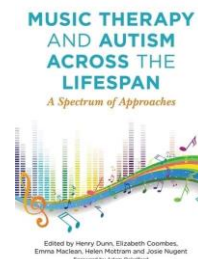


BOOK REVIEW

Music therapy and autism across the lifespan (Dunn, Coombes, MacLean, Mottram & Nugent, Eds.)

Reviewed by Thomas Bergmann

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Title: Music therapy and autism across the lifespan **Editors:** Henry Dunn, Elizabeth Coombes, Emma MacLean, Helen Mottram & Josie Nugent
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The authors of *Music Therapy and Autism across the Lifespan* rely primarily on case studies to illustrate music therapy with people on the autism spectrum. This edited book centres on practice in various settings within the UK, reflected in 13 chapters and presented in three major sections: (1) improvisational approaches, (2) collaborative approaches, and (3) music therapy approaches associated with autistic identity and culture.

The book opens the door to music therapy practice with individuals who are on the autism spectrum. This is done narratively with numerous case studies, both one-to-one and group settings, reflecting each therapist's approach. These range from a psychoanalytically informed approach to collaborative methods and approaches focusing on neurodiversity and self-esteem. The book's clear structure, postlude included, greatly assist with navigating through this array and in finding specific information and inspiration when used as a reference. However, looking at the UK from an outside perspective, a psychoanalytic orientation seems surprising due to the fact that autism spectrum condition (ASC) is rooted in multiple genetic and environmental factors (Grabrucker, 2012; Rylaarsdam & Gomez-Gamboa, 2019). Historically speaking, many diagnosed children, together with their families, suffered from psychodynamic interpretations of ASC as being caused by a lack of maternal warmth connected with the demand to take the children away from their families (Kanner, 1973). This dilemma may have been initially revealed by way of developmental theories from authors with a psychoanalytic background. These include Daniel Stern (2000), whose work plays a prominent role in many approaches found in this book. A second reason could be the strong psychoanalytic music therapy tradition in the UK represented, for example, by Mary Priestley (1994). Behavioural approaches are almost completely missing from this text next to functional approaches adopted from neurologic music therapy. The lack of these approaches conveys a non-medical, humanistic standpoint, including therapy goals beyond autistic symptomatology in contrast to social skills trainings solely focusing on

adaptive functioning. However, neurologic approaches based on auditory-motor mapping may be promising due to effects on motor control, selective attention, speech production, language processing and acquisition, and brain connectivity as recently discussed by Janzen and Thaut (2018). In these approaches motor dysfunctions are seen as ASC-core symptoms in line with current research (Fulceri et al., 2019) and music may play a key role in future treatment concepts.

A respectful and person-centred attitude is reflected throughout the entire book by, for example, avoiding the use of the term “disorder” when writing about autism, as in line with many self-advocates who claim that autism is not a disease and should be accepted instead of being cured (Shore, 2006). An honest desire to understand people with autism and their needs and to reflect one’s own relationship with these individuals is noticeable throughout the book, making it furthermore worth reading.

The individuals and groups described in manifold case studies represent a broad age span and diverse levels of functioning. This enriches the current music therapy literature, which focuses primarily on children who are on the spectrum. Since autism is a lifelong condition, many people on the spectrum are in need of ongoing support, especially in transitional situations. Thus, reports and studies on music therapy with adults are well received. Against this background, *Music Therapy and Autism across the Lifespan* may encourage therapists to offer their unique music-based interventions to adolescents on the cusp of adulthood, as well as to adults and even elders. Case studies presented in this book, however, involve adults with intellectual disability; high-functioning adults with ASC are not represented. This may reflect music therapy practice but does not serve to explain why this population is excluded. Due to the ability to conceal autism symptoms and cognitively compensate social interaction deficits, these people may somehow manage to function in our society but often for a high price, resulting in depression, anxiety and an increased suicide risk. Here, it seems as if dance movement therapists are better informed about this population by fostering body awareness, social skills, self–other distinction, and well-being using synchrony-based interventions as reported in controlled studies (Koch et al., 2015; Koehne et al., 2016). This indicates that music/movement interventions may be appropriate and helpful in achieving specific goals in adults with high-functioning autism.

Finally, this book may be seen in the light – or better in the shadow – of the TIME-A study (Bieleninik et al., 2017); a million-dollar international multi-centre randomised controlled trial (RCT) indicating that improvisational music therapy did not show significant improvements on social affect in young children with ASC. This RCT was a shock for the worldwide music therapy community, following decades of research and practice in the field of ASC with promising results and a wide spectrum of approaches. This is explicitly focused upon in the first chapter of *Music Therapy and Autism across the Lifespan*. From an evidence-based research perspective, this book can be seen as reverting to practice and narrative case reports concentrating on music therapy principles and restoring self-confidence. This step may be crucial in order to push ahead, re-examine, refine methods, further develop assessments, define treatment goals and targeted groups. On this solid foundation a new start may be made to initiate systematic controlled studies implementing established scales and follow-up measurement to indicate maintaining treatment effects even beyond the therapeutic context.

Pulling it all together, this book is strongly recommended for all music therapists working with people who are on the autism spectrum. In addition, professionals in the field, families, and even those on the spectrum may benefit from the revealing case studies, effectively depicting just what music

therapy is all about. The diverse approaches, illustrations and reflections highlight decades of experience in this field, colourfully portraying the potential of *music therapy and autism across the lifespan*.

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