

## Conference report

# Third BAMT Conference 'Music, Diversity and Wholeness'

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'Music, Diversity and Wholeness'

16-18 February 2018

Barbican Centre/Guildhall School of Music and Drama  
London, UK



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**Publication history:** Submitted 29 June 2018; First published 4 September 2018.

### INTRODUCTION

This conference report is approached from two perspectives. There is an overview of the conference as a whole, which focuses on the events which included all attendees; namely, the Friday evening lecture and the two 'dialogues' on Saturday and Sunday. I also give some personal perspectives as an individual attendee, which are necessarily limited to those papers and round tables that I attended myself.

### THE SETTING – BARBICAN AND THE GUILDHALL SCHOOL OF MUSIC AND DRAMA

This was the third BAMT conference, and the first to take place in London. It was appropriate, perhaps, for the main venues to be The Barbican Centre and the Guildhall School of Music and

Drama (GSMD), 2018 being the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Juliette Alvin's music therapy training. The setting allowed for a strikingly multifaceted conference. While many conferences present an array of choices, this was notably and impressively wide-ranging, with so many events happening simultaneously on both Saturday and, even more so, on Sunday, that one could not help but leave with an impression of a partial experience of a difficult-to-grasp whole (see Warner, Tsiris & Watson 2018). This underlines the variety of work going on in the profession, as well as the high level of engagement of practitioners. The closing ceremony, with the unveiling of a cartoon montage depicting a series of moments throughout the weekend, brilliantly and wittily executed by artists in residence Vicky Long and Ada Jusic, was an effective and memorable way to unify these many and varied experiences (see Photograph 1 and 2).



Photograph 1: Cartoon montage depicting a series of moments throughout the conference



Photograph 2: Cartoon montage

## FRIDAY EVENTS / THE TONY WIGRAM MEMORIAL LECTURE

The preliminary day was a full one, including a variety of events such as the PhD Symposium at GSMD (see Parsons 2018), the East London Foundation Trust Open House event, and ‘Silk Threads: The Guildhall School’s tapestry of music therapy research’ at Milton Court.

The evening lecture by Professor Inge Nygaard Pederson, from the University of Aalborg in Denmark, was partly an affectionate tribute to the much-missed Tony Wigram. It was also a reminder of a kind of psychotherapeutic approach to clinical work in adult psychiatric settings which seems to distil something essential about clinical improvisation. The musical examples we heard were not for the uninitiated. This did not shy away from the kind of darkness that can be expressed in sound by people who have experienced aspects of self which can feel difficult to be exposed to, but which demand an essential aspect of the music therapist’s craft. The capacity to meet and contain musical utterances which stray a long way from conventional beauty, but which are self-expressive in a profound sense, is a part of the music therapist’s skill-set which might be something like a

USP. While we may be diversifying, looking for new models and ways that music can 'help', cross-fertilising with community music, with education, with other professions and disciplines, who else, frankly, can do *this* stuff? A colleague remarked to me after Inge's lecture, "That was the kind of thing that got me interested in music therapy in the first place".

## DIALOGUES

The theme of the conference, 'Diversity and Wholeness', was potentially very wide-ranging. It was the two dialogue sessions which brought these themes into sharper focus, with both presenting a perspective from which it became possible to examine some broad priorities of music therapy.

### Tia DeNora with Simon Procter

Tia DeNora explored music as a medium for change over time, "getting into something" and "leading onto something", including concepts such as transcendence and endurance, as well as the social structure and dynamics of the processes of engagement in music-making. She directly addressed the conference themes, challenging the profession, from the perspective of sociology, to address people's need to "find a place". This was very much about music *in context*, in a particular space. How do people negotiate their way through shared musical interactions? It is dangerous to make presumptions about what the client needs. We need to be flexible and adaptive, not be drawn into 'must' ('Who must? Where must? Why must?'). What is the relationship between collaboration and control within the context of musical parameters? The interesting challenge is to explore how our presumptions about the clients' needs might be tested, to remain open to new possibilities. This flowed into her discussion with Simon Procter which touched again on "preconceptions about who knows best", and the importance of paying attention to "what is going on", ending with an entreaty from Tia DeNora for music therapists, with our "powerful set of lenses", to be "much more bullish with other disciplines and with the public, and engage".

### Raymond MacDonald with Philippa Derrington, Becky White, Nicky Haire and Alison Barrington

Raymond MacDonald's presentation on Sunday, which began startlingly with his alto saxophone, focused strongly on improvisation, on what it might

be, how it might work, and how it might be framed or understood. Part of this was about opening up the definition. Improvisation is not only John Coltrane exploring modal possibilities in a post-bop jazz context, it might also be applied as a framing concept for children's play. We can think of playing children as "master improvisers", in their own way, an idea which has obvious resonance for music therapists, where the inclusivity of concepts such as *innate musicality* or *affect attunement* seems to have an immediate relevance to some of the ideas Raymond MacDonald was exploring. Following a series of responses from Philippa Derrington and Becky White, who have worked together on their *Concurrent* project, and Alison Barrington (with her "yes, and..." stance in preference to the familiar "yes, but..." of much academic and practice discourse), we were then treated to an improvised duet between Raymond's alto saxophone and Nicky Haire's violin. This was a lovely illustration of what music can do to a room. We were all focused and interested during the talking part. At this point we were spellbound. This might be one of the differences between the spoken word and the musical event.

## WORKSHOPS

I did not attend any workshops. I wish I had had the opportunity. I was struck by the incorporation of Bach's 6<sup>th</sup> Brandenburg Concerto as a vehicle for exploring dyadic relationships, along with workshops on self-care for music therapists, singing for lung health, and many more. This conference could easily have encompassed a week without starting to feel sparse. I wonder whether BAMT might consider rerunning some of these workshops at later dates. Certainly there was much here that could be of enormous benefit to music therapists as practitioners, theorists and researchers.

## PAPER PRESENTATIONS / ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

Presentations that were memorable for me included Martin Lawes' and Becky White's offerings, both exploring different perspectives on improvisatory processes. While Lawes linked the therapist's clinical improvisation to dream states, White was exploring the processes of learning how to improvise in non-clinical contexts, but through a music therapy lens. Later on Saturday, I had the privilege of chairing the session for Amelia Oldfield, Jackie Robarts and Steve Cobbett. While Cobbett

gave us a neurological overview of trauma, Oldfield presented an outline and preview of her exciting and innovative film project, in which she has interviewed parents and ex-clients, whom she worked with as children, 17 years on from the original period of work. Robarts discussed accompaniment techniques in the context of work with an individual client, from a strongly psychodynamic perspective, as well as the positive and varied influence of Daniel Stern on her own practice. If you have not heard Robarts present, do so at the next opportunity, because as well as being a profound and significant thinker and practitioner, she is also hilarious, with a great gift for comic timing.

I chaired a roundtable discussion in the afternoon on approaches to music therapy research, where music therapy's position in relation to evidence-based medicine was explored, along with other approaches to research, by Anna Maratos, Neta Spiro, Catherine Carr, Claire Flower and Stuart Wood. The importance of keeping an open mind about methodology, and to keep thinking creatively about the many shapes and sizes of research, rather than being over-focused on the 'gold standard' of RCTs, was an important take-home message from this discussion.

The East London Foundation Trust team presented a fascinating round table first thing on Sunday morning, which included the voice of a service-user within a variety of perspectives on a multifaceted research project in an adult mental health setting. The complexity of this work was apparent, but so too was the high level of cooperation between various groups. The team at ELFT seem to be pointing the way forward for music therapy research in healthcare.

Another forward-looking presentation was Donald Wetherick's exploration of the musical training of music therapists. This was an update on Wetherick's ongoing PhD research, which seeks to provide an overview of what is expected of music therapists both before and after training and asks important questions about 'music therapy musicianship' which may have implications beyond the training courses themselves. Meanwhile, Nicky Haire is conducting her own PhD research into humour in music therapy, which she presented at the very end of the weekend. I was particularly engaged by this idea, since it has often struck me that therapists can come across as a bit serious at times, perhaps because of the serious nature of the work we do. But, as became apparent from Haire's video excerpts, humour is a serious thing (just watch *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*), and a

crucial part of the engagement of both client and therapist.

## **SPECIAL EVENTS: MUSIC PERFORMANCES IN THE GARDEN, QUESTION TIME DEBATE**

Entangled in absorbing conversations, I missed the musical performances in the wonderful Barbican conservatory, an imaginative idea which made creative use of an inspiring space. Finding more room for musical performance feels like a welcome innovation. Could there be scope for exploring this further at future BAMT conferences?

The 'Question Time Debate', later in the evening, was brilliantly chaired by Leslie Bunt and his jacket/tie combination. This event was the closest the conference came to pure showbusiness. A diverse panel explored themes suggested by attendees throughout the course of the day. Gary Ansdell made some controversial statements; Daniel Thomas expressed optimism for the profession. Cathy Warner and Grace Watts provided considered thoughtful viewpoints. However, the show was stolen by Dean Beadle. Dean is autistic, an ex-music therapy client, and a renowned public speaker and campaigner for autism rights (and featured in episodes 8 and 9 of the podcast *Music Therapy Conversations*). On this occasion, he punctured the atmosphere with a series of devastating one-liners, alongside some pertinent observations about what music therapy can achieve, and how crucial it was for him at a critical time in his life. Let's hope we see more of Dean (and of other music therapy clients) on the UK music therapy scene.

## **BAMT LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD**

Kay Sobey was presented with the BAMT Lifetime Achievement Award by Tessa Watson, who gave her a fitting and moving testimonial. I doubt there was anyone present who would have disagreed with this choice of recipient. Sobey herself accepted the award with her characteristic modesty and self-deprecating humour. She approaches music therapy with curiosity, intelligence, warmth and empathy, but she has also contributed so much to the profession as an educator and, not least, in her role on the editorial team of the *British Journal of Music Therapy*. It was great to see this formally recognised.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Cathy Warner, the Chair of the Scientific Committee, brought us a conference which was both 'diverse' and 'whole', in keeping with its title. This was a grand showcase for the UK music therapy profession and beyond, which acknowledged the past while looking to the future. There was optimism, notes of caution, calls for new ways of thinking, and, perhaps most importantly, indications that, whatever our theoretical stance or clinical setting, we have to keep coming back to the music itself.

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### Suggested citation:

- Annesley, L. (2018). Conference report: "Third BAMT Conference 'Music, Diversity and Wholeness'". *Approaches: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Music Therapy*, 10(2), 230-234.