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## Conference Report

### **‘Striking a Chord’; Music, Health and Wellbeing: Current Developments in Research and Practice**

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**‘Striking a Chord’; Music, Health and Wellbeing: Current Developments in Research and Practice**

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Sidney de Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health,  
Canterbury Christ Church University, Folkestone UK



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#### **Introduction: An applied ethnomusicological perspective**

This conference report aims to give readers an impression of what transpired at the Society for Education and Music Psychology Research (SEMPRE's) conference entitled *Striking a Chord*. The conference sub title was: *Music, Health Wellbeing: Current Developments in Research and Practice*. The two-day event was hosted by the Sidney de Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, Canterbury Christ Church University, University Centre, Folkestone UK on the 9<sup>th</sup> and

10<sup>th</sup> of September 2011. In this report, other than commenting on a selection of the papers and presentations, I would also like to reflect on the conference as a whole from the perspective of an applied ethnomusicologist with a background in Australian Aboriginal choral facilitation (Swijghuisen Reigersberg, 2009) where the approach I developed resonates with the principles of Community Music Therapy and Culture-Centred Music Therapy (see Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2004; Stige, 2002). The aim is to briefly highlight some of the disciplinary similarities and differences I

observed when comparing current ethnomusicological research projects, methods and the presentation of these at conferences, to what I observed in Folkestone. In true ethnographic form, I was doing some participant observation, if you will.

This report does not aim to be overly critical of any approach used. The fact that there are differences should not be taken as a critique in this case, merely as a report on the 'state of play'. In fact I shall demonstrate that scholars would do well to consider future collaborations because there is much yet to learn about how music is able to benefit health and wellbeing or how, if used inappropriately, it might be detrimental to health and wellbeing. Stephen Clift verbally emphasised the spirit and goal of the conference well in his opening address, when he highlighted the need to "think beyond the scientific questions which interest us—and debate ways in which the findings from our research can be translated into practice ... to really make a difference in people's lives".

### Conference programme

Organisers had designated the first day of the conference (Friday) as the post-graduate day. Titles were many and varied, ranging from the *Effects of Choir Singing on Wellbeing and its Psycho-endocrine Correlates* by Bento to *Sing for Life: An Investigation of the Effects of Choir Participation on Health and Wellbeing* by French, and *A Qualitative Investigation of Age Motivations and Music Use in Gym-Based Exercise Sessions* by Hallet, whilst Fulford and Ginsborg explored the use of auditory and visual feedback in music-making for people with and without hearing impairments. Robertson-Gillam spoke about the use of a portable QEEG<sup>1</sup> system to determine whether choral singing can reduce depression in middle age.

The second day of the conference (Saturday) featured an equally exciting programme. MacDonald gave an entertaining and informative presentation entitled *Conceptualising Music, Health and Wellbeing: Evidence and Multidisciplinary Perspectives* and van der Zwaag, Tijs and Westerlink explored the uses of music to reduce patient anxiety. In a similar, health related setting,

Finlay discussed the role of music as a distractor in post-operative audio-analgesia and cortisolemic change. An inspiring keynote by Hallam asked whether music is able to promote social engagement and wellbeing in older people, the answer being a resounding 'yes', in the appropriate circumstances. The conference programme overall reflected the Sidney de Haan Centre's interest in (communal) singing as a way to promote wellbeing, with a large number of presentations focussing on singing. All presentations allowed me to become more familiar with the differences and similarities between the 'ethnomusicological approach' (if there is a single one) and those of non-ethnomusicologists.

### Some reflections from an applied ethnomusicological perspective

Ethnomusicological conferences have increasingly encouraged alternative modes of presentation and representation of research work being done. This partially stems from the disciplinary belief that talking and writing about music cannot always capture the experience of 'musicking' in scientific or scholarly text. This problem of 'translation' is compounded if the people we work with do not share our language, musical heritage, social background, cultural 'protocols' or ways of conceptualising what constitutes to 'health' and 'wellbeing'<sup>2</sup>. The discussions about how to represent research participants' narratives were absent at the SEMPRE conference and social factors and their impact on musicking not discussed in great detail. The emphasis was more on presenting research methodologies and outcomes.

Ethnomusicologists also believe 'the doing' can lead to an embodied 'knowing'. We value the production of different types of knowledge and different expressions of this knowledge by our research participants and ourselves. In some cases, we argue that knowing can *only* be achieved through doing, and we therefore encourage plenty of musical performance to stimulate these different ways of knowing, as part of our conferences. At the SEMPRE conference, musical participation opportunities were also catered for and movement was an important part of these. Delegates were treated to workshops by the Stephen Fischbacher (Fischy Music) and the venerable Frankie Armstrong and Sarah Harman (Natural Voice Practitioners' Network). The take-up was enormous and participation enthusiastic. However, I did not

<sup>1</sup> Quantitative Electroencephalography is the measurement, using digital technology, of electrical patterns at the surface of the scalp which primarily reflect cortical activity or brainwaves. A multi-electrode recording of brain wave activity is recorded and converted into numbers by a computer. These numbers are then statistically analysed and are converted into a colour map of brain functioning. Digital EEG techniques have grown rapidly in both technology and popularity since the early 1980's for recording, reviewing, and storing EEG data.

<sup>2</sup> Some ethnomusicologists have therefore developed special ways in which they write about their own and other people's musicking (see Barz, 1997; Hagedorn, 2001; Kisliuk, 1997; Stock, 2001).

encounter written papers which described something similar to concepts of ‘embodied knowledge’ as a mechanism for ‘knowing’ the benefits of music. The embodiment I am familiar with was translated into biological markers, statistical information, and graphs. My colleague Caroline Bithell observed something similar and remarked in her report of this conference for the Natural Voice Practitioners’ Network:

“So for me, it was strange to hear so many speakers referring to singing, or setting up a choir, as an ‘intervention’ that was part of a randomised controlled trial (with people allocated to either a choir/singing group set up for the purpose or a non-singing control group), and the results expressed in terms of ‘significant differences’ (e.g.  $p < 0.01$ ). “ (Bithell, 2011: 57)

In our theorising, many ethnomusicologists have tended to follow postmodern, anthropological trends. This can bring about disciplinary debates with those scholars who follow more positivist lines of enquiry<sup>3</sup>. Some ethnomusicologists (myself included) are slightly bamboozled by the scientific jargon in music psychology texts, for example. The terms of scientific reference used are very different to ethnomusicological texts, which often do not use numerical surveys or statistical analyses. Ethnomusicologists can also be slightly suspicious of terms such as ‘data collection’, ‘investigation’ and ‘experimentation’ as this type of language is closely tied to colonial discourses and unequal distribution of power<sup>4</sup>. However, many ethnomusicologists are increasingly beginning to understand that there are good reasons for using positivist, empirical<sup>5</sup> studies and language that are

tied to scientific approaches as used in the health sector. Empiricism and scientific language are required to help prove the effectiveness of musicking. Our human musicking activities have a physiological impact as well as social, and this physiological impact can be measured. This is where ethnomusicologists concur with their more empirically-oriented colleagues. What needs to be decided between postmodernists and positivists is how scholars should account for the influence of ‘context’ in their research designs, methodologies and result analysis. It is an important debate to have, because measurements generate numbers which can in turn be used to demonstrate the efficacy (or lack thereof in some cases) of musicking to promote health and wellbeing. The right numbers can be helpful in persuading those who design policies and hold purse strings that musical activities are worth investing in. Verbal accounts of wellbeing tend to be far less effective at generating income. This is where ethnomusicologists might do well to try and familiarise themselves with empirically/ statistically oriented research methodologies.

There is also another ethical reason why the debate of ‘context’ needs to be had. ‘Context’ ethnomusicologists believe, is what influences the embodiment of music. People respond to context and all emotional responses to music are socially constructed and changeable (see call and response articles Becker 2009; Becker 2001; Titon, 2009). What I missed therefore during the conference presentations, was a regular assessment by presenters of how any form of musical activity is extremely context sensitive and culturally specific, and how this impacts on research outcomes. Ethnomusicologists may not necessarily be disputing the validity of research outcomes by non-ethnomusicologists. What they may be objecting to is the fact that these outcomes sometimes lead to unwarranted generalisations and claims to universality. They find this problematical because the research is undertaken in a Western musical setting, using Western music and Western research participants only, in contexts which do not resemble the circumstances in which a certain musicking usually takes place. Sometimes reflexive research methodologies are not used, where the impact of the researcher, the research environment and the social significance of a music are not

<sup>3</sup> See Hurren (1999) for a concise discussion of some of the theoretical discourses and philosophies surrounding the differences (and common misconceptions about these differences) between positivist and postmodern approaches. Hurren’s discussion clearly demonstrates why it is that postmodernists and positivists are still unable to see eye-to-eye when it comes to the ways in which we should conduct research which explores the relationships between music, health and wellbeing.

<sup>4</sup> One only needs to remember, for example, that phrenology and social Darwinism were used to demonstrate Australian Aboriginal ‘inferiority’ ‘scientifically’, thus relegating Indigenous Australians to an almost sub-human status. This in turn led to many policies justifying colonial rule in Australia, the appropriation of Australian Aboriginal land, oppression, and until this day enormous social disadvantages for Indigenous Australians.

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘empirical’ is problematical. Although it is defined as being: ‘based on, concerned with, or verifiable by

observation or experience rather than theory or pure logic’. (Oxford Concise English Dictionary, 1999) it has acquired positivist connotations and to some ethnomusicologists is a suspect term. As a matter of fact ethnomusicologists also conduct empirical research despite their objections to the term, but for the purposes of this text I shall use the word ‘empirical’ in its ‘positivist’ context only, for comparative purposes.

acknowledged as being important variables in the research outcomes and where researcher 'experience' is not valued or analysed. Unwarranted generalisations, ethnomusicologists fear, lead to practises and research methodologies being exported to non-Western contexts where they are then unquestioningly employed wholesale by practitioners to promote wellbeing without considering the differences that exist between cultures and ways of viewing what constitutes to music and wellbeing. If some cultures do not even have a direct translation for the English word 'music' as we understand it<sup>6</sup>, how can we then claim that engagement with 'music' is promoting wellbeing universally? *All* scholars must ask themselves what is it that is promoting the wellbeing *and according to whom* and *in what context*. This information should form part of the research analyses of results, or at least should be mentioned as a variable. Useful examples of how musical responses can differ culturally in relation to health can be found in Clayton (2009), Harrison et al (2010), Koen (2008) and Barz, (2006).

### **Future prospects and interdisciplinary collaborations**

As I and my colleagues have argued elsewhere (Becker, 2009; Swijghuisen Reigersberg, 2010; Titon, 2009), it may therefore be time for ethnomusicologists and other scholars to engage in mixed-methods research programmes which allow for culturally, socially, biologically and psychologically diverse, but complementary understandings of what music is and how it might help promote wellbeing or indeed how music sometimes reduces it! Thankfully collaborations and debate have been happening sporadically (see Harwood, 1976, 1977; Hurren, 1999; Koen, 2008; Stige, 2002; Stige et al, 2010). At the SEMPRES conference there was a palpable curiosity in evidence too, where scholars such as Helen Loth questioned what therapeutic uses gamelan playing might have in various contexts. Mary Cui presented a cross-cultural comparative study on music, health and wellbeing between Scottish and Chinese people. She questioned whether perhaps Chinese holistic approaches to music, health and wellbeing which seek to prevent illness rather than cure it, might be of use in the Scottish context too. Julie

<sup>6</sup> Some cultures, such as many African and Australian Aboriginal ones, include dancing in their equivalent for the word 'music' as the two tend to happen simultaneously and are conceptually linked. To say therefore, that 'music' in an African or Australian Aboriginal context promotes wellbeing would be only partially correct.

Rickwood, in turn, discussed the experience of 'cultural inter-relatedness' through community singing in a context where Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups in Australia come together. However, in order for all this to be followed through, more frequent and closer collaborations and discussions are necessary at an academic level. Equally, academic research and theorising needs to have more bearing on policies, practice and training programmes. Educators and health practitioners need to receive training in how to think and work reflexively and cross-culturally. They must be taught to remain open to different ways of musicking, promoting health and being in the world. This training should go beyond one-off diversity workshops and become embedded in training programmes, day-to-day practice and thinking, especially in culturally diverse city areas or countries with large minority groups and/ or Indigenous populations such as Australia, New Zealand and North America. To my mind the SEMPRES conference gave plenty of food for thought in this area and promising signs that fruitful collaborations are not far off. As an applied ethnomusicological scholar I am therefore extremely excited about what the future holds.

### **Some relevant web-links:**

Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research (Sempre),  
[www.sempre.org.uk](http://www.sempre.org.uk)

Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health,  
[www.canterbury.ac.uk/Research/Centres/SDHR/Home.aspx](http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/Research/Centres/SDHR/Home.aspx)

International Council for Traditional Music,  
[www.ictmusic.org](http://www.ictmusic.org)

British Forum for Ethnomusicology,  
[www.bfe.org.uk](http://www.bfe.org.uk)

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