

CONFERENCE REPORT

Key Changes Music Therapy Annual Conference “Just when we thought it was safe...”

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University of Roehampton; Autism Unlimited, UK

CONFERENCE DETAILS

Key Changes Music Therapy Annual Conference

“Just when we thought it was safe...”

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

This is an exciting time for the profession of music therapy. Many new areas of research and practice are being developed and avenues being found to respond to people seeking support amidst challenging geopolitical, social, and economic circumstances. Together with the impact of the global pandemic, these conditions continue to test services with the potential to generate uncertainty and anxiety. The Key Changes 2022 Annual Conference theme, *Just when we thought it was safe...*, was born from the charity's therapy team's shock and dismay upon learning of the ongoing, and as yet unresolved, process of change for the MA in Music Therapy programme at University of Roehampton, London. As

a former Senior Lecturer for the programme for seven years, this sense that one of the foundations of the profession in the UK has been shaken is one I share. Through a rich and varied programme of paper presentations, workshops and sensitively placed reflective spaces, the conference offered both a



Photograph 1: Margetts raising awareness of her book *Intercultural Music Therapy Consultation Research: Shared Humanity in Collaborative Theory and Practice* (2002, published by Routledge), at the Key Changes conference.

celebration of innovative clinical work and a rare, welcome forum to acknowledge, express and explore strategies in response to contemporary challenges.

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

The substantial Key Changes Music Therapy team provides music therapy services to a wide range of client groups across the county of Hampshire, UK. The enlivening musical opening, a consistent element of these annual conferences for over 20 years, literally surrounded delegates with resonant rhythmic drumming by members of that team. In the following introduction and welcome, Jim Squire, Chair of Key Changes, then urged us all to 'indulge' in the rich material to follow.

The morning session comprised three presentations of clinical work in contemporary areas, which highlighted the efficacy and importance of collaborative working with parents and fellow professionals. The first, presented by Minna Harman, was entitled "The Song is Ended but the Melody Lingers on: The Development of a Music Therapy Group". The recovery of a special school class of six children with complex needs following the non-Covid-19 passing of a member immediately following the first lockdown of the pandemic was movingly described. Space, and gentle, responsive support, offered by the therapist to both class staff and children in their own timeframe, was fundamental to the gradual assimilation of this loss.

In the second presentation, "Some Sing to Remember, Some Sing to Forget: Music Therapy with People Experiencing Homelessness in Swansea During the Pandemic," Jo Humphreys considered individual and open group sessions provided as part of a 'move-on project' in a hostel in collaboration with Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy. The inspiring journey of one young, talented rapper from individual sessions to developing capacity to thrive in a group vividly illustrated the potential of music to create and support a sense of community.

The third paper was "George's Lullaby: A Case Study of the Use of Music Therapy to Support Parents and their Infant on a Palliative Pathway", presented by Kirsty Ormston. Based at Noah's Ark, Great Ormond Street Hospital, this poignant case history described the therapist's end-of-life support for a family whose infant son had a life-limiting condition. Central to being with this family in this time of trauma was the empowerment of the baby's parents to musically connect with him and each other at the end of his short life.

Planned space in which to hold and process the profound emotional impact of these moving stories as a group through musical improvisation was indeed welcome. The afternoon began with the opportunity to continue to reflect on how we, as music therapists, both view and undertake self-care in response to work which, while rewarding and nourishing, can also take an emotional and physical toll. Entitled "But what about me?", and led by Leigh Warren-Thomas, this discussion forum was framed by the ethical imperative of self-care in terms of fitness to practice, as stated by HCPC Standards of Proficiency 2023. The group explored aspects relating to the prioritisation of wellbeing including expectations of oneself and those perceived from employers, practical obstacles and mitigating strategies.

The fourth session was entitled "Music Therapy and Biodiversity: Adapting Practice and Thinking Around Climate Emergency" and presented by Elizabeth Coombes and Rebecca Sayers. Prompted, in part, by an increase in anxieties brought by clients around climate change that included the

provenance of instruments, delegates were challenged to actively consider issues of sustainability in all areas of practice. Balancing an ideal response with professional realities such as geography, transportability and durability of instruments, local employment availability, and economy provided timely discussion points.

Against the emotive backdrop of the recent consultation process and ongoing uncertainty for the arts therapies programmes at the University of Roehampton, Emeritus Professor of Dramatherapy, Anna Chesner, then delivered a thought-provoking Keynote: "Being with Change." This concept, Chesner argued, creates ambivalence as there are changes that we embrace and those that need to be resisted. Physical as well as emotional ways in which our response to organisational change are experienced, particularly when processes go against our ethos as therapists, were discussed and group experiential exercises further explored their embodiment. In summary, Chesner drew together ways in which we as music therapists can equip and support ourselves to weather the storms of change through taking care of our health, artistry, and creativity, and by maintaining professional solidarity.

CONCLUSION

Having had the privilege of presenting my own clinical work and research at several of these events over the years, I have been consistently struck by the accessibility, relevance and inclusivity of the content. The spirit of this conference was no exception. While different experiences of a sense of professional 'teetering on the edge' (as described in the conference programme), were central, there also prevailed a tangible warmth and joy in being able to meet face-to-face again as part of a music therapy community.