

This year's UK Disability History Month will explore music and links with the experience of disablement. Richard Rieser reminds us how disabled artists have been some of the world's best-loved musical inspirations.

Songs in the key of life

CREATIVE impulse, the urge for self-expression and the need to connect to fellow human beings often 'trumps' the oppression we as disabled people have faced and continue to face.

UK Disability History Month (UKDHM) aims to showcase how people with every type and degree of impairment can creatively express themselves through music. The event will interpret the music, lyrics, librettos and performance against social model thinking, hoping to encourage solidarity and support for disabled people's ongoing struggle for equality.

Blind in the eyes, illuminated in the soul

There is a long association between blindness and music, both classical and popular. In early times, blindness was often associated with punishment – for example, Oedipus and Samson, or as divine inspiration such as the Greek prophet Tiresias and Odyssey author Homer.

Francesco Landini, the 14th century composer in Renaissance Florence, was described as "blind in his eyes, but illuminated in his soul".

A similar approach was taken towards Frederick Delius, who died in 1934. Delius's late music was composed in close collaboration with Eric Fenby who helped him as he became blind and unable to use his hands due to syphilis.

Beethoven had lost 60 per cent of his hearing by 1801 when he was just 31 and by 1816 he was completely deaf. He was determined to continue, and wrote some of the world's most notable music as a deaf person, including the Eroica Symphony 3 and Symphony No 8.

Loves You, Porgy

With popular music, Porgy and Bess was the first modern musical/opera to feature an entire Black cast. Written by George and Ira Gershwin in 1935, it is set in the deep south of America just after the Civil War.

Porgy is a disabled man who lives in a shack, using a cart on wheels to get around. Bess is a 'fallen angel', beleaguered and oppressed by a violent low-life called Crown.



Many blind singers and musicians, such as Stevie Wonder (pictured), have made careers in blues, jazz and popular music.

When she tries to get away from him, she seeks the protection of Porgy who loves her.

As their friendship develops, she comes to love Porgy but Crown cannot accept that Bess would leave him for someone that he considers a useless 'cripple'. With such songs as I Loves You, Porgy and Summertime, it was the first all-Black musical to break through into the mainstream.

Blind singers and musicians have made careers in blues, jazz and popular music – Blind Willie Johnson, Blind Willie McTell, Blind Lemon Jefferson, George Shearing, Lennie Tristano, Tete Montoliu, Diane Schuur,

Roland Kirk, Art Tatum, Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder to name a few.

In Cairo, the Al Nour Wal Amal Orchestra has only blind female musicians using Braille notation and memory to play high class western symphony music. From Mali, there is the highly successful blind duo Amadou and Mariam.

Another world music phenomenon, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, is the band Staff Benda Bilili who came together while sleeping rough on the streets of Kinshasa. Five of the band's players are wheelchair-using polio survivors.

Reasons to be cheerful

Ian Dury was a UK polio survivor and art college student, a founder of punk music, who wore callipers on both legs. His response to the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981 – Spasticus Autisticus – was banned by the BBC. It was a political statement against prevailing charity and patronising attitudes.

Steve Harley, frontman of the rock band Cockney Rebel, used his physical impairment from polio to create a tableau in Psychomodo. Soft Machine founder and singer Robert Wyatt survived a fall from a fourth-floor window but his spinal paralysis did not stop his pop comeback.

Contemporarily, Drake Music promotes young disabled musicians; Disability Arts Online highlights contemporary disabled musicians; and Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra are working with James Rose as a disabled conductor with disabled musicians.

**UKDHM
launches on
19 November with
events continuing
until 22 December.
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more details or email
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