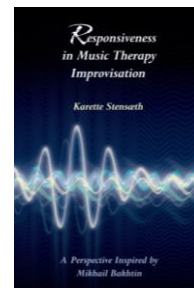


BOOK REVIEW

Responsiveness in music therapy improvisation: A perspective inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin (Stensæth)

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Title: Responsiveness in music therapy improvisation: A perspective inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin **Author:** Karette Stensæth **Publication year:** 2017 **Publisher:** Barcelona Publishers **Pages:** 193 **ISBN:** 9781945411236

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Responsiveness in Music Therapy Improvisation: A Perspective Inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin offers a well-rounded and comprehensive insight into new perspectives in the world of improvisation within therapy. Mikhail Bakhtin was a Russian literary theorist, philosopher of language, semiotician and scholar whose wide-ranging ideas significantly influenced Western thinking in cultural history, linguistics, literary theory and aesthetics (Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc, 2019). Although Bakhtin was active in the debates on aesthetics and literature that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, his distinctive position did not become well known until he was rediscovered by Russian scholars in the 1960s.

The author states the book's purpose is to "outline novel perspectives on responsiveness in music therapy improvisation that might provide a fresh conceptual framework for the broad value of active and creative music-making in therapy" (p. 3), and she is successful in doing so, backed by thorough philosophical and theoretical research.

Stensæth brings 20 years of clinical practice to the literature, in which improvisation has been one of her core approaches. Her passion, knowledge and deep understanding radiates throughout. The author acknowledges her influences and preunderstanding of the world of improvisation from her previous experiences and training. These have included both the Norwegian music therapy community and its perspective on Nordoff-Robbins-oriented improvisation, combined with her Master's research on music therapy and the phenomenon of play. It was after this work that Stensæth was inspired to reconsider her understanding of music therapy improvisation and its

relation to the phenomenon of action (Stensæth, 2002, 2008), further stating that “play ‘proves’ that human beings seek transcendental experiences” (p. 8).

The book is divided into 16 chapters, with a Prelude and Postlude by the author. Chapter 1 redefines central core concepts combining the background and perspectives from many prevalent researchers and authors both from within the music therapy field and other related professions, including Bruscia, Ruud, Wigram, Aigen, Ansdell and Pavlicevic, Maslow, Aldridge, Langer, Schütz, and Schön. These references provide clarification in regard to many definitions within the paradigms of clinical music therapy. As a result, the bulk of this chapter will likely be familiar to the practising music therapist and some students, but is still able to provide interesting perspectives and parallels on core themes; for example re-defining a music therapist not just as the profession but in regards to the many “roles” that clinicians will take on with their client (supportive teacher, helper, creative musician, companion, accompanist, a “mother”, a participating observer and a personal motivator) - all too easy to forget to reflect on and remember while practising in the moment.

In Chapter 2 the reader is taken through an in-depth description of the phenomenon of action and the importance of its understanding for facilitating music therapy improvisation. There are many explanations of the phenomenon in this chapter, however, the author’s translates Skårberg’s (1998, p. 24) interpretation eloquently, suggesting that the concept of action keeps the triad of client, music, and therapist together: “Actions are the glue from which musical forms become a net of layers of meaning” (p. 41). The chapter goes on to define different types of action and the ways in which they affect the improvisation process - action as a dialectical phenomenon, the anonymous action, the unfolding spontaneous action, actions as a means for an intention. This is followed by the discussion of the important simultaneous relationship between action and intention in music therapy improvisation, in that “an action may realize an intention, and, at the same time, an intention may realize the action (Østerberg, 1993, p.17)” (as cited in p. 46). The author also explains that,

with Bakhtin’s help, action is kept as a premise for music therapy improvisation and is something that comes *before* collaboration and communication [meaning that] action is required from both parties, both the client and therapist, to realize music therapy improvisation. (p. 47)

Following this overview of constructs in Chapters 1 and 2, Chapters 3-5 provide the music therapy narrative from observations of session improvisations between Jakob (author’s previous long-term client), and Karla (author’s pseudonym), including scores of the excerpts and a final “summing up the narrative” note from the author. These chapters represent a perspective in the discussion of her implementation of Bakhtin’s ideas, a welcome ‘real life’ addition to the book since they illustrate the perspectives in detail, similar to that of Nordoff and Robbins’ style of “indexing” - a detailed second-by-second written commentary of music therapy sessions, providing a thorough breakdown of the exchanges between therapist, client and the music itself. The narratives in this book fit the pieces of the theory together clearly for the reader reflecting on Karla, both professionally and personally, supporting Jacob “in searching for his own voice, his individual voice, his being in the world, which belongs to the larger dialogical context of which we are all part (c.f., Matusov, 2009)” (pp. 113-114).

Chapters 6-8 introduce Bakhtin and his terminology. The author graciously breaks down Bakhtin's complex writings into more 'bite-sized' ideas. Interesting points from these chapters include the fragility of communication in the work of a music therapist, and recognition that perhaps it needs support or 'mending', as referenced by Ansdell (2014) when defining music therapy as "communication repairing"; and the introduction of his term "carnival", which the author states to find useful in her understanding of music therapy improvisation, referring to "a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humor, the grotesque, chaos and/or joy" (p. 92); also recognising its ability to regenerate and revitalise life.

In Chapters 9-13, the author transposes more of Bakhtin's thoughts regarding responsiveness in music therapy improvisation, highlighting his philosophy that

music therapy improvisation is a *living event* which is played out in which two (or more) "consciousnesses meet dialogically" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 72) and dialogue, responsiveness in music therapy improvisation is the process by which newer ways to respond, to mean, and to be can come into existence (c.f., Lillis, 2003). (p. 99)

This section also addresses Bakhtin's viewpoint that "by being responsive toward ourselves and others, we must ask questions, heed, respond, agree, and so forth, even in situations where communication is different" (p. 119). The Carnival perspective returns, this time relating to the topics of the imagery of carnival and the music therapist as "jester" (p. 133), providing an interesting parallel – one slightly hard to digest initially, since being labelled as a form of entertainment is precisely what we music therapists want to avoid. However, the chapter does provide a new and novel perspective to reflect on by the end.

In the final chapters the author presents, then discusses and contextualises, a theory on responsiveness in music therapy improvisation, which she calls musical answerability. Answerability is Bakhtin's term "for the process of mutual response, answering, that happens between two persons or between art and life" (p. 156). These chapters also highlight Bakhtin's ideas of levels and types of responsiveness and how these may guide improvisational approaches, with the conclusion of Chapter 14 providing a helpful five-page summary of the main characteristics of the theory.

Responsiveness in Music Therapy Improvisation: A Perspective Inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin is an inspiring text, allowing the reader to not only gain detailed insight into the workings of a real-life deep and meaningful connection created through improvisation, one which will likely spark or reignite excitement and passion for clinical improvisation, but also provides the research and reasoning backing this 'behind the scenes', thus allowing the reader to gain a more thorough understanding of the process.

This book is not a light read; however, the author does an excellent job of dividing each chapter into many smaller chunks, which is effective in helping to guide the reader through many complex topics and in connecting the dots between ideas. All clinicians and students could benefit in part from this new resource, however, it is also not a book for a reader looking for 'black-and-white' answers – instead inviting and provoking further personal thought and reflection. There are many questions asked and theories presented in this book and, as the final words from the author state in regards to whether the book is answerable, "that is not up to me to decide, instead the responsibility

lies with you, its reader" (p. 174). This book's author encourages the reader to think outside the box towards a fresh perspective on improvisation, an integral part of clinical practice with many populations. It is a welcome addition to music therapy literature.

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