Approaches: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Music Therapy
14 (1) 2022

ISSN: 2459-3338 | www.approaches.gr

FILM REVIEW

Operation syncopation: Music therapy and autism (Thompson, Ed.)

Reviewed by Efrat Roginsky

University of Haifa, Israel

Title: Operation syncopation: Music therapy and autism **Film director and editor:** Maxim Thompson **Publication year:** 2017

REVIEWER BIOGRAPHY
Efrat Roginsky is a classical guitarist and music therapist, specialising in working with non-speaking persons with neurodevelopmental disabilities and their families. Along with her music therapy practice Roginsky supervises a regional arts therapies group for the Israeli Board of Education, and teaches at the University of Haifa MA Music Therapy programme. Her PhD research explores the personhood of children with profound cerebral palsy through their musicality and appropriation of music. Roginsky is also part of an international group aiming to study the possible contributions of the Neurodiversity movement to the music therapy profession. [roginskyefrat@gmail.com]

Publication history:
Submitted 14 Dec 2019
Accepted 3 Jan 2020
First published 17 Apr 2020

This review attempts to share some impressions and thoughts regarding Amelia Oldfield's documentary film *Operation Syncopation*. The film, which was directed and edited by Maxim Thompson, won the audience award for best documentary at the 37th Cambridge Film Festival. Its full English version is available on YouTube. Before beginning the review, I should make it clear that I myself, a music therapist, do not own lived autistic experience, nor am I a parent to autistic individuals. This review is therefore written from my own perspective. Also, informed by the Neurodiversity discourse, the term 'autistic' is used here rather than person-first language, to recognise autism spectrum individuals as whole beings, and not owning separate, disabling characteristics.

THE FILM

Sixteen years ago, as part of her doctoral research, Amelia Oldfield documented her music therapy sessions with ten autistic children, in the presence of their parents. This research generated additional exploration, writing, and teaching (for example: Oldfield, 2003, 2006; Oldfield, Bell & Pool, 2012); the documented footage holds special value in the music therapy literature. Presently, Oldfield, assisted by two music therapist colleagues, Emma Davies and Dawn Loombe, invited the research participants to revisit their videos, share their past experiences, and reflect on the outcomes of the music therapy.

The film begins with some background: the earlier research and the present follow-up are described in running headlines, music therapy videos, and through the music therapists' discussions.

Then, each parent is interviewed as they watch their video segments. Some of the child clients, young adults now, join their parents. Talking, singing, playing, and many visual elements – several layers of audio and video are played together, in an intense, kaleidoscopic dance.

Memories, thoughts and emotions emerge during the interviews. The music in therapy is discussed, and the means whereby it meets the needs of every parent and child.

Parental knowledge arises regarding their children's diagnosis, communication and the influences of music therapy. The young adults participate as well. Some of them, uneasy with direct or verbal communication, offer their nonverbal input. Then, parents share their advice with families newer to autism, and the music therapists consider the efficacy of the treatment, and potential improvements. Towards the end, the filmmakers are introduced: a father, and his son, formerly a child client of Oldfield's. It is more apparent now how this film has not only a historical value; it echoes the intricate dialogue of parents with their children, and child clients with their therapist.

Overall, it is a complex film, loaded with documentary material, reflection, visual ideas, professional and academic effort; it integrates past and present approaches to music therapy, autism and therapy clients.

THE SENSORY ENCOUNTER

The viewer of this film encounters an array of music, words, continuously shifting perspectives, and ideas. The several layers of information presented all at once require one to stop, watch once more, and process. It felt at times as I was the autistic child, unable to comprehend the gushing stream of information. I needed to find the way through viewing and halting, listening to some parts audio-only, seeing time and time again bits and pieces of the film, to capture the big picture. It has been a unique sensory and intellectual journey.

ACADEMIC, OR ARTISTIC?

The film starts in the general form of an academic document: Oldfield's follow-up study presented through video. The idea to present music therapy research in such a vivid manner was exciting; it reminded me of arts-based research ideas and their scarcity in our profession (Ledger & McCaffrey, 2015). As the film progresses, it seems as though the editor's artistic intentions intervene with Oldfield's academic ones: two aesthetic languages collate, combine, and towards the end of the film, a more free and emotional spirit takes over.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Each parent had a unique contribution; some shared their memories and thoughts fluently, and others were more reserved. A few parents moderated their young adult's communication, while others were too immersed in their private emotional journeys. Some young adults seemed uneasy or remote, supplying short replies, and with some behaviours that may have suggested irritation.

For me, it has been a sensitive experience watching a parent talk *about* their young adult, not *with* them, especially when difficult issues were encountered. A few parents enabled their vulnerable children to take part through various expressive modalities rather than direct verbal interview.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

The parents remembered the pride they felt as their non-speaking children showed attention, playfulness, creativity, and coherency in the music therapy; these children's personhoods were unveiled through the musicking. Furthermore, some young adults who found it hard to talk contributed to the film by sending their music, visual arts, and creative writing. This was both touching and animating. It is indeed worth recognising that, along with music therapy, a broad communicative world exists beyond the borders of our typical, verbal conversation.

PLAYFULNESS

Besides the music, Oldfield demonstrates a high level of playfulness; using her body, the space and the musical instruments to engage with the children and their parents synchronously, communicatively, and energetically. This kind of engagement, highly appreciated by the interviewed parents, is typical of Oldfield's works, and is also evident in her other films and publications, especially her book on interactive music therapy (Oldfield, 2006).

AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Mainly parent-child dyads were shown in the past and present; spouses and siblings were not included. The only triad – father, mother and child – revealed that one parent has been less affectionate or engaged. This scene was never reflected upon in the film. Contemporary approaches involve whole families in the music therapy of their children with developmental challenges, meaning to establish firm communicative and psychological foundations through the musicking (Jacobsen & Thompson, 2017).

NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

Different autism-rights movements advocate involving autism spectrum individuals in any professional work or decision-taking concerning their condition (see Bolton, 2018). The present film begins with the academic background, the therapists and the parents' experiences; only then, bit by bit, do autistic voices emerge. As this occurs, the film becomes a little less orderly and coherent; its flow and rhythm change, and a powerful experience takes over. Unique voices are heard now: a girl tells her story through music and dancing. A piano is playing, and poetry is read. Then, a young participant, true to himself, insists on not speaking despite the interviewer's attempts. The dialogue

between theory and art, academic research versus advocacy, typical and autistic, is indirect, and yet, it is present and powerful. But the grand finale is reached only as the film comes to end, and the director, a former child client in his twenties, speaks. No, he does not remember music therapy as anything special as a child: “You are just doing your job," he shares, smiling. "You just get taken into rooms, you do things, and you get taken out of those rooms...it was never really for me anyway, I just existed… It was for you… Music therapy wasn't really for the children so much as it was for the parents," says the young film editor, looking at his father. "I think you're right," the father replies.

As music therapy practitioners, lecturers and researchers, we tend to focus on the power of music, the benefit of our methods, or the future of the profession. Are we aware, though, that even the most effective therapy is but a ripple in the fuller lives of our service-users and their families? Beyond the historical and academic significance of this film, Oldfield's brave and humble attitude stands out, as she allows the children's unexpected message to come through: therapists do not understand a lot; in fact, our value in our service-users' experiences may be marginal regarding their ongoing efforts to fit in with the expectations of their everyday, their family, and the ‘typical’ society. In this film, Oldfield seems prepared to learn, and have the viewers listen and learn as well. Watching the film again and again, I considered it as highly useful food-for-thought for anyone in our profession.

REFERENCES

Bolton, M. J. (2018). With the silence of a thousand cries: extremes of autistic advocacy. *Disability & Society*, *33*(6), 980-984.

Jacobsen, S. L., & Thompson, G. (Eds.). (2017). *Music therapy with families*: *Therapeutic approaches and theoretical perspectives*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Ledger, A., & McCaffrey, T.M. (2015). Performative, arts-based, or arts-informed? Reflections on the development of arts-based research in music therapy. *Journal of Music Therapy, 52*(4), 441–456.

Oldfield, A. (2003). *Music therapy with children on the autistic spectrum: Approaches derived from clinical practice and research.* Doctoral thesis, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK.

Oldfield, A. (2006). *Interactive music therapy in child and family psychiatry: Clinical practice, research and teaching*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Oldfield, A. Bell, K., & Pool, J. (2012). Three families and three music therapists: Reflections on short term music therapy in child and family psychiatry. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy, 21*(3), 250-267.

Oldfield, A. (2017). The first ‘themed’ British Journal of Music Therapy: An introduction to music therapy with families. *British Journal of Music Therapy, 31*(1), 5-11.