

CONFERENCE REPORT

The 8th SIMM-posium (Social Impact of Music Making)

Catherine Threlfall

University of Melbourne, Australia

CONFERENCE DETAILS

Social Impact of Music Making 8th SIMM-posium,

Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University

20-22 November 2023, Australia

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Catherine Threlfall is an experienced music therapist, community music leader, teacher, and researcher passionate about making participatory music making accessible to communities in regional Australia. Catherine is deeply committed to health equity and the social impact of participatory artmaking, the subject of her current PhD research. Since 1993 she has worked in community, education, special education, post-school options, community health, aged care, research and tertiary settings as a community music leader, teacher, therapist, advisor, practitioner scholar, mentor, writer, and presenter. Catherine's career has taken her from Gippsland to the Yarra Ranges, Melbourne, Darwin, rural Northern Territory and to the Mallee. Catherine is a change leader, driving the growth of community music, music therapy, and participatory artmaking in the Mallee's regional centres and remote towns, including intergenerational programs, inclusive community music groups, and outreach music therapy with underreached children, young people and families in partnership with place-based change organisation Hands Up Mallee. [catherine@sunraysiaartsandlearning.com.au]

Publication history:

Submitted 27 Nov 2023

Accepted 26 Feb 2024

First published 5 Apr 2024

The 8th SIMM-posium (Social Impact of Music Making) was the first time this dynamic gathering of researchers and practitioners has been held in the Oceania region, taking place in Meanjin on the lands of the Yugarabul, Yuggera, Jagera and Turrbal peoples at the Griffith University Conservatorium of Music. I took the opportunity to attend this hybrid event in person along with more than 100 delegates from 24 countries, to present, connect and discuss the incredible range of research and practice shared in this forum.

A deep sense of place was established from the outset as Gimilaraay elder Uncle Glenn Barry welcomed us with an Acknowledgement of Country and warmed up the space playing the yidaki. There was a refreshing sense of informality throughout the three days, and an explicit and implicit invitation to presenters and delegates to be authentic, real, bold, critical, courageous, and generous.

From the very beginning of the symposium First Nations ways of being, learning and researching were centred. The purposeful celebration and privileging of indigenous voices was timely and much needed, given recent events in Australia where the referendum for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament was defeated, and tensions around the ongoing impacts of colonialism and the long road to healing run high.

The opening keynote delivered by Australian First Nations researcher Naomi Sunderland left delegates with a sense of hope, as she opened with song, presented transformative values-led

research in remote Australia, and conceptualized research as healing. She invited researchers and practitioners to see research as a spiritual practice, and to be aware of connections to country as a resource for healing and renewal. A heartfelt response from indigenous weaver and singer Ivy Minniecon left no doubt about the important role of First Nations led research in the “long unwinding” process of healing in colonised nations like Australia.

Apart from the three keynote sessions the symposium offered a format of three to four 10-minute provocations, followed by 30 minutes of discussion, with only one stream of presentations. This allowed for an interactive and lively forum. From my perspective, it was a challenge to condense a complex topic into 10 minutes, and many presenters cut their presentations short with on-the-spot editing or ran over time. The allocated discussion time generally allowed enough space to discuss only one or two questions in any depth. With such stimulating and sometimes contentious topics it may have been of value to add extended yarning circles in a space other than a lecture theatre for even deeper discussion and highlighting of more voices.

The scope of presentations was extremely broad. Within the space of a few hours, we journeyed from the personal – such as Kate Daly’s story of recovery through artistic citizenship – through to the systemic, including Gillian Howell and Jane Davidson’s account as music and wellbeing researchers attempting to work across systems and disciplines to generate a critical mass for funding.

There were recurring calls throughout the forum for creating cross-disciplinary connections in support of music making for social impact. Presentations by community musicians, psychologists, social workers, music therapists, artists, music educators, youth workers, researchers and academics raised the important question of how we can work together to advocate for making room for creativity and wellbeing at a systems and policy level. It was refreshing and exciting to think about music therapists taking a role in cross sector efforts for social justice, and a reminder to us of the importance of building connections outside of our discipline.

The second keynote by Jioji Ravulo set the scene for thinking about music as resistance to unjust social norms, and celebrated music as disruption. His energetic, joyful, and impassioned presentation of his work in making space for lived experience and youth voices from both inside and outside of detention was thought-provoking. It was a powerful reminder that music has many dimensions. The day-to-day life of music therapists in Australia in health and education systems often privileges the role of music for individuals and groups in creating connection, bringing joy and calm, and supporting growth and learning. In this, music making as a political act is sometimes pushed to the background. The keynote was a welcome disruption to my thinking and my everyday practices.

A theme of music making and compassion was also beautifully woven throughout the three days. Canadian Music Educator Gabby Smith’s presentation of femme pedagogy and transforming music education gently introduced the deep importance of bringing care, compassion, and collective wellbeing into the music classroom. Alexandra Gorton and Frankie Dyson Reilly provided a window into the life of neurodiverse artists and performers, and reminded us of the value of Universal Design, building kindness and welcome into all spaces for all people.

The power of care and compassion was elevated in the third keynote by Te Oti Rakena titled *Rewiring Global Minds: Celebrating Indigenous Musicians as Norm Entrepreneurs*. Te Oti shared and modelled a quiet resistance in tertiary music education, speaking of the important work of responding

with compassion to sometimes reactive and fearful colleagues during the process of indigenising systems and structures.

This keynote raised some important questions around how people entering tertiary education can be prepared for working with social impact of music making practices in their careers as artists and performers. For the music therapists present it also led us to ask if current music therapy norms are fit for purpose in Oceania, recalling the groundbreaking work of Carolyn Kenny in bringing an indigenous perspective to her work as a music therapist. I was also led to reflect on how the social impact of music for collective wellbeing is closely linked to the evolving conversation in music therapy about post-humanism. I saw close links with the call for taking a collective approach, and for showing care, vulnerability, and inviting the whole person to show up in the therapy space.

There was music embedded in multiple ways in this symposium. Sandy Sur from Vanuatu responded to Te Oti's keynote through stories of the water music of Vanuatu, followed by a beautiful sung response from Aunty Candace Kruger singing to call on the ancestors, bringing us all to focus on the relationship between music and country. Delegates were also treated to a Soundbath and live performances of original compositions from music students from the Conservatorium, a welcome change from the intensity of words and thoughts.

The 8th SIMM-posium created a precious space to reflect on the role of music making in creating a more equitable society. It was an invitation to remember that music allows us to be active at both a micro and macro level at the same time. I left this symposium with a determination to continue to share music for the collective good. The words of Australian First Nations elder, doctor, writer and academic Helen Milroy, as shared by Naomi Sunderland in her keynote, that healing will happen when we are both "soft and strong at the same time" continue to resonate.