



Five Decades... and Five Minutes - Personal Reflections on Clive Robbins

James Robertson

It was in the early summer of 1983 when I first met Clive Robbins. As one of eight students on the original Nordoff-Robbins Diploma course in Leighton Place (North London), we eagerly awaited the arrival of Clive and Carol Robbins who were to be with us for one month. Yet we had all 'met' Clive before in different ways. Like so many prospective students about to start the course, I had read Nordoff and Robbins' book *Therapy in Music for Handicapped Children*. Clive's – and of course, Paul's – 'voice' could be clearly heard. The writing flowed, certainly, but the content was groundbreaking and the photos within the book illuminated moments of joy and intense creativity. And then there was Clive's speaking voice that we heard weekly on a reel-to-reel tape recorder as part of the *Talks on Music* series throughout our training. The timbre in his voice was warm and mellow yet also youthful; here was a man who could not help but speak in the present tense. Words like *immediacy*, *living* and *now* punctuated every sentence. Yet he could also be firm and to the point; I often wondered how Anna must have felt when – in session 1 – Clive promptly challenged her by saying, "Who's gonna pick that stick up, eh?"



Picture 1: Clive Robbins (standing) and Paul Nordoff working with a child

James Robertson is the Programme Leader of the MSc Music Therapy (Nordoff Robbins) at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. Since graduating in 1983 he has worked in Scotland in both music therapy and music education. His current clinical work is in the area of forensic mental health.

Email: jrobertson@qmu.ac.uk

And then we met Clive through his teaching. He was inspirational and informed, yet open and always encouraging. Perhaps one could call Clive charismatic, but this may imply a sense of 'style over substance' and Clive was nothing if not steeped and grounded in all that he wanted to share with us. As students at the time we felt a sense of awakening; there had been inevitable elements of resistance to those who had guided and taught us in the months leading up to the visit from Clive and Carol.



Picture 2: Clive and Carol Robbins

I look back on this more objectively now. My own students from Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh – up until two years ago – would travel to London to work with Clive (and Alan Turry) towards the end of their training. When they returned I could always sense – rightly – that they had been in the presence of a brilliant teacher and a unique man. I could not hope to compete with Clive; nor could anyone, and he would not have wanted us to. But it always seemed hard for the students to return to ‘business as usual’.



Picture 3: Clive Robbins and Alan Turry with music therapy students from the Nordoff Robbins London Centre and Queen Margaret University (Edinburgh), April 2009

Clive loved Scotland. He would never say “Scotland” but “Bonnie Scotland” – and quite right too. He once visited a village called Dirleton in East Lothian. This was a small rural community which, for one day, hosted Clive and Carol for a talk and workshop in a local hall. They opened with a greeting song, making the point that it is from the music you should begin; his life philosophy, perhaps. We were struck by their organisation, enthusiasm and warmth. They worked us hard – and we loved them for it.

Yet perhaps one of the most poignant and memorable presentations by Clive which I attended was in Washington D.C. in 1999 as part of the 9th World Congress of Music Therapy. A particular session was arranged which was entitled *Five International Models of Music Therapy Practice* and featured Rolando Benenzon, Helen Bonny, Clifford Madsen, Johannes Eschen and Clive Robbins. The five speakers were required to talk about the roots and inspiration of their particular approach and how it was being used today. Twenty minutes were allocated to each speaker. What followed was a unique example of presentations of different approaches to music therapy – and different styles of presenting. Each speaker had carefully prepared what he or she planned to say. Yet Clive seemed particularly free and spontaneous in his delivery; he had prepared to the extent that he

had an overall structure and headings but he seemed to be improvising rather than instructing – and he told us so. Towards the end of his presentation he was given a five-minute call from the chair. Clive seemed taken aback that he still had so much time left. He could have stopped there and then but instead he just paused and mused – to himself more than to the audience – “*five minutes*”; the audience spontaneously applauded. Yet what he seemed to be saying to us was – “*Have you any idea how much I can tell you in five minutes?*” His use of those minutes was inspiring and he warmly encouraged us to be ourselves, to value our individuality and to refrain from adopting a dogmatic approach to our work.

So farewell, Clive, and thank you; for over five decades of clinical practice, teaching, writing, musicing – and simply being you. But thank you also for those five minutes and how you taught us to respect time, and ourselves.

If we could ask Clive the question “*So, what do we do now?*” I think he would simply say, “*go pick that stick up – and run with it*”.

References

Nordoff, P., & Robbins, C. (1971). *Therapy in Music for Handicapped Children*. London: Gollancz.

Suggested citation:

Robertson, J. (2012). Five decades... and five minutes - personal reflections on Clive Robbins. *Approaches: Music Therapy & Special Music Education*, 4(1), 21-22. Retrieved from <http://approaches.primarymusic.gr>