

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019

Project Summary

A series of music and dance events culminating in a larger-scale finale performance in 2019.

The three main aims of the project were:

Goal 1. *ARTISTIC* - Support and platform local artists

Goal 2. *AUDIENCE* - Engage and develop audiences in the region

Goal 3. *VENUE* - Raise the cultural and artistic offer of the Peepul Centre

This Self Evaluation report will summarise the main outcomes of the project and review the activity against these three aims.



(Peepul Centre ArtsHub Anil Bhanot, Dharambir Singh MBE of Sitar Society, Smita Vadherkar of Nupur Arts and Nilima Devi MBE of Centre for Indian Classical Dance)

1. Activity Review

Background

In 2015 Anil Bhanot, the Chairman, spoke to Leicester based art organisations to form a network of artists to be based at the Peepul Centre. It took a few years before the Peepul Centre Arts Hub was able to format our first project, funded by the Arts Council, Leicester City

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019

Council and EMFoundation. The Mehfil Project aimed to bring people, artists and organisations together through Indian classical arts. 'Mehfil' means a 'meeting' or 'gathering' in Hindi/Urdu so this project sought to enrich the cultural offer of the Peepul Centre by creating an artistic hub or meeting point where artists and audiences of diverse backgrounds could enjoy and enrich their understanding of the music and dance forms of South Asia together.

Management

The project was led by Belgrave Baheno Peepul Centre (BBPC) Anil Bhanot (Chairman), Coromoto Power Febres (BBPC Director) and some of its Peepul Centre Arts Hub members; Dharambir Singh MBE (Sitar Music Society), Nilima Devi MBE (Centre for Indian Classical Dance - CICD) and Smita Vadnerkar (Nupur Arts). Seetal Kaur was the designated Project Manager and coordinated and promoted the events with marketing support from Shahana Sokhi (Social Media Assistant). The entire Peepul Centre team was also involved in this project with particular contributions from Survkeet Plaha (Financial Controller), Hashmukh Pankhania (COO), Naishad Chhtralia (BDM), Rupa Vadher Chauhan (Events) and Nigel Hammond (Technician).

Events

There were 3 interactive 'Appreciation Sessions', followed by 2 small performances leading up to a larger performance evening in the Peepul Centre Main Theatre.



('Taal - The Beat of Indian Classical Music and Dance' - 28 September 2018, Peepul Centre - Image credit: Thaxnay Kapdee)

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019

1a. Appreciation Sessions

The three appreciation sessions were structured as lecture demonstration evenings that focused on key aspects of Indian classical music and dance. The Arts Hub members planned and led each session and were assisted by young dance and music students of the respective organisations. Depending on audience numbers, the sessions took place in the Training Room or the Function Room of the Peepul Centre with basic technical requirements for presentations and demonstrations.

It was occasionally challenging for the young students to be enthusiastically involved, so monetary incentives (travel expenses) were given and they benefited in the end. The final session on 28 October clashed with the busy Diwali/Navratri season so attendance was low (6 people). It was decided to live-stream the session via Sitar Music Society Facebook to reach a wider audience and gained 339 views with 713 people reached and 203 engagements.

Appreciation Sessions

Total number of artists involved: 8

Total audience engaged: 56

1b. Performances

The two small-scale performances took place in November 2018 and January 2019 showcasing local artists. The project commissioned a new collaborative work and provided the rehearsal space and time to create a new performance piece. Audiences were invited to take part in the Q&A at the end of the presentation to deepen their understanding and help the artists to reflect on the creation process.

The first performance was highly successful both in artistic development and audience attendance as it exceeded the ticket sales target of 50 attendees. The second performance had to be rescheduled from December 2018 to January 2019 as one of the dance artists was unable to take part due to personal issues and we were unable to source local, suitable musicians. With a large focus on Christmas and the New Year, the marketing campaign would have been in high competition and more time was required to coordinate travel for the musicians for the rehearsals and performance. In the end it was a high-cost event with significant additions to the budget but it was well managed, feedback from artists was positive and the audience were highly engaged.

Performances

Total number of artists involved: 8

Total audience engaged: 80

“A new experience for me. I was impressed, so beautiful to watch and mesmerising music - thoroughly enjoyed every moment.” - The Mehfil Project - ‘Musical Movements’ Audience Member

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019



(Aarti Lodhia and Kesha Raithatha at 'Musical Movements' - 23 November 2018, Peepul Centre - Image credit: Thaxnay Kapdee)

1c. Finale Performance

The final showcase event 'Celebrating the Future' on 1st February 2019 was ambitious in its scope and scale as it involved the development of an original commission by Sampad, 'Confluence' and also showcased internationally-renowned guest artists Aakash Odedra and Roopa Panesar.

Rehearsal space and time were provided to the 5 artists involved in 'Confluence', who had a very positive experience working together in new ways as musicians and dancers. As established professionals, the guest artists required certain standards of sound and lighting that the Peepul Centre wasn't fully equipped to provide. This was highlighted as a key area of development for future performance projects and events (see Section 4 - Future Development).

Despite audience figures being lower than anticipated (75 paid attendees against 150 target), both the audience and artists had a positive experience with attendees coming from Birmingham and Wellingborough. The volunteers on the evening were also extremely helpful and supportive in running a smooth, professional and high quality event. The finale event provided a valuable opportunity

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019

Finale Performance

Total number of artists involved: 9

Total audience engaged: 120

“Great to see such high quality performers at a local level for accessibility.” - The Mehfil Project - ‘Celebrating the Future’ Audience member



(Anaya Bolar and Shyam Dattani in rehearsal for ‘Confluence’, Peepul Centre - Image credit: Seetal Kaur)

2. GOAL 1 - Artistic Development Review

The project was incredibly beneficial for the development of the artists involved, the majority of whom were based in the Midlands.

Direct feedback from artists during rehearsals and post-performance discussions clearly demonstrated that the project aim to ‘support and platform local artists’ was achieved with increased reputation of the Peepul Centre among artists as a supportive, welcoming centre with facilities for creation and performance.

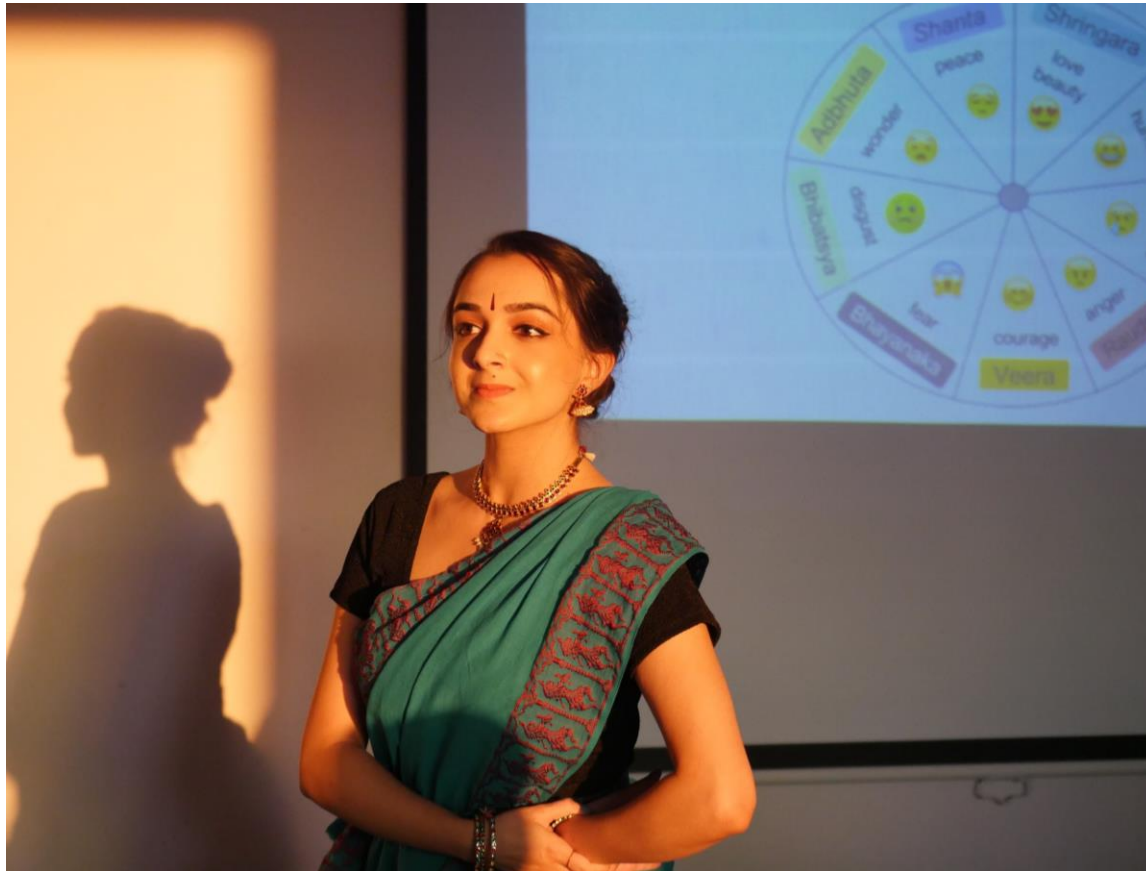
2a. Appreciation Sessions

A number of local, upcoming dancers and musicians connected to the Arts Hub member organisations were involved in the lecture demonstrations including:

- Shree Savani finalist in the BBC Young Dancer competition 2019.
- Two young Kathak dancers from CICD guided by Aakash Odedra.
- Nupur Arts adult Bharatanatyam students.
- Kaviraj Singh and Upneet Singh, talented musicians from Sitar Music Society.

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019

The sessions gave them the opportunity to reflect on the knowledge that they have gathered so far and gain confidence in public speaking and performance by presenting during the sessions.



(Shree Savani - Nupur Arts at 'Rasa - The Power of Indian Classical Music and Dance, 31 August 2018, Peepul Centre - Image credit: Thaxnay Kapdee)

2b. Performances

The two performance platforms were completely innovative initiatives that enabled many of the artists to work in ways they have been wanting to but hadn't had the opportunity to before. This included the opportunity to train and work with musicians as musical knowledge, understanding and collaboration is essential in Indian classical dance forms but artists in the UK don't often have the resources or support to work together. In this way, the Mehfil Project provided a valuable space for artists to create a 30-minute piece of work through collaboration. Many of the artists felt a sense of validation but also freedom in being invited to explore and perform classical work that had no pressure of being 'contemporary'. (Quote from Q&A session)

The artists emphasised that more of these opportunities are needed to collaborate and learn from one another, strengthen their skills and showcase their work. This feedback has been incorporated into forward planning (see Section 4 - Future Development).

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019

2c. Finale Performance

The final event was carefully programmed to attract the audiences who follow established artists, Roopa Panesar and Aakash Odedra, as well as create a platforming opportunity for the strong young talent of the next generation through the 'Confluence' commission development.

It fulfilled Goal 1 by supporting five artists (two dancers and three musicians) to develop the 'Confluence' work in length and depth. All were in residence at the Peepul Centre for two full days of creation and each artist enhanced the process with their own choreographic and composition time but found the collaboration fulfilling and fruitful. Particularly for the two young dancers, the project gave them encouragement and an incentive to take up dance as a professional career.

"I think these events are brilliant as it encourages cultural understanding and sharing artistic passions." - *The Mehfil Project - 'Celebrating the Future' Audience member*



(Audience members and Surmeet Singh at 'Musical Movements' - 23 November 2018, Peepul Centre - Image credit: Thaxnay Kapdee)

3. GOAL 2 - Audience Development Review

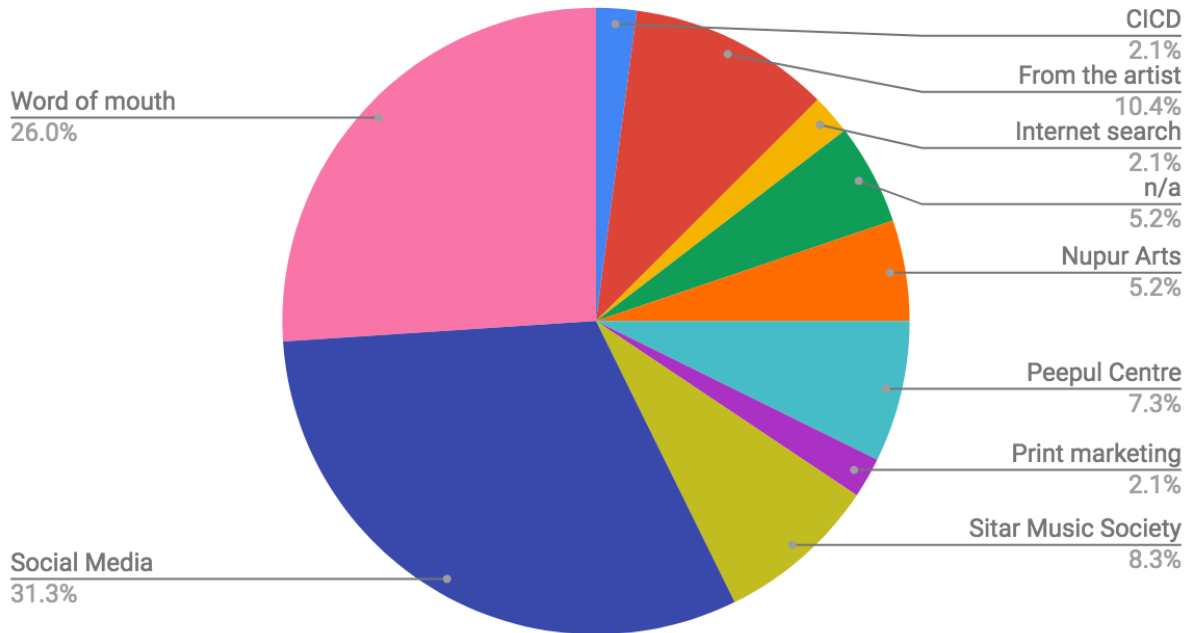
The project aimed to fulfill Goal 2 'engage and develop audiences in the region' by channelling existing audiences from partner organisations to the centre as a venue for South Asian classical arts and conversely, engage existing Peepul Centre visitors with South Asian classical arts in a way that they have never had an opportunity to before.

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019

3a. Surveys

We were able to gather 96 audience surveys across the three performances events through volunteer support. We conducted an analysis on the data gathered to review whether the range of marketing and audience development aims had been met.

Count of Where did you hear about this event?



Word of mouth was the most powerful form of marketing but the surveys were unable to capture further detail of which organisation may have been the channel. Social Media (Instagram, Facebook and Twitter) was the most effective form of communication, which shows that the dedicated campaign across all organisations accounts was effective in engaging audiences. There was also an increase in follower numbers across all platforms, which shows that a clear digital presence was built throughout the project and the new, creative content (see Section 5 - Links) was successful in promoting the events.

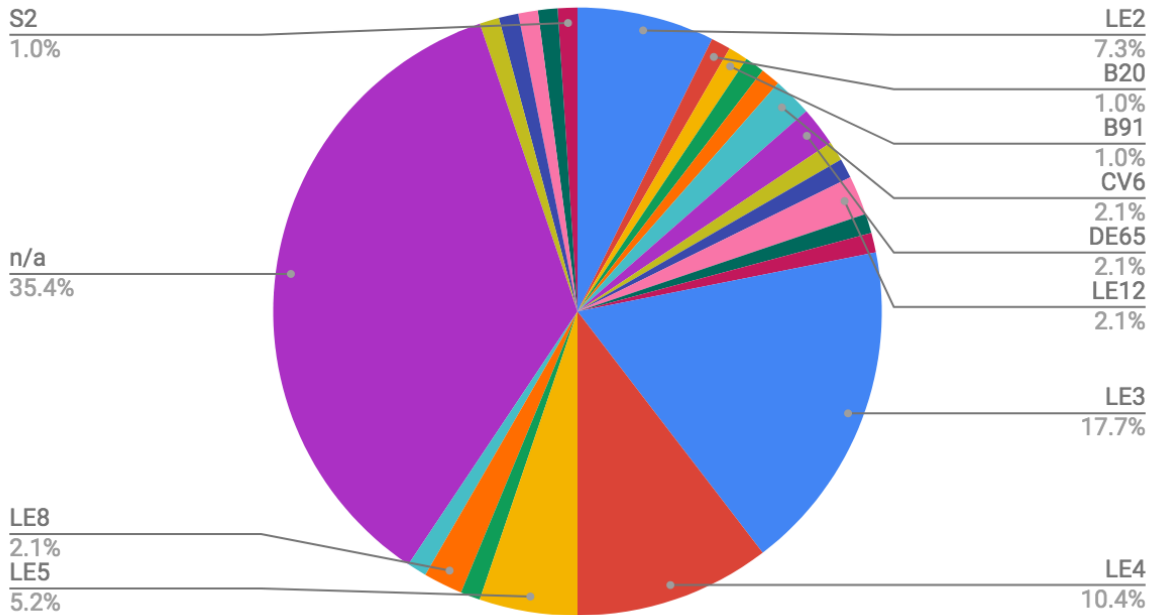
One of the aims of the Marketing and Audience Development Plan was to develop Leicester and the Belgrave area in particular as a distinctive driver of the city and county's visitor economy. The chart below shows that although the majority of respondents chose not to share their post code information, the data captured showed audiences from LE3 and LE4 were the next highest in number of attendees. Combining the whole postcode region, 16% of people in LE3 and 12% of LE4 are classed as having an AB social grade, (i.e. 'white-collar' middle-upper class), compared to 27% across the UK.

'This does not mean that the people of LE3 and LE4 are poorer than other areas, but it may give an indication that there are areas of deprivation.' (source: www.postcodearea.co.uk)

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019

The wide range of locations shows that the project attracted both local and regional audiences and that audiences are willing to travel from as far as Sheffield, Derby and Nottingham to visit the area and seek out artistic and cultural events at the Peepul Centre.

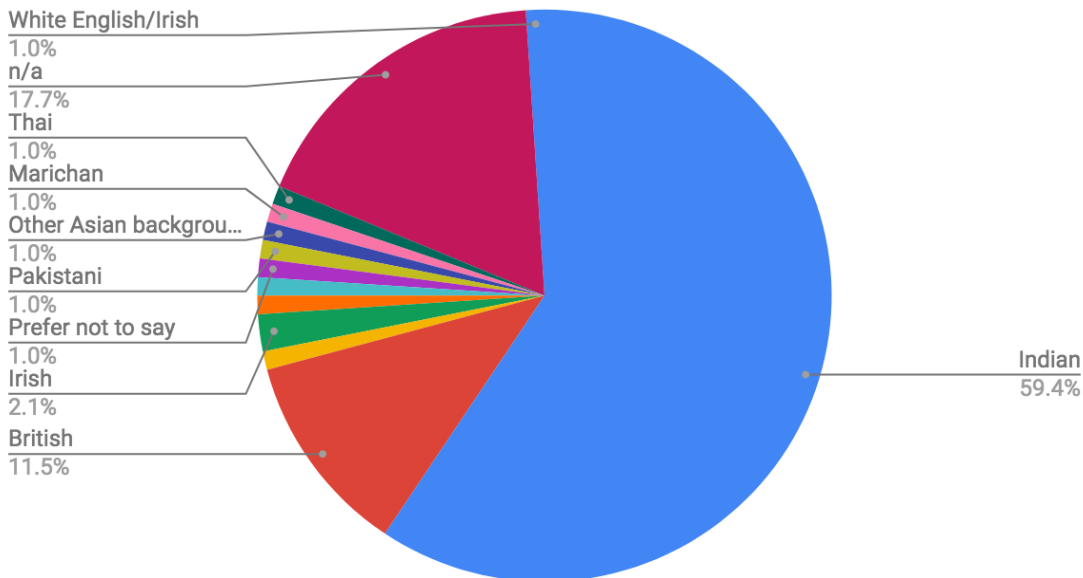
Count of Postcode analysis



The project aimed to diversify audience race and ethnicity profiles of attendees to foster community integration. The project fulfilled this aim to some extent as the events did attract people from a range of backgrounds, however the majority of audience members identified as

'Indian' as is shown by the chart below.

Count of Ethnic group



The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019

3b. Print Marketing & PR

Flyers were printed in-house for the majority of events. The final two events required a stronger marketing drive so posters and flyers were professionally printed and distributed in the local area as well as via Arts Hub organisations and in the Peepul Centre itself.

The capacity of the Project Manager to deliver the marketing campaign as well as coordinate events and rehearsals was very limited. However successful airtime on BBC Radio Leicester 'The A-word' show was secured in January 2019, which boosted profile of the project and venue to a mainstream audience.

For the finale event, lower audience numbers than anticipated may have been caused by the limited capacity of the Project Manager and strength of marketing networks from Arts Hub organisations. This was recognised as a key area of development as a dedicated and strategic marketing role would be needed in future projects with a higher level of resources.

"I really enjoyed my first introduction to Indian classical dance, especially the live music aspect."
- The Mehfil Project - 'Bharatanatyam & Beyond' Audience member



(Upneet Singh, Roopa Panesar and Dharmesh Parmar at 'Celebrating the Future' - 1 February 2019, Peepul Centre - Image credit: Thaxnay Kapdee)

3c. Audience Impact

The audience impact aim of the Mehfil Project was to 'demystify Indian classical arts and make the forms accessible, exciting, relevant, interesting and more understandable to people of different ages and backgrounds living in the UK'.

81% of survey respondents said that their experience had increased their understanding of Indian classical music and dance, which shows that the project was largely successful in making the art forms more understandable to a wide range of people.

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019

There was an element of expenditure allocated for subsidised tickets for young people (0-25 year olds) per event in order to attract families and younger people who may not usually attend classical music and dance. This strategy was successful for the three Appreciation sessions and also for the 2-3 volunteers per performance event that gained access to the performances too.

“I would love to see this as a longer piece of work (I would come and see it again!) and this should be shown to more audiences.” - The Mehfil Project - ‘Musical Movements’ Audience member



(Aakash Odedra at ‘Celebrating the Future’ - 1 February 2019, Peepul Centre - Image credit: Thaxnay Kapdee)

“Extremely impressed and surprised to see so much talent outside India.” - The Mehfil Project - ‘Celebrating the Future’ Audience member

4. GOAL 3 - Future Development

The Peepul Centre was created as a social, cultural and creative community hub and it is currently in the process of researching and developing an attractive performance programme for local and regional audiences and artists. Goal 3 was to ‘raise the cultural and artistic offer of the Peepul Centre’ and the project achieved this to a certain extent as audience comments were positive and 91% of survey respondents said that they would attend similar events in the future.

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019

The project drew upon the artistic expertise and networks of the Arts Hub partners who each gave a significant amount of energy and time to planning and delivering the Appreciation Sessions, steering the project's success and dedicated event promotion. Through this project and in consultation with Arts Hub members, BBPC gained key insights for future planning and development of arts projects as follows:

4a. Artistic

- An open consultation will take place with Mehfil Project artist's and partners to shape and inform future Arts Hub projects.
- In order to facilitate high quality, professional performances, Peepul Centre will review it's technical facilities for maintenance and upgrade work.
- Peepul Centre's unique position within the South Asian community and through cultural partnerships place it in a strong position to offer a significant contribution to the Arts Council England's Creative Case for Diversity. 'Elevate' funding will be investigated for artistic capacity and organisational development.

4b. Audiences

- Further understanding of Peepul Centre audiences through data collection is essential to be in a stronger position to receive public funds. BBPC will consult the Audience Agency for advice on development in this area.
- A part-time role has been recruited to develop future arts projects and activity in the centre, with the support and guidance of the Arts Hub.

"I thought it was very well organised and entailed a range of enticing diverse performances. I really enjoyed it." - *The Mehfil Project - 'Celebrating the Future'* Audience member

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019



('Confluence' at 'Celebrating the Future' - 1 February 2019, Peepul Centre - Image credit: Thaxnay Kapdee)

The Mehfil Project - Self Evaluation Report 2019



(Lord Dholakia, our honoured guest with Peepul Centre Chairman, Anil Bhanot – 1 February 2019, Peepul Centre at 'Celebrating the Future')

5. Links

Promotional videos and Rehearsal footage:

- 'Musical Movements' 23 November 2018 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PLYYa9Y8Og>
- 'Bharatanatyam & Beyond' 18 January 2019 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZGdx4C3O34>
- 'Celebrating the Future' 1 February 2019 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Kbm2YrPDU8>

A video summarising the project will be published on Peepul Centre YouTube channel and shared with the Arts Hub network to culminate the online activity of the project.

Signed on behalf of BBPC Peepul Centre Arts Hub by Coromoto Power Febres (Director)