



Malawi Music Fund

Newsletter No. 5 August 2020



Welcome to the fifth newsletter of the Malawi Music Fund

My planned visit to Malawi in April had, of course, to be cancelled. At the end of March Malawi closed its borders and its schools, though a full lockdown was impossible in a country where so many rely on selling their produce in the local markets. Then in July, after a re-run of last year's elections, a new government took over, led by president Lazarus Chakwera. The Covid-19 pandemic has added to the major challenges – in economy, health and education – facing the new government.

Although hospitals report a shortage of nurses, beds, PPE and testing facilities, the number of confirmed covid cases has so far been lower than might have been expected. Now, the president has announced that all schools and colleges will re-open in phases from early September. This is good news. While some universities have provided online tuition, most of our students are at home in their villages, with only sporadic internet access. But they keep in touch with me as often as they can and I know how eager they are to get back to their studies.

Our houseparents have been checking on the welfare of the children and our tutors will meet with them before the schools re-open. Some will no doubt need encouragement to return to school after five months at home. (There have been worrying reports of an increase in child marriages during the pandemic.) We'll provide the children with pens, pencils and exercise books as well as soap for their families and for washing their school uniforms.

My most recent visit to Malawi was in August last year when I was joined by two friends from Orkney, and on pages 2 & 3 Penny Aberdeen describes her week with Likhubula Children's Choir. Since then we've had to pause our activity weeks at Likhubula, but we're in regular contact with our Malawian friends and are working hard to find new ways of raising funds (see page 4).

We're grateful to everyone who has contributed in any way. Your generosity enables us to continue supporting these resilient young people.


Glenys Hughes

Our New Website

Over the past months we've been working on a new website – www.malawimusicfund.org.uk – and it's live at last. It describes who we are, how we started and what we do and includes contributions from some of the young people we're supporting – and you can hear the children sing. So do take a look!



Making Theatre in Malawi

Penny Aberdein, drama director and teacher, writes about her experience of working with Likhubula Children's Choir.

I was delighted to be able to join Glenys on a trip to Malawi in August 2019, and be part of the Malawi music project. This was something I had wanted to do for a long time.

Glenys, Linda Hamilton and I flew from Heathrow to Blantyre, the ramshackle, post-colonial commercial capital of Malawi which cannot help exhibit how much economic recovery is still badly needed in this wonderful country. There we were entertained by two ex-pupils of the music project who danced and sang on the hotel lawn with easy charm. Those lads are now training to be a teacher and an accountant.

From there we travelled through villages and markets selling all kinds of fruit and vegetables and something I had never seen before – skewered mice on sticks! When I asked Derek, our driver, how to eat them he said, quite simply, with ketchup!



We drove on to Likhubula House in the Mulanje mountains where the project is based. This used to be a mission orphanage with a large hall, dormitories for the children and chalets for the adults. It also had a beautiful garden with steps leading into it from the main hall. I immediately started planning our performance space!

Glenys and I had decided to use the story of 'Mufaro and his beautiful daughters', an African Cinderella tale, as the basis for our week's music and drama. This would culminate in a show for the children's guardians and relatives. There would be 32 orphaned children in all, recruited from local primary schools. I was slightly anxious about working with children who spoke very little or no English. I need not have been.

My first introduction to the children was watching them perform their local songs and dances. Their natural rhythm and the ease with which they sang in harmony was joyful and captivating. I couldn't resist joining them for a step or two!

Our teaching day was divided into five sessions, beginning at 9 am and finishing at 9 pm and included African dance and drumming sessions run by three local tutors. On the first evening, with the help of a young Malawian supervisor, Kingsley, who spoke very good English, we shared the story of Mufaro with the children and then went into drama games and improvisation. All the children joined in without reservation, they understood intuitively what was needed and through gesture and mime we had a lively and warm hearted session.

The performance was to be held in the garden and terraced area of the hall, so most of our rehearsals took place outside under the African sun.



No show is complete without set and costume. Glenys and I had taken fabric from the Joke Shop in Kirkwall to create a river, and a colourful snake from the Quernstone in Stromness. The snake duly transformed into the King who married Mufaro's beautiful, kind daughter.

The basic choir uniform was very colourful and we decided to use it as the base for most of the costumes. With the help of the children we decorated the outfits with leaves and flowers and draped them with fabric for cloaks and wings. Some of the girls had their own *chitenjes* - strips of colourful fabric used for wraparound skirts, headdresses and for carrying all sorts of things, including babies - and we used these for the main female characters. Glenys, Linda and Eneles, one of the local houseparents, worked with the children to transform paper plates into hand-held flower masks and create exotic bird heads.



The skill of the drummers was amazing. Complex rhythms were played on a set of five drums and were used to mark entrances and exits, add atmosphere and accompany the singing and dancing. The children improvised their own dialogue and the whole story was held together by our very able and fluent narrator, Kingsley.



After a week of hard but really enjoyable sessions we were ready for an audience. They arrived in large and expectant numbers – relatives, grandparents, local teachers and young children dressed in their colourful fabrics, party dresses and some in smart suits.



The performance started with a display of traditional songs, dances and drumming. They then had the best treat of the afternoon, a bottle of Fanta! An African audience has a very vocal way of showing their appreciation. They break out into a loud 'rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr' or an 'ayayayayayay' whenever something strikes them as funny or dramatic!

On the night of the show we held a braai (barbecue); beef and chicken were barbecued on the terrace and the children danced all evening. I had taken bangles which glowed in the dark and I will never forget the sight of these circling lights in the hall and the joy on the children's faces as they moved with easy rhythm to African pop music played on a ghetto blaster. Linda and I had taught

them an ideal Scottish dance during one of the evening sessions and we all joined in a high spirited and abandoned Strip the Willow.

I was very sorry to say goodbye to Likhubula and the warm hearted children who had been such a pleasure to work with.



Malawi is a beautiful country with mountains, rivers, lakes, spectacular wild life, two large towns and dotted with small villages. Sadly, in a population of 19,000,000 there is 80% unemployment. The primary aged children crowd into classrooms of 100 pupils or more and eat nothing but a bowl of porridge from the time they leave home to the time they get back. Secondary education is only available to pupils who pass the 11+ equivalent and is not free. The children from the Malawi music project who pass their 11+ are funded to go on to secondary school and then on to further education. I must say without reservation how much I admire Glenys' long and deep commitment to the project and how it is achieving such enlightened outcomes.

From Likhubula we went on to spend a few days at the Majete Game Reserve. Seeing impala, wart hogs, elephants and even lions at close quarters was so exhilarating. The rangers were excellent guides, very articulate and very aware of the needs of all the animals. Sadly, now that there are few visitors due to coronavirus, they cannot afford to employ so many rangers and the reserves are open to poachers.

From Majete we travelled north to Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi. It has two distinct parts, the old town with bustling markets, busy streets, cafes and hotels and the new town housing Malawi's surprisingly lavish political headquarters. We spent our last evening in a quiet hotel in Lilongwe.

My first visit to Malawi has only whetted my appetite for more. I would love to go back and see more of the country and work with those warm hearted, creative children again. And I will!.

Penny Aberdein

Raising Funds

Covid-19 meant that we had to postpone our fundraising performances of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury* which we'd planned for late March in Kirkwall Sheriff Court. Such a disappointment as it was shaping up to be a great show! But we still hope to revive the project as soon as we're able.

Because our usual concerts and community events are not possible at present we need to find alternative ways of raising funds to support the children and to maintain our commitments to the 22 young people we're funding through secondary school and higher education. Below are our current projects - and any new fundraising ideas are always welcome!

Malawi Masks

Several of our trustees who've visited Malawi have brought home pieces of the distinctive African wax-printed *chitenje* fabric. Shirley Davies, mother of trustee Jo Sutherland, had the brilliant idea of using the fabrics to make face masks.



Shirley sewing masks



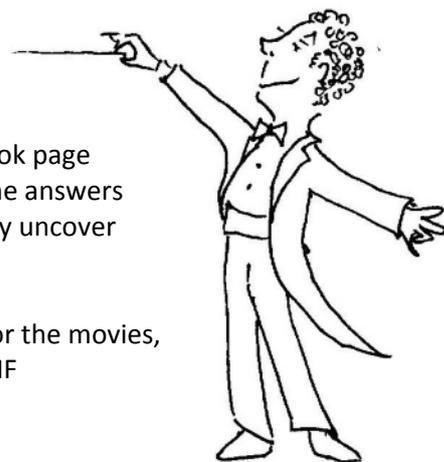
and Jo modelling

These have proved to be hugely popular - face masks are becoming the latest must-have fashion accessory! - and sales of our masks have raised over £1,200. We can still take orders; so if you'd like to see the range of colourful fabrics on offer please take a look at our facebook page or email us for further details.

Musical Quiz

We launched our Musical Quiz on 17th August and you can find it via our facebook page or on the News & Events page of our website. We'd be amazed if you knew all the answers immediately; but they can all be found with a little (online) research and you may uncover some interesting facts.

So whether your interest is in pop and rock, classical, musicals, opera or music for the movies, do have go. A chance to win a great prize while at the same time supporting MMF by making a donation.



Christmas CD

Sadly, the annual Christmas Concert by the Winter Choir and Orkney Camerata won't be possible this year. The concert usually attracts a capacity audience in St Magnus Cathedral and is one of our major fundraising events. So, instead, we're planning to produce a CD of Christmas music, with contributions from the Winter Choir, Orkney Camerata and others, with recordings made at home all mixed to create something special. There will even be songs from our children's choir in Malawi. An ambitious project - but we hope the CD will have a wide appeal so that as well as raising funds it will go some way towards compensating for the lack of a live concert. Look out for further publicity from early November.

Malawi Music Fund enables orphaned children in Malawi to transform their lives through education.

We are supported by donations, fundraising activities and grants from trusts and foundations.

If you would be interested in helping us by funding a school bursary or in any other way please get in touch.

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