

BOOK REVIEW

The Oxford handbook of music therapy (Edwards, Ed.)

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REVIEWER BIOGRAPHY

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The Oxford Handbook of Music Therapy, edited by Australian music therapist and researcher Jane Edwards, is an ambitious work of almost 1000 pages, with over 50 eminent contributing authors and a foreword by psychologist Colwyn Trevarthen. This book is a welcome addition to the extensive series of Oxford Handbooks.

A book of this size and scope requires a clear structure and signposts for the reader. Edwards has structured this book in five sections or “frames”: (1) Music therapy contexts and populations across the lifespan, (2) Approaches and models of music therapy, (3) Music therapy methods, (4) Music therapy research, and (5) Music therapy training and professional issues. I recommend beginning with her introduction to the book and her opening chapter in each section, which provide a helpful overview. Addressing the familiar challenge of defining music therapy, Edwards emphasises that music therapy is context-dependent and responsive to the individual, with “multiple practices developed uniquely in each region of the world” (p.5). While the book’s 50 chapters certainly reflect professional breadth and expertise, the text is predominantly Eurocentric, with authors from Europe, North America and Australia. I particularly enjoyed the late Carolyn Kenny’s writing, but had hoped for other adventurous writing to reflect contemporary values related to culture and diversity.

In Section One, Edwards emphasises that professional competence requires understanding of both clinical populations and four contexts of practice – medical, developmental/educational, mental health, and community – while acknowledging that some work bridges multiple areas. In a discussion of evidence-based practice, Edwards promotes all forms of research and calls for accurate terminology, such as clear distinctions between accounts of music therapy and music medicine. These values are sustained throughout the book. The remaining twenty chapters in this section describe music therapy with infants, children, young people, adults and older people, with a range of medical, developmental, sensory and psychosocial issues.

Turning from diagnostic to theoretical frameworks, Section Two describes eleven music therapy approaches, selected on the basis of prior publication or inclusion in music therapy education in the “English-speaking world” (p. 417), in the literature, and in introductory professional training. The juxtaposition of these models in one volume encouraged me to flip between chapters and to reflect on my preferred ways of working and our eclectic stance here in New Zealand. I was drawn to Carolyn Kenny’s metaphor of the river as our “field of play”, depending on “grounded energy”, natural flow, mutuality, and a lack of “interventions” (p. 480). Edwards’ own view in the Introduction is that music therapy, as an active process with intentions of growth and change, can be considered an intervention – however collaborative the process, music and music therapy can (and perhaps should) provoke as well as soothe. My own metaphor for this section is a New Zealand braided river – its different channels flowing in the same general direction, sometimes crossing, merging and separating, but each following its own course.

The short third section has only four chapters and I wondered whether these chapters could have been integrated with Section Two. In the introduction to this section, Edwards seeks to define methods, techniques and procedures, and briefly discusses song-writing, improvisation and composition. Aasgaard and Ærø’s chapter on song-writing provides structured guidelines, musical examples and a discussion of technology, followed by chapters on group work (Pavlicevic) and receptive methods (Grocke).

Research is addressed in Section Four, with two separate overviews (by Edwards and Wheeler) followed by examples of grounded theory (Daveson), phenomenology (Ghetti), randomised controlled trials (RCTs) (Robb & Burns), mixed methods (Erkkilä), and research in medical settings (Colwell). As this book is dedicated to students, I wondered whether Edwards considered these the most accessible approaches for student projects – with the exception of RCTs, which remain uncommon in music therapy research but prized by the medical community. I would have liked to see a chapter about action research, a particularly accessible and transformative approach for aspiring practitioner-researchers (Stige & McFerran, 2016); although there are connections with grounded theory, these are distinct methodologies. I recommend that student researchers read this section alongside Wheeler and Murphy’s (2016) *Introduction to Music Therapy Research*.

Finally, Section Five considers five important professional issues: training (Hanser), developing work (Ledger), interprofessional practice (Twyford), professional recognition (Nöcker-Ribaupierre) and self-care (Trondalen). Drawing on her doctoral thesis, Ledger makes effective use of poetry to reflect on experiences and challenges – advice that might extend to readers of all chapters, given the expertise and calibre of all the authors:

Development takes patience,
It won’t happen overnight.
You might never feel “established”
So just work towards “alright”.
(p. 882)

I would have liked to see a further chapter discussing the value of clinical supervision in ensuring safe practice and continued professional growth for both students and professionals. Trondalen’s

chapter on self-care includes a short section on supervision, but self-care is by no means the only purpose of supervision. Perhaps the absence of a discrete chapter is a reminder that supervision for new graduates and experienced music therapists is optional in many countries.

While I am delighted to have a print copy of this book to dip into, I am also aware of contemporary opportunities to append online audio, video and other electronic resources, and hope these authors might consider this in their future writing. The strength of this book lies in the coherent structure and abundance of professional voices, and vignettes, which provide insights into the therapeutic process. Like many music therapists, my professional journey has taken unexpected turns, and I would have valued this book during my training and when considering new professional opportunities. I am aware of several areas of practice that remain uncommon or unknown here in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and I hope this book will boost our confidence to address these gaps. Congratulations to Jane Edwards and team for bringing these voices together in one volume.

REFERENCES

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