

MusicFirst NI

Unincorporated Association Trustees' Annual Report Year Ended 31 March 2024

The trustees present their report and the independently examined financial statements of the charity for the year ended 31 March 2024.

Reference and Administrative Details

Registered charity name:	MusicFirst NI (MFNI)
Registered charity number:	NIC104806
Principle and Registered office:	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 re-elected at the AGM in August 2023.

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:

Only goods for studio maintenance – see 'Capital Purchases' in Treasury Return.

Strategic Report

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

Achievements and Performance

Total Members: 104

- 99 Active (up by 12 from last year)

- 86 Students (down by 15 from last year)

Total Student Hours Taught: 1129.25 (up by 247.25 hours from previous year)

Children's Group Classes:

- 35 (for a limited time, 39) children were taught in 9 classes.

Children's Department (directed by Ms Becca Hopkins):

In September 2023, all classes were running face to face in the studio. On the very rare occasion when a family requested to do so, the option of online access was provided to facilitate joining the live class virtually.

Classes:

Kindermusik Our Time (ages 18 months – 1 ½ Years) – closed Sept. 2023 due to low intake

Kindermusik Imagine That! (ages 3 – 5 Years)

Kindermusik for the Young Child (ages 5 – 7 Years) with 7 “Graduates” June 2023

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

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 communicate 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 44 students (14 fewer than 2022/23) – total singers & children's classes

Miss Sophie Giraudeau (Singing)

Ended financial year with 10 students (3 fewer than 2022/23)

Mr. Garvin Clements (Guitar & Music Theory)

Ended financial year with 15 students (1 fewer than 2022/23)

Mr. Ben McGarvey (Piano & Music Theory)

Ended financial year with 0 students

*Ben continues to offer online lessons only, and it would seem that as we distance from COVID the demand for virtual lessons has decreased. Ben however continues to state his commitment to the school, and do offer the option of online learning for those students who have a preference for it.

Miss E Lim (Piano & Violin)

Ended financial year with 10 students (7 more than 2022/23)

Ms Cristina Santana (Piano)

Ended financial year with 9 students

*Cristina joined MFNI in October 2023 as a piano tutor

Following the departure of 2 piano tutors in previous years, and the challenges of recruiting, many of MFNI's piano students had moved on. Edeline has been a great addition and by virtue of her growing number of students, the demand for piano lessons remains. In October 2023 MFNI welcomed Cristina as its newest piano teacher. As MFNI once again now have 2 piano tutors it is hoped that student numbers will continue to grow, and will allow for the transition of children from the Children's Department to individual lessons, as families often see piano as good choice for a first instrument.

As had been agreed by the Trustees in the previous financial year; tutor contracts were issued and signed in April 2023 for the academic year ahead (starting Sept 23). Should new tutors join after April, contracts are signed with them individually. This new policy for signing contracts ensures there is no overlap between contracts and also provides tutors with ample time to give notice if they so choose, allowing MFNI time to seek an alternative tutor. This protects and promotes the best interests of both the tutor and the charity.

Events

Forte Festival



The Forte Festival has always played a central role in MFNI's academic year; something that tutors and students alike work towards throughout the year. The event also offered the opportunity to bring all of our community together – a central part of MFNI. However as recognised in previous AMRs following COVID, the energy and impact of the Forte Festival has diminished and has never quite recovered, despite tireless efforts of MFNI. The legacy of COVID continued and was also accompanied by the increasing financial pressures of families in NI. The MFNI management committee spent time reflecting on the way forward: something that would promote the commitment and ethos of the

school in relation to performance opportunities and reaching out into the community, and balancing this with the costs, financial, practical, and personal, to the charity and its community, from running such an event. It was agreed that alternative venues would be sourced, and consideration of ways to mitigate the significant personal and financial impact on tutors and volunteers that came with the planning and facilitating.

MFNI secured space within 2 Royal Avenue, a community and creative hub that offers a creative space within Belfast City Centre. As the venue is multifunctional, it did not offer a separate theatre or stage, however MFNI had access to an area at the back of the venue, which included chairs and a grand piano. Whilst there was no cost to the hiring of the venue, MFNI subsequently had to purchase a stage, sound equipment, additional seating, and decorations/signage. There also was the requirement for a team of volunteers to be involved with transporting the equipment, and setting up and tearing down, on the day. Although there was no need to provide catering (an onsite café was available), run a ballot, or face-painting, the event did involve a significant amount of voluntary time from tutors, committee, and volunteers.

2 Royal Avenue did provide a great location, especially as the Forte Festival took place on a Sunday, meaning more free parking was available within the city centre, which was also accessible via public transport. However, as it was a public building, and therefore open for anyone to use, MFNI were unable to sell tickets for the event – the main source of income from any of our events. This presented the management committee with a challenge; why would families pay for a ticket, when someone could just come in and watch. It was decided that a 'seated' areas would be created, providing a good view of the stage. Seated tickets were sold to MFNI families via PayPal and in class, allowing them to have a guaranteed seat (and view of their performer) on the day. The seating area was roped off and tickets checked at the entrance of the building. Anyone without a ticket was able to stand behind the seats and watch. Whilst this was not ideal, it had been hoped that this could provide an opportunity to freely publicise and promote the work of MFNI. Throughout the building, including at the entrance, and at the performance areas, donation tubs and QR codes were available for people to also donate.

Unlike previous Forte Festivals, there was only one main stage, but the variety and diversity of performers was still present, alongside a relaxed atmosphere that enabled the little ones to stand up and run around if need. From toddlers, to adults, beginners to professionals, MFNI shone! As always it was a delight to see the children of the Kindermusik class of 2023 graduate, celebrating the end of their Kindermusik journey. During the interval Ms Becca facilitated a group class for everyone who wished to take part. As always this was a hit with all the little ones from the group

classes as they all adore Ms Becca! It was also an absolute delight to see the older kids, who have grown up in Ms Becca's classes, join in. Not only this this provide an opportunity for a movement break for the audience, it also served to show what happens at MFNI; an invaluable way to reach out to the people visiting 2 Royal Avenue who were not members of the MFNI community.

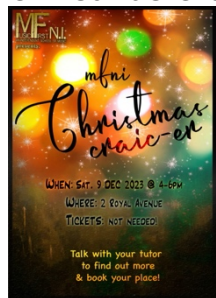
On the whole feedback from families, performers and tutors was positive, however there were issues raised that we had to share the space and that other events were also taking place. Positivity, one of the MFNI parents were so impressed by the event, that they wrote a promotional piece for Belfast Live, highlighting the success and community ethos of the school. Sadly, MFNI received limited donations, and despite the venue being free, the other costs, and issues with selling tickets, meant the event ran at a financial loss. Once again, the management committee are committed to discussing this further, weighing up the costs and benefits to the charity and the community: the event was such a positive and enjoyable experience, however how to facilitate this without financially disadvantaging the charity. This will be explored further in the upcoming financial year.

Summer Singing

This year instead of running a 4-6 week group course, Ms Becca provided the opportunity for students to continue their individual lessons through the summer term. Ms Becca offered a flexible approach to timetabling and this was positively received by students as it isn't always possible to commit in advance to a block of weeks, so this approach enabled them to continue their tuition over the summer.

Ms Becca also provided opportunities for her older Music Fundamentals students to attend for individual tuition/top up support with their summer project or other work they had been undertaking that year. Again, this flexible approach is attractive to families, as often it can be hard to commit to a set week or day of classes over the summer due to childcare and holidays.

Christmas Cracker



In keeping with the charity's aims and objectives, MFNI continued to explore opportunities for our students, regardless of age or skill, to perform. Following the feedback from performers and the families, we utilised 2 Royal Avenue again to host a very relaxed Christmas concert. Unlike the previous year's lounge evening, this was something for all the family, and also provided MFNI to reach out into the local community. Due to the low-key nature of the concert, the majority of performers were singers, peppered with some pianists and guitarists too. Ms Becca took the lead in organising and facilitating the event, and there was support from other tutors also. No tickets or programmes were sold for the event, although donation tubs and QR codes were available. Only £40 in donations were taken, again the event being a loss for MFNI. It was however a success for students with performers were from all ages and performance levels, and it was a lovely way to spend an afternoon just before Christmas. Whilst there was minimal cost to MFNI as a school, it must be recognised that the event did come at a financial, and personal time, cost to Ms Becca. It would be great to be able to provide further opportunities such as this within the heart of the community, but cannot be a detriment to any individual tutor. This will also be something the management committee will explore further in the upcoming financial year.

Lounge Evenings



Given the continued success of the Lounge Evenings in the previous year, two were planned for 10 June 2023; a junior concert for teenage students, followed by an adult concert. It had been previously agreed that it was more beneficial for tutors and volunteers, and more cost effective to have both the junior and adult concerts back-to-back on the same evening.

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 provided.

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.

Feedback from students and families remains 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 socialise, 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, therefore offering them the opportunity to see their young person performing, strengthens their connection to the school and the tutors.

10 Years of MFNI

At the beginning of 2024 we said Happy 10th Birthday to MFNI; created by 3 amazingly talented tutors who wanted to write and perform music together, whilst nurturing their students within a supportive community. We took the time to reflect on how MFNI has continued to flourish with the community at its heart, drawing on the knowledge and experience of tutors, students and families alike. Ms Becca took the opportunity to reach out to the MFNI community for any memories, stories, or photographs they wished to share, many of which contributed to a lovely memory wall display, visually depicting the 10 years of MFNI history! Having the time to think back over the challenges faced and overcome, the talent that was inspired and encouraged, and the friendships that were formed by families in the children's classes, had a positive impact on tutors and families alike, and reminded everyone of the values at the heart of the school.

Following the challenges presented over recent years, it has been great to be reminded of, and to celebrate all the achievements of the school. We are all hopeful and excited for what the next 10 years will bring.

Financial Review

Through the income raised from tutor room rental fees, donations, ticket sales and interest received, MFNI grossed a total income £7,902.21 leaving a net profit of £511.94 after running expenditure and assets purchased.

Changes and Improvements

The annual deep clean of the waiting room, studio A and studio B took place prior to the start of the academic year. Certificates, achievements and awards received by tutors are displayed on the walls within the studio, and educational posters were updated to reflect MFNI's aesthetic and pedagogy.

MFNI continue to have a growing presence on social media, enabling the charity to reach out to the community; sharing all about tutors, the programmes that run, and also snapshots of the students performing. The moments captured by the professional photographer at the Forte Festival, photos and video clips taken by families, students, and tutors of their lessons and time in the studio, are providing excellent content for MFNI's online platforms. As we move further into an era where people want information to be easily and instantly accessible, striving to develop MFNI's online profile is a key aim in promoting the charity. Having tutors' details available online also ensures that potential students can make direct contact with them regarding availability, rather than going through MFNI secretary, creating a much more effective and streamlined process.

Child and Adult Safeguarding training was provided to all tutors in February 2024. For some, this was a refresher, and for our newer tutors, their first within their time with MFNI. Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults is a key responsibility of all tutors, volunteers and management within MFNI and it is essential that opportunities for learning and development are provided, and that everyone is clear of their individual and collective roles and responsibilities within the school. Training needs will be reviewed on an ongoing basis and further training provided when required.

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. Whilst we move further away from the time of lockdown, its legacy lingers, and its impacts amplified by the enduring cost of living crisis. MFNI continues to work hard to increase student numbers both within the children's classes, and individual tuition. Over recent years, the flux in tutors has created additional challenges to this, as families have found themselves on a waiting list, or have decided to look elsewhere for tuition. It is hoped now with some stability within the

tutor cohort, MFNI will be in a better position to undertake this task. It is acknowledged that our world is much changed, and that although music still remains an important part of people's lives, they may no longer be in a position to prioritise furthering their learning.

In the not-too-distant future, a very significant change will be coming into place within MFNI. In June 2024 will we say goodbye to Ms Becca's award winning Kindermusik programme. This decision has not been taken lightly and is with a degree of sadness. However, Kindermusik in recent years has moved away from its traditional format and approach to teaching, relying heavily on short term, online access to materials, including songs, storybooks, and other creative materials, as well as using digital apps to simulate playing a musical instrument. MFNI parents have shared the frustration with these changes and have not found them to be positive. Despite the lack of physical materials, the costs has increased. In addition to the disappointment expressed by parents, Ms Becca also feels that this approach to early music learning is not in line with her own values and practice, or indeed those of MFNI. Children need to be able to learn through their play; to hold storybooks in their hand; to build paper playgrounds, and dance with scarves. They also need to have the experience of touching and interacting with an actual musical instrument, not simply hitting a screen to hear the sound it should make. Consequently, Ms Becca has proposed that she will develop her own children's department, drawing on her significant and extensive experience of working with children in a musical and educational setting. To ensure that the MFNI is part of this evolution, focus groups will be held with parents throughout the children's department, to gather feedback, suggestions, and hopes for the new programme. This is going to be an exciting time for MFNI and also offers the opportunity for MFNI to have its own unique and individual children's department, that aligns with the school's values, and also promotes and integrates the benefits of engaging in both group learning and individual tuition. June 2024 will see the final children graduate from the Kindermusik programme.

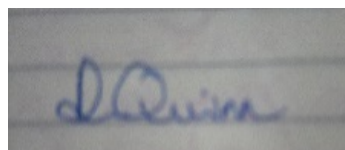
As already acknowledged above, the management committee will continue to explore alternative options for the end of year celebration, alongside thinking of other performance opportunities for our students.

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 29 January 2025 and signed on behalf of the Board of Trustees by:



Ms. Becca Hopkins
29 January 2025
2023-2024 Secretary



Ms. Denise Quinn
29 January 2025
2023-2024 Chairperson