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## Book review

# **Invitation to Community Music Therapy** Brynjulf Stige & Leif Edvard Aarø

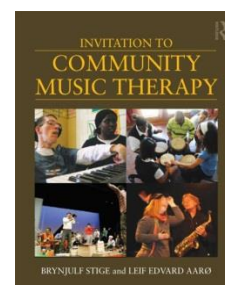
Reviewed by Stuart Wood

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*Invitation to Community Music Therapy*

Brynjulf Stige & Leif Edvard Aarø

New York: Routledge (2012)  
330 pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-80554-4



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The world is in chaos. Science authors such as Steven Johnson and James Gleick describe how slime mould, ant colonies and – the most famous – butterflies flapping their tiny wings, have become examples in the science community of how unpredictable the world really is. Swarm behaviour, emergence and the butterfly effect are ideas that explore the sensitive interaction between smaller parts and greater wholes. They generate systemic notions of self-organisation, collective phenomena, de-centralisation and multiplicity, and they continue to challenge the *status quo* of science.

In their book, *Invitation to Community Music Therapy* (Routledge, 2012), Stige and Aarø outline a movement in music therapy that illustrates the same kinds of ideas. They present a text that acts as an invitation to explore what they call a “sub-discipline” (p. 27) of music therapy built upon self organisation, collective phenomena, de-centralisation and multiplicity. It is a descriptive text, with the aim of being a pedagogic resource. Their stated intention is to create an accessible book, featuring research, theory, practice and profession. The outcome is a robust collaboration

between two fields, reflecting the nature of the subject matter in the writing team itself. The combined perspectives of the Professor of Music Therapy in the University of Bergen (Stige) and the Chief Scientist at the Division of Mental Health in Norway’s Institute of Public Health and Adjunct Professor of Social Psychology in the University of Bergen (Aarø) give the book a platform to ask big questions. My big question then, is, if they are inviting me as a reader to explore something, does this book tell me where to look for it, and does it make me want to go?

The authors are clear from the start. If you are looking for Community Music Therapy, they cannot tell you where or what it is, but they can help you recognise it when you see it: “Community Music Therapy is being developed in various ways in relation to a range of local contexts, cultures, and social situations. There are therefore limits to how clarifying general definitions can be” (p. 16). Their strategies for helping us recognise Community Music Therapy, or its characteristics, are thorough and practical. These strategies include a useful acronym of qualities, impressive use of

photographs and practical vignettes, and a comprehensive theoretical framework, which I explain below.

One of the book's most helpful pedagogic inventions is the acronym, PREPARE. This acronym lists what the authors call the "qualities" (p. 18) of Community Music Therapy, bringing together features of Community Music Therapy theory and practice. It stands for:

P – Participatory  
 R – Resource-oriented  
 E – Ecological  
 P – Performative  
 A – Activist  
 R – Reflective  
 E – Ethics-driven

This acronym runs through the whole text, providing a clear method of understanding the many vignettes and practical examples in the book.

There are seventy figures in the book, providing varied and contrasting images of practice. The vignette text boxes run to fifty. These visual elements are an integral feature of how the authors present Community Music Therapy. Not functioning only as illustration or distraction, images and vignettes demonstrate that the authors need more than words to really portray their subject. The book needs images, diagrams and vignettes to act as constituent parts of the text, not just added extras. The list of features needed to represent Community Music Therapy is extraordinary.

In terms of theory and meta-theory, the book surveys a history of Community Music Therapy, basic concepts of health, society and community, key practical issues, and the role of research and professionalisation. It goes some way to reinforcing the growing narrative of Community Music Therapy, but provides some interesting historical and theoretical gems along the way. Packed as it is with perspectives, these gems will be different for every reader.

For example, I found the argument about Community Music Therapy as a "rights-based practice" (p. 179) very interesting:

"The efforts of lawyers and politicians working for human rights are highly valuable but limited. Many of the social and cultural rights, for instance, cannot be achieved by laws and regulations only. They must be actively provided for" (p. 179).

This radical idea about the power of musical work in social activism seems to conflict in some ways with the progress of professionalisation in this field.

I wondered, do people who need their human rights to be defended actually have access to musical provision? Or is it inhibited by our increasingly professionalised status? Is our power to help neutered by our being approved to help? Going further, does a focus on rights and freedom distract from the physical/functional component of musical work? Does this orientation simply swap one limitation for another? So many questions; yet one way to recognise Community Music Therapy, perhaps, is the kinds of questions it makes us ask. This in fact, is built into the text, with discussion topics included at the end of each chapter.

Another question that the book triggered for me was about concepts of music. The authors propose a way of thinking about "music as milieu" (p. 119), following on from their understanding of Aigen's "music as medium" (p. 118) and Gaston's "music as means" (p. 118). They suggest that this ecological metaphor allows us to think of music as a scene in which we perform relationships. In other words, the authors base Community Music Therapy on a de-centred concept of music. This describes an important puzzle for me, which is that this music-centred approach to music therapy actually has a de-centred concept of music. So it puts de-centring, as it were, at the centre.

Putting a de-centred music at the centre is a typical paradox of Community Music Therapy. It preserves the sense of wonder, and enquiry, that I recognise as an important feature of its creativity. The style of presentation here – ecological, empirical, abductive – leaves room for growth, new learning, development, and discovery. The style is also generous, being less hierarchical and hagiographic perhaps than previous movements in the history of music therapy, and I enjoy this intellectual attitude. It is summarised for me in Stige and Aarø's quotation of Ansdell:

"[...] instead of saying 'the central defining element of CoMT is either x, y or z' we instead look at how the pattern of its elements is rearranged in *new relationships* within any given context. So CoMT is not defined by anything new, or anything 'particular' – but by a new arrangement of known elements: in short, a new pattern [...]" (Ansdell 2005, cited in p. 17).

So in this new de-centred pattern, what is in the foreground? This text brings the focus on ecological knowledge systems, empiricism, and abductive thinking. This raises the question: in Community Music Therapy, what does context really mean, and where does it end? As we know already, the butterfly that flaps its wings can change everything. The authors suggest that, "[...] beliefs, attitudes, and values, are all parts of a functionally

integrated cognitive system, so that change in any part of the system will affect other parts [...]” (p. 177). The authors do not offer studies of how those changes work, or what practitioners do with those changes in detail, but this was not their intention. It could be a helpful addition for future editions.

So the reader is presented with an exciting landscape, not mapped from above but instead described using the walks, experiences and ‘geological samples’ that people have taken through and from it. We are invited to explore it too, with a guide for recognising important features of the terrain, and ways of understanding the ecology of the whole. But keep your eyes open for slime mould, ant-colonies and those dangerous butterflies...

## References

Ansdell, G. (2005). Community Music Therapy: A plea for “fuzzy recognition” instead of “final definition” [Contribution to moderated discussions]. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*. Retrieved on 17 January 2006, from [www.voices.no/discussions/discm4\\_07.html](http://www.voices.no/discussions/discm4_07.html)

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