compliance with the legal and other governance obligations. The Association was formally granted charitable status by the Northern Ireland Charity Commission on 20 April 2016, its charity number being NIC104806.

### **Organisational Structure & Guidance**

On 3 September 2020, MFNI passed a Special Resolution to amend the governing structure as previously constituted. The Charity is now governed by a committee of trustees and member volunteers appointed annually – The Management Committee.

Representatives were reelected at the AGM in August 2022.

### **Management**

MFNI's volunteer Managing Director, who reports directly to the trustees, conducts day-to-day management of the Association.

### **Objectives & Activities**

The objectives of MFNI are for the benefit of the public by advancing music education for children and adults in Northern Ireland:

- Providing a centre for music lessons, classes and workshops
- Providing qualified and vetted tutors for music lessons, classes and workshops
- Arranging performance opportunities for developing musicians
- Entering developing musicians for examinations, festivals, and competitions

Studying music improves full brain function - nurturing creativity, problem solving, improved focus and reduced stress levels "Playing a musical instrument is a multi-sensory and motor experience that creates emotions and motions—from finger tapping to dancing—and engages pleasure and reward systems in the brain. It has the potential to change brain function and structure when done over a long period of time... intense musical training generates new processes within the brain, at different stages of life, and with a range of impacts on creativity, cognition, and learning".

- Gottfried Schlaug, MD, PhD (*Neuroscience 2013*)

Further benefits include the fostering of self-confidence and personal discipline in setting out and achieving progressive goals within a supporting environment and community. These benefits are evidenced through the growing number of learners enrolled, feedback from students and their families via semi-annual surveys as well as students' personal exam results and successful performances.

### **Assets Purchased:**

N/A

## **Strategic Report**

The following for Achievements and Performance, Financial Review and Plans for Future Periods form the Strategic Report.

### **Achievements and Performance**

Total Members: 319

- 87 Active (down by 12 from last year)
- 86 Students (down by 15 from last year)

Total Student Hours Taught: 882 (down by 400 hours from last year)

#### **Children's Group Classes**

A total of 40 children were taught in 7 classes. For the previous year there were 45 children taught in 9 classes and of the 10 classes proposed by Ms Becca at the start of the academic year, only 2 have reached the minimum number (4) of pupils needed to run the class. Of these 2 classes, only 4 children are enrolled in each. Whether it be the continued legacy of Covid or the result of the cost-of-living crisis, the Children's Department is not growing as it should.

Children's Department:

- Directed by Ms Becca Hopkins

In September 2022, all classes were running face to face in the studio. For families who require occasional online access, this is facilitated and they can log in to join the live class.

Classes:

Kindermusik Our Time (ages 18 months – 1 ½ Years)

Kindermusik Imagine That! (ages 3 – 5 Years)

Kindermusik for the Young Child (ages 5 – 7 Years); with 4 "Graduates" June 2022

Music FUNdamentals (ages 7 – 11 Years)

MFNI Children's Dept. Benefits:

Evidence continues to emerge highlighting the benefits of music to promote child development. Unfortunately, the legacy of numerous lockdowns can be seen in the delayed development of specific skills in babies and toddlers born during this time. Face to face musical lessons encourage the children to socialise, develop their play skills, and promote their speech and language development.

Language & Literacy

- Prepare child with school-readiness skills: language, literacy and listening
- Build communication skills
- Provide structured routine and flexibility

Physical

- Promote physical development
- Build gross and fine motor skill
- Prepare child for physically active future

MusicFirst NI

### Creative

- Develop lifetime love of music and learning
- Creatively express and explore individual strengths: art, vocal, dance, and instrumental activities
- Engage curiosity and imagination

### Social & Emotional

- Develop social skills through group communication
- Build self-esteem
- Learn to communication to a group

### Cognitive

- Advance brain development: spatial and complex reasoning
- Improve memory and ability to learn new information
- Follow directions and learn sequential order

## TUTORS (Individual Tuition)

Ms. Becca Hopkins (Singing)

Ended financial year with 58 students (3 less than 2021/22) – total singers & children's classes

Miss Sophie Giraudeau (Singing)

Ended financial year with 13 students (down 1 from 2021/22)

Mr. Garvin Clements (Guitar & Music Theory)

Ended financial year with 16 students (up by 5 since 2021/22)

Mr. Ben McGarvey (Piano & Music Theory)

Ended financial year with 0 students

\*Mr. McGarvey joined MFNI in September 2022 taking face to face lessons. In early 2023 Ben moved to London and continued to be part of the charity, offering lessons online.

Miss E Lim (Piano & Violin)

Ended financial year with 3 students

\*Miss Lim joined MFNI in March 2023 as a new piano tutor following the resignation of Miss Wishart in summer 2022.

Mr. Matty Irvine, drum tutor, did not renew his contract with MFNI for the academic year 2022/23. There were few enquiries in relation to drum lessons and Matty continued to have no students. This was a great loss to the charity, however Matty continues to support the school and would be open to returning in the future should circumstances change.

Miss Molly Wishart (Piano)

Miss Wishart made known to the trustees her intention not to renew her contract in August 2022.

Miss Wishart's unexpected resignation left the charity in a vulnerable position as she took with her all her students who had been registered as members of MFNI. The loss of 22+ students had a significant impact on the charity, affecting the numbers of children enrolled

simultaneously in Music Fundamentals. The school was also unable to offer piano lessons for the 6 months following Miss Wishart's departure; lessons which are extremely popular, and therefore this had a negative impact on the income of the charity.

As tutor contracts were annually signed at the AGM, the contracts for 2022/23 were to be signed in the middle of the summer term, splitting the term between 2 contracts. Whilst, MW had declared in writing via email her intention to sign the new contract (which included a noncompete clause), paid the projected commission fee, and had received full payment from students for the 7 weeks of the summer term. MW did not attend the AGM, and 4 days later, emailed to state that she was resigning from MFNI and would not be renewing her contract.

These commission fee payments are MFNI's primary source of income. And as per contract, tutors are expected to fulfil projected hours. At that time, MFNI's standard practice had been to offer a credit towards the following term for hours unfilled, but refunds were never given. In keeping with standard practice, MW could have received credits, however as she had decided to leave MFNI, she would not be able to avail of any credited funds. After being notified of this, MW threatened legal action to gain a refund of £135 commission fee. MFNI Management Committee met to discuss and review the attendance and payment records (on which the commission payments are based) submitted by MW.

Even though intention to teach through the summer term was clear, due to the quality of recording keeping, the committee were unable to establish a clear picture of attendance by MW's students that corresponded with previous commission fee payments. Therefore, the committee were unable to determine the exact amount either remaining to be paid to MFNI or credited to MW.

The Committee then ask MW to meet and review the records - giving her the chance to expound on the them. She refused and continued to escalate the threat of legal action. After consulting the Charity Commission of Northern Ireland and considering proportionality, the trustees agreed that in the best interest of the charity and the wider community, to resolve this matter as quickly as possible and move forward with the charity's aim and objectives, MW would be paid the requested amount of £135. The payment included the following conditions (that were accepted by MW):

- 1) Ms Wishart is debarred from the charity and no longer able to receive any benefit, monetary or otherwise (affiliations, performance / accompanist work, access to the premises, etc)
- 2) The payment (£135) is not a refund, and therefore does not set a precedent for refund of Commission Fees
- 3) The payment of £135 is payment to provide settlement; this amount has not been substantiated
- 4) Following receipt of the payment, MFNI request Ms Wishart cease and desist disruption of the charity's work, including personally contacting trustees
- 5) This payment does not set precedent and is an isolated situation for which measures have been put in place to prevent reoccurrence.

While this was a very difficult time for the charity, the trustees considered the damage done and ongoing disruption. They agreed there was greater public benefit to concede the £135 with the understanding that MW will not receive any more benefit, monetary or otherwise, from MFNI in

order that she will also cease and desist the disruption of the charity's ability to best serve the community.

To prevent re-occurrence of a similar incident, the trustees have reviewed and updated tutor contracts:

- 1) to include noncompete clause (from August 2022)
- 2) to include clarification of the credit policy for commission fees and unfilled hours (October 2022)
- 3) with a process for giving notice and a way for students' payments to be honoured within MFNI should their tutor leave mid-term (October 2022)
- 4) with adjusted signing dates to ensure overlapping annual contracts (April 2023)

As stated above Miss Lim was recruited in March 2023 following a number of unsuitable applicants. The delay in recruitment has had a negative impact on student numbers and it continues to be challenging to rebuild the cohort of piano students. Miss Lim is a positive asset to the charity and it is hoped her number of students continues to grow.

## EVENTS:

### Forte Festival



As we left Covid and lockdown in the not-so-distant past, the Forte Festival was back with a bang. As the previous venue was not available the charity investigated other possibilities which would facilitate the needs of the performers and also being cost effective for the charity. Belvoir Players Studio in Belfast was the chosen venue. Although it was more costly than anticipated, a significant donation of £300-£350 from the Forestside Christian Centre helped with this. On the day there were no studio staff available as had been agreed, to assist with set up, sound etc. and therefore a reduced rate was invoiced by the venue. A reduced fee of £200 was agreed and Forestside Christian Centre covered the full cost.

This was a large-scale event, with 2 stages and 65 performers, showcasing every level of Kindermusik, Music Fundamentals, and soloists young and old, novice to professional. Tutors also had the opportunity to share with MFNI families their own skills and talents. Tickets and programmes were sold, and a raffle was also organized, with prizes donated by local businesses. Face painting was also provided free to families with the cost covered by MFNI.

A team of volunteers comprising of tutors, committee members, families and students, took on the planning of the event. Wanting to promote a sense of inclusion and ownership, members were encouraged to take an active part in the running of the event. Volunteers were recruited to provide catering, whilst others helped with decoration, play area, setup/take down on the day. As a charity it is central to our ethos that everyone in the community feels included. There were challenges with securing volunteers as many of the families were new to MFNI and had no experience of the atmosphere and purpose of the Forte Festival. Evaluation of the event was

that whilst it provided and excellent opportunity for a wide range of students to perform; the children to graduate the Kindermusik programme, it was not as successful as previous years and donations were limited. It was however so lovely to once again see our graduates perform and for them to have their graduation ceremony. Both the students and their families were delighted with this and felt it to be a positive conclusion to their Kindermusik journey. The management committee are committed to exploring other options for showcasing talent and celebrating our end of year graduates in the coming year.

### Summer Singing Course:

Once again Ms Becca returned with Summer Singing in July and August 2022. Teaching took place in MFNI and it had been agreed that a professional pianist (Ms Wishart) would be in attendance each week. The finale of the course would be a Lounge Evening to allow participants to showcase the song they had been working on. Participant numbers were down this year and attendance fluctuated each week.

Ms Wishart was to provide accompaniment at the Lounge Evening prior to the final weeks Ms Wishart had resigned and therefore the evening had to be postponed. This situation impacted the charity in a negative way in terms of reputation, professionalism and income.



### Description:

Led by MusicFirst NI's Becca Hopkins, this series of vocal workshops / masterclasses is geared towards the advancing singer who wants:

- \*Personal 1-2-1 coaching (or to observe and contribute to a 1-2-1 session)
- \*To achieve more volume and power as well as a clarity in softer tones
- \*To discover subtleties essential to defining a personal style
- \*To explore the art of affective performance
- \*To establish effective practice routines for continued development
- ...plus gain a big confidence boost knowing "you've got all the notes!"

### Children's Department Kindermusik Playdates



30 July & 2 Sept. 2022

- Raising awareness of MFNI within the community
- Offering free class demos and expert advice on music tuition pathways in regards to child development

Given the low numbers of families who engaged in open days in 2021, Ms Becca implemented a new way of opening up Kindermusik to the community. A number of 'Playdates' took place prior to the new academic year commencing, allowing families to book a place in a special one-off class. This approach allowed families to experience the unique approach and structure of the class they could enroll their child in. This turned out to be a positive approach.

### Lounge Evenings

MusicFirst NI

Unincorporated Association

Trustees' Annual Report (continued)

Year Ended 31 March 2023



Given the continued success of the Lounge Evenings in the previous year, more were planned for 22 September, 22 December, and 23 February. As explained above, circumstances resulted in the evening in September being postponed, and then combined with the next Lounge Evening in 22 December.

Tutors and trustees gave of their time to completely transform Studio A from a classroom into an intimate, fairly-lit performance space, with room for up to 35 audience members. Adult performers receiving individual tuition were given the opportunity to perform for an audience, promoting their self-esteem and confidence and allowing a showcase for the talent within MFNI

A nominal fee of £5 per ticket was charged to cover snacks and soft drinks provide.

After the main performers an open mic space was offered for any other budding performers in the audience. This enabled those students who didn't feel ready for the more formal performance opportunity, to still have a go and build their confidence for next time. It also enabled the tutors from MFNI to showcase their skills and talents, offering a prime opportunity to advertise the school. Finally, it also allowed those in the audience, who weren't students but were perhaps considering tuition, to experience the supportive and nurturing atmosphere of MFNI, to meet the tutors, and even have their moment in the spotlight. All of this contributes to promoting the reputation of the school as a place for all the community.

Junior Lounge evenings were also organized for 22 December and 23 February, however latter was rescheduled for 23 April due to tutor commitments. These junior lounge evenings enable our young students aged 11 years to 17 age to perform for one another and an audience. These performances allow students to build their confidence or perhaps use as a rehearsal for exam practicals. The evening followed the same format as the adult evenings, although starting a little earlier to allow for the age of participants and audience members. Ven the set up and organization required, alongside the time given by tutors, it was decided that both events would be held on the same date with time in between. Not only is this a more responsible way to use resources, it also opens up both to other audience members who may choose to attend both performances.

Feedback from students and families continues to be positive and the open mic session following the main performance, continues to give those students, and audience members, a chance to perform in a more informal atmosphere. The hope is that audience members will have fun and potentially consider taking up individual lessons.

A central goal of the Lounge Evenings continues to be focused on bringing the community together; to learn from one another, to socialize, and to celebrate each other's success. Ensemble work is an aspect of advanced formal music exams, and therefore encouraging relationships and promoting an open mic environment for collaboration, will be adding to the students' ensemble skills.

Parents and other family members are vital to the running of MFNI, as demonstrated by the success of the Forte Festival 22, therefore offering them the opportunity to see their young person performing, strengthens their connection to the school and the tutors.



## Financial Review

Through the income raised from tutor room rental fees, donations, ticket sales and interest received, MFNI grossed a total income £7419.94, leaving a net loss of £633.30 after running expenditure.

With Ms Wishart resigning as piano tutor in August 2022 MFNI lost over 22 students, equating to a sizable amount of income and once again the school was in a vulnerable position. There followed a period of uncertainty, causing much stress for tutors. Given it took approximately 6 months to appoint another piano tutor, income was negatively impacted.

It should be noted that demand for individual singing lessons continued to be high during this period.

## Changes and Improvements

A deep clean of the waiting room, studio A and studio B took place prior to the start of the academic year. New furniture was purchased for the waiting room to make it more welcoming, and certificates, achievements and awards received by tutors were displayed on the walls within the studio.

The promotional video which commenced filming in 2021 continues to be unfinished. The positive of this was that it enabled David Hughes (videographer) to attend the Forte Festival and create a mini video of the event. This was used on social media to promote MFNI. The main promotional video is in post-production, but as Ms Wishart had composed the background music, and also no longer is a tutor at MFNI, the video will have to be re-edited and new music composed/acquired. When completed the video will be used on social media to raise the profile of the school. MFNI are focused on increasing their social media presence and Miss Owens has specialist skills in this area and is going to take on this task.

## Plans for Future Periods

In setting our objectives and planning our activities for the year, the trustees have given careful consideration to the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland's guidance on public benefit to ensure that the activities have helped to achieve the charity's purposes and provide a benefit to the beneficiaries.

MFNI plans to continue working towards the advancement of music education in Northern Ireland. As a legacy of Covid and now the recent cost of living crisis, we recognize the challenges of increasing student numbers as we go forward. We also acknowledge that offering virtual lessons also adds an additional format for students and the community to engage with the school

MFNI continues to promote ease of access for payments for events and Kindermusik via PayPal. This was the preferred method for purchasing tickets for the Forte Festival.

The Lounge Evenings will continue to be a prominent feature of the year ahead. Continuous feedback will be sought from tutors and students, and it is also hoped piano, violin and guitar students will feature in forthcoming evening.

It is uncertain at present will Summer Singing will return give the drop in numbers and increasing costs.

A number of 'Playdates' are also planned for Summer 2023 and individual tutors will offer lessons over the summer period.

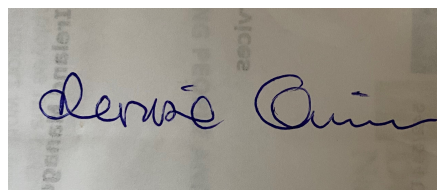
Given the expense of the venue used for this year's Forte Festival and the problems with support from the venue, other options will be explored for the end of year celebration. The management committee will evaluate the costs and benefits for the charity and its members of such a large scale event and will consider ways to evolve the festival ensuring performance opportunities, celebration of graduates, and reaching out to more of the community.

The only private benefit flowing from this purpose is the heightened awareness, and increased brand recognition, of the tutors as both educators and performers. This is incidental and necessary, because without the tutors, the charity could not fulfil its purpose and objectives. The public awareness of the tutors' expertise brings an assurance of the quality of service provided. No harm arises from these purposes.

The Trustees' Annual Report and Strategic Report were approved on 26 January 2024 and signed on behalf of the Board of Trustees by:



Ms. Becca Hopkins  
26 January 2024  
2022-2023 Secretary



Ms. Denise Quinn  
26 January 2024  
2022-2023 Chairperson