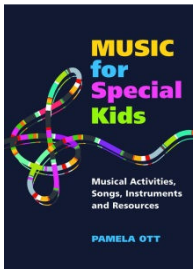
Book Reviews

Music for Special Kids: Musical Activities, Songs, Instruments and Resources
Pamela Ott

Group Music Activities for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities
Maria Ramey

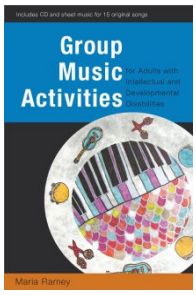
Reviewed by Donald Wetherick



Music for Special Kids: Musical Activities, Songs, Instruments and Resources

Pamela Ott

Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2011)
192 pp, ISBN: 978-1-84905-858-2



Group Music Activities for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Maria Ramey

Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2011)
171 pp (includes CD), ISBN: 978-1-84905-857-5

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George Bernard Shaw is often quoted as saying that "England and America are two countries divided by a common language". Reading these two books for review has certainly made it clear to me how different the meanings of 'music therapy' can be, both between the USA and the UK and even within the same country.

Both books are written by established music therapists in the USA and are clearly 'about' music therapy in some way. Yet both describe music therapy approaches which are profoundly different from most corresponding work in the UK, and in some cases are not recognisable as music therapy at all.

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Before discussing the books in detail, it is important to be clear about the authors' intentions. Are they in fact writing about music therapy, or about something different – for example, education in (or through) music, or music as recreation, or music as a social activity? Both authors distinguish between trained (i.e. professional) music therapists and others who may use music in their work (e.g. educators, parents or carers). Ramey is explicit that her book is "by and for music therapists" (p.20) and that others using the material in the book should not describe what they do as 'music therapy' to avoid "bringing to light issues you are not trained to deal with" (p.20). Ott says only that her book "does not attempt to train you to become a music therapist" (p.17) but otherwise makes no distinction between music therapy and what other professionals or carers might do or aim to do through music (including those with little musical training).

This exposes an important discontinuity within discussions of music therapy which reaches beyond geography to more fundamental concepts. Is 'music therapy' simply a way of describing *ordinary* musical activities (including educational ones) which are adapted for people who bear labels such as 'ill' or 'disabled'? Or does it describe something qualitatively different: an approach to *treating* someone in distress or need through music, with the aim of bringing about real, and possibly lasting, *benefits*? Ramey seems to subscribe to the latter position, at least in principle, and Ott to the former. The authors' own practices may, of course, go beyond what is described in their respective books.

I think my own view on this is now clear, but let me set out my stand. If music therapy exists at all it must be or include something *other* than ordinary music making. Moreover, this otherness must be more than simply the *who* and the *where* of the music making in question: it must involve something different about the very *qualities* of the sounds and relationships involved. Neither of the two books under review discusses this aspect of music therapy in any depth, and Ott does not even seem to acknowledge that it may exist.

My own view is not universally held even within UK music therapy. Ansdell, for example, claims that "music therapy works in the way that music itself works" (Stige, Ansdell, Elefant & Pavlicevic 2010: 27), which at first reading suggests an opposite position. Yet I do not believe it is necessary to read it in this way. Unless Ansdell intends to obliterate any distinction between music therapy and other uses of music altogether (which I doubt), he is left claiming only that the *benefits* of music making are best considered and understood as part of the discipline of *music* rather than the disciplines of (say) psychotherapy, or education, or neurology. A corollary of this is that the study of music must then be enlarged to include the personal, psychological, educational, social and therapeutic aspects of music and music making. This is indeed what he and his colleagues have begun to do in their recent published work (Stige, Ansdell, Elefant & Pavlicevic 2010).

My own view is that this demands too much of musicology, and that it is simpler to see music therapy as a *trans-disciplinary* field, over-lapping with other established fields without seeking to subsume them, while also having its own identity. This is in practice what has happened in the UK for many years, particularly with the overlap between music (therapy) and psychotherapy, but more recently including psychology, sociology and education. What differentiates Ansdell's position within UK music therapy is perhaps the absence of psychodynamic/psychotherapeutic contributions to the musical understanding of music therapy, either from within or without music therapy itself.

Whatever position the reader holds on these matters, I raise them simply to point out that it is impossible to review these two books without recognising the different understandings of music therapy which do exist, both within and between countries. What follows is written from a UK perspective, and one that values the place of psychodynamic and relational thinking in music therapy itself.

Now to the books themselves. *Music for Special Kids* is as cheerful and optimistic in its style as its title suggests. In her introduction Ott describes how "music can be an incredibly effective therapeutic and educational medium for young children and individuals with special needs" (p.17). The educational value of the book is clear, but there is little about it that is therapeutic beyond the simplification of educational ideas for children with special needs. Much also depends on what is understood by 'special needs' in the first place: throughout the book it is assumed that these children will be able to speak, or at least understand simple spoken instructions, and will be able to stand, sit or move relatively normally. This is simply not the case with many of the moderately or severely disabled children that music therapists in the UK work with. Anyone expecting to find ideas for work with children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), or even those with limited communication skills, will find this book a disappointment.

The majority of activities Ott describes are directed (involving no improvisation) and most have linguistic aims (e.g. learning names of months of the year, parts of the body etc.). Where emotions feature at all they are considered only at a cognitive level (recognising/imitating emotions) rather than a relational one (responding to actual emotional

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states in others). The book also includes one of my personal horrors: adapting the song 'If you're happy and you know it' to contrasting emotional states (e.g. sad, angry) without any attempt to make the music *communicate* the designated emotion. To anyone trained to understand music as communicating emotional dynamics more directly and immediately than words this is not just a simplification of music therapy for the untrained; it is a betrayal of a key principle of music therapy, at least as I understand it.

The activities are clearly described, with objectives, materials etc. clearly listed, and hints on how to develop and adapt them. The book also includes nineteen songs in staff notation. The musical range covered is extremely narrow: all are in major keys, all but one are in common time, and most are based on folk songs. The last ('Calm song') is the most musically developed and original, but most music therapists trained in the UK will have created their own songs at least as good as this, or should be well able to do so.

I cannot recommend this book to music therapists in the UK, if only because most would find it too basic in relation to the training they already have. However, the activities themselves do have an educational value for young children with mild or moderate learning disabilities, and would be a useful resource for teachers or music group leaders. They do not require great musical skill. I cannot see them being of use with more severely disabled or emotionally troubled children, or indeed any child over the age of about twelve.

Group Music Activities by Maria Ramey is altogether a more useful book. The field of adult learning disabilities is often ignored or undervalued, as Ramey notes in her introduction, and any serious published discussion of it is welcome. This book would be a useful primer and resource for anyone leading group sessions for adults in residential or social care. After a short explanatory guide to the book's purpose and some clear and useful tips on using the activities with groups, there come one-page descriptions of 100 different activities involving active and passive music activities with clear goals and instructions. There are also fifteen songs in sheet music, some useful indexes/appendices and a CD with recordings of the fifteen songs and instrumental sound tracks (needed for some of the activities described in the book).

Ramey makes more allowance than Ott for the fact that many adults with learning difficulties will have some degree of physical disability or limitation too. She acknowledges that the music (as well as any gestures) may need to adapt to the needs and choices of the participants, and encourages the use of improvisation. She also makes it clear that these activities are not aimed at more severely or profoundly disabled adults. The goals are less single-mindedly educational than Ott's, with recognition of social and leisure aspects of music making too. There is still an expectation that all will have a reasonable level of receptive and expressive (even written) language. Those working with non-verbal or more severely disabled adults, or those with associated mental health or emotional problems, may find this limits the book's usefulness.

The songs are original compositions by several different music therapists, including Ramey herself. They are predominantly major key and in common time, with melody and guitar chords. They cover a number of rhythmic (mostly Latin) styles. In two compositions by Kelly Summer ('Let's all play together' and 'Howl at the moon') the key signature does not match the song melody or chords – 'Let's all play' is a major blues, but notated in D minor, while 'Howl at the moon' is in E (not D major), with a strong mixolydian feel. What is more, 'Let's all play' is in a nine-bar form – crying out for an extra bar at the end of each phrase to make up the more usual twelve-bar blues. While there is useful material here, most music therapists will be able to create their own, or already have done so.

What is useful is an appendix listing a range of well-known songs suitable for use in group sessions, and a cross-index to the 100 activities by goal areas/developmental purpose. The CD may be a useful resource to some, and to get the feel of some of the songs, but most music therapists will want to use the songs or sounds live where at all possible.

In conclusion, *Group Music Activities for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* is a book some music therapists may value having to hand if only for its potential to stimulate new ideas in a field where it is very easy to become 'stuck'. For others working in this field, I would also strongly recommend Rio's book *Connecting through Music with People with Dementia: A Guide for Caregivers*[1] (2010) – a sympathetic and sensitive guide to the ways in which musical interaction can be truly individualised and responsive without the need for highly developed musical skills.

References

Powell, H. (2011). Review of the book "Connecting through Music with People with Dementia: A Guide for Caregivers" by Robin Rio.

[1] For a review of this book, you can see Harriet Powell's review (2011) published in *Approaches*, volume 3, issue 1.

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