

Academic's work strikes a chord with war children

Music classes help to heal pain of Sri Lankan youngsters

■ JOHN CONNELL

AN academic has been making music with hundreds of Sri Lankan children traumatised by their country's civil war.

Dr Tanya Ekanayaka, who teaches at Edinburgh

University, has just returned from her homeland, where she has been hosting annual workshops.

This year, she saw twice the expected number of children attend the sessions after previous visits struck a chord.

Many of the youngsters on the war-torn island are orphans from poor backgrounds who have been affected by the horrors of war.

Dr Ekanayaka said: "I

worked with nearly 800 children which is twice the number

that we expected.

"I think news of the workshops has just spread by word of mouth. All the students who

attend workshops have a great time – it's quite obvious.

"This year, at the end of the workshops, the children were refusing to leave and some were in tears. It was a very powerful moment."

The project – which sees the academic help children compose and perform their own music – was largely funded by a £1900 grant from Edinburgh University via the Innovation Initiative Grant.

Dr Ekanayaka, who lives in Leith, and teaches part-time at the Reid School of Music, is a noted pianist, composer and linguistic expert.

She has given solo recitals at the John F Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts in Washington DC, and was the first Sri

Lankan pianist to be invited to perform in the Pianists of the World series at London's St Martin in the Fields.

Dr Ekanayaka, who has lived in the Capital since 2006, believes music has a healing

effect on children. This year, five students from Sri Lanka's northern districts, which bore the brunt of the 25-year conflict, were awarded scholarships enabling them to study with Dr Ekanayaka.

She said: "I think the sessions and the idea of being able to create can be hugely liberating. It has a very positive effect on the mind and can benefit how they view themselves, how they view the world and how they view others."

Dr Ekanayaka wants to continue the sessions next year, and hopes to have some students from the north of the country studying remotely via



Skype. Ultimately, she wants to bring together Sri Lanka's three different ethnic groups to foster reconciliation through music.

Dr Ekanayaka's work forms part of the SJC 87 Initiative, which is a non-political humanitarian action plan.
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ON SONG: Dr Tanya Ekanayaka of Edinburgh University with children in Sri Lanka