



A Tribute to Tony Wigram

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Professor Tony Wigram passed away in his home on June 24th 2011, aged 57, after almost one year with a growing tumour in his brain.

Almost all music therapy professionals in Europe have heard of Tony Wigram, heard him speak at a conference or as a guest Professor, or read one of his numerous articles or books. Wigram has contributed to the field of music therapy not only in Europe but worldwide. He did groundbreaking work as a music therapy clinician, as well as a teacher and researcher and created an extraordinary research milieu at the Doctoral Programme in Music Therapy at Aalborg University.

Wigram was one of the founders of the European Music Therapy Confederation (EMTC) and served as the first president and later also as president for the World Federation of Music Therapy (WFMT). He was Professor of Music Therapy and Head of the doctoral programme at Aalborg University, Professor at Anglia Ruskin University and Honorary Principal Research Fellow at Melbourne University, Australia.

From St. Albans and Aalborg to an international career

Two decades ago a group of Danish music therapy lecturers at the University of Aalborg heard Wigram speak and were impressed by his clinical and academic work. They succeeded in persuading him to take the job as Associate Professor in Denmark. This meant that in 1992, he started a full time position in Aalborg on the MA programme and he bought a nice little brick house in the village

of Uggerhølle, that music therapy colleagues and students from all over the world know from Wigram's open doors and warm hospitality. In spite of a heavy work load Wigram kept his clinical music therapy work with children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders at *Harper House* in UK, not far from *Wigram House* in St. Albans near London where he lived with his wife, Jenny, and his three sons.

In 1998 Wigram earned a full professorship in Denmark and with his double bases in Aalborg and St. Albans he was additionally engaged at Melbourne University and Anglia Ruskin University and affiliated at music therapy training programmes in Spain, Belgium, Germany and other countries. Wigram's clinical work and research was especially centred on music therapy as a means of distinguishing Autistic Spectrum Disorders in children from other severe communication disabilities.



Picture 1: Lars Ole Bonde and Tony Wigram receiving the prize for *the most dynamic research milieu in Denmark in 2007* from Professor Kirsten Drotner, chair of the Danish Research Council for Culture and Communication

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Picture 2: Tony and Jenny Wigram receiving presents from a group of colleagues in St Albans in November 2009



Picture 3: Wigram's fantastic cooking was matched with fantastical gifts from doctoral students and guests

Doctoral research

Wigram was an ambitious and talented researcher and contributed to international music therapy research in the most impressive way. Not only did he carry out research studies himself, he also supported numerous researchers all over the world. He was deeply involved in research and was able to encourage and give constructive feedback to researchers at all levels.

A Nordic Research Network collaboration was already established with yearly research seminars in Denmark, but in 1997 Wigram set up a research programme in Aalborg, and started a tradition with biannual research seminars at the university campus with invited guest professors from many different music therapy research milieus. Since the first two PhD students enrolled in 1997 there has been an increasing interest in the doctoral programme, and by 2011 twenty-seven doctoral students are enrolled. Since 1998 there have been between one and three PhD defences a year, and in 2011 twenty-five doctoral students have submitted and defended their theses; a big proportion of these supervised by Wigram.

Wigram additionally supervised doctoral students from research programmes in Australia and UK, or gave feedback to research in progress or at defences all over the world. In this way he contributed to the development and quality control of music therapy research in an extraordinary way. It is rare that one person has supervised so many doctoral students and still in such a compassionate and careful way.

It is remarkable to see how many of Wigram's doctoral students successfully carried out their research and fruitfully disseminated and defended their theses, and also remarkable to see how he could attract guest professors and students not only from the Nordic countries, but from Europe, USA, Australia and even Asia. Wigram has built up the largest music therapy research programme in the world. He was proud of this, but still did all he could to help other music therapy research milieus to grow and develop. This move forward for the music therapy research field will certainly continue to have an effect for many years to come.



Picture 4: Twenty five doctoral students have completed their doctoral studies in music therapy at the programme in Aalborg. In the picture is one of the committees with the PhD candidate and supervisors (from left: Tony Wigram, Susanne Metzner, Dorit Amir, Inge Nygaard Pedersen, Denise Grocke and Karen Vibeke Mortensen)



Picture 5: Wigram at one of his dinner parties for PhD students in his apartment in Aalborg (Christian Gold and Helen Odell-Miller in the background)

Clinician and teacher

Besides being an excellent researcher and equilibristic musician, Wigram kept on being a clinician and this was a continuous inspiration to his teaching of music therapy students. He brought his clinical experience into his lectures and workshops and expressed the necessity to focus on the client's needs and to describe how music therapy can contribute in the process of assessing and meeting these needs. The students learned how to use the music, which musical parameters to include, and how to change the character of the music while playing with the client.

At the MA programme in Aalborg Wigram developed a course called "Clinical Group Music Therapy Skills" where the students were trained in a professional use of the music in order to meet the client's specific needs. This course especially helped the students to move their way of thinking from a client/student perspective into a therapist/professional perspective.

Another clear fingerprint on the Aalborg training programme from Wigram was his different courses on improvisational skills. With these courses the students learned to integrate musical improvisational skills on their instrument with clinical knowledge and therapeutic skills.



Picture 6: The group of colleagues from Aalborg at a seminar in Rome in January 2009, visiting music therapist Marianne Bode (from left: Hanne Mette Ridder, Tony Wigram, Lars Ole Bonde, Inge Nygaard Pedersen, Marianne Bode and Ulla Holck)

Improvisation and vitality forms

A special contribution to this area of training is his book from 2004 with the title *Improvisation: Methods and Techniques for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students*. Professor Kenneth Bruscia describes the book as the "first book to extricate improvisation training from specific clinical models of music therapy" (Bruscia 2004, p.15) as well as the first book that includes improvisation on different instruments and that integrates musical and clinical techniques of improvisation for both individual and group sessions. In his book about "Forms of vitality" Daniel Stern (2010) sees Wigram's book as an example of how the role of vitality forms in intersubjectivity shape the basis of therapeutic interventions. Stern states that "the basic methods in improvisation music therapy all require the use of vitality forms to share or interchange experience" (Stern, 2010, p.141) and he refers to Wigram's description of the following improvisation methods: mirroring, matching, empathic improvisation, grounding / holding / containing, dialoguing, and accompanying.

The students who have been taught by Wigram all express enthusiasm and passion about his teaching and describe how his courses have made them able to understand how to integrate improvisational skills in their professional work. Wigram's intention with the book was "to explain in a way that empowers readers into music ... to improvise!" (Wigram 2004, p.20). Wigram did not see improvisation as a skill for a few talented musicians, but saw improvisation, as well as the ability to participate in it in social situations, as inborn and present in everyone (Wigram 2004, p.19).



Picture 7: Tony Wigram debating with Daniel Stern at the Nordic Conference in Music Therapy 2009 in Aalborg, Denmark. The keynote presentation by Daniel Stern and the subsequent debate was video streamed from the University of Geneva, Switzerland.



Picture 8: Tony Wigram, Denise Grocke and Christian Jantzen (Head of the Institute for Communication and Psychology).

A rich life

In the preface of his book *Improvisation* Wigram stated that “I have lived and breathed improvisation since before I can remember, and the experiences I have enjoyed stimulate my mind and satisfy my soul” (Wigram 2004, p.19). Wigram integrated wisdom, humour, music and improvisational skills in his work and in his way of being. He lived in the present moment and was always full of prosperous ideas, completely unexpected perspectives on a certain topic and ready to play and improvise in an inspiring and creative way. He was always ready to find new ways and therefore also couldn’t stop engaging in new projects.

His death is a very big loss to family and friends, and to colleagues, music therapy students and professionals all over the world. We all have lost much more than a fantastic and unique person.

Wigram has inspired, acknowledged and supported students, researchers and colleagues in the most compassionate way, and is remembered with deep respect, love and admiration. The words of Abraham Lincoln resonate so well with his life:

And in the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years.

Lists of Tony Wigram’s publications

A list of 230 publications by Tony Wigram can be found at the Aalborg University website:

<http://vbn.aau.dk/da/persons/tony-wigram%28b8606bb6-763c-415b-bd4b-0b83df7f0db3%29/publications.html>

Tony Wigram published several books with Jessica Kingsley Publisher. See the list here:

www.jkp.com/search/index.php?s=tony+wigram

References

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