

## TRIBUTE

# A tribute to Colwyn Trevarthen by Stensæth and Trondalen

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Communicative, accommodating, and scholarship. These are characteristics that we would use to describe Colwyn Trevarthen. Already in the early 1990s, Trevarthen was a frequent lecturer in Norway and Scandinavian countries on 'Music and Infant Interaction' (Stige, 1997). His pioneering studies, using video recording to reveal communication patterns in mother-child interactions (Trevarthen, 1980), offered new insights into both psychology and music (Johns, 1993).



**Photo 1:** Trevarthen at the first National Conference of Music Therapy in Norway (1997) (photo by Trondalen)

Trevarthen was an invited keynote speaker at the first National Conference of Music Therapy in Norway in 1997. Trevarthen, in his characteristic generosity, dedicated himself to sharing his research and answering questions about rhythm and emotions in communicative interactions in music therapy at the conference. His contribution to the field is clarified in *The Dance of Wellbeing: Defining the Music Therapeutic Effect* (Trevarthen & Malloch, 2000), published in the *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, and we are all deeply grateful for his openness and willingness to share.

The trio of Daniel Stern (1985/2000), the Norwegian Stein Bråten (1998), and Colwyn Trevarthen (1999) have significantly influenced our understanding of rhythm, attention, structure, and timing in interplay, imitation, and cross-modal response. Trevarthen's view on the foundations of *intersubjectivity* (1980) and the vital notion of *communicative musicality* (1999) are particularly noteworthy and

have indeed been embraced in music therapy in Norwegian research and practice.

At a personal level, we recall an engaging luncheon where we delved into the fascinating world of human communication, focusing on children, music, and health. The interactive meal sparked lively discussions on intersubjectivity, altero-centric participation, emotions, musicality, and, not least, the phenomenon of time. These terms were not just abstract concepts; they came alive through the active participation of our attendees, making the event genuinely dynamic and compelling relating to historical and recent research. The interview during the luncheon was completed with several explanations in the footnotes and significant references at the end of the text, generously offered by Bråten and Trevarthen during and after our talk (Stensæth & Trondalen, 2012).

I, Karette, attended several of Trevarthen's lectures on his theories as I was working as a music therapist in a special education setting in Norway, where I have had my most extended clinical experience as a music therapist. I always felt empowered by these encounters with him simply because his personal energy and vitality were so contagious.

However, as my interest in foundational and philosophical perspectives of music therapy improvisation grew over the years, his work and his use of metaphors meant the most to me. Talking about the first mother and infant interaction as an ongoing 'socio-dramatic' interaction (Trevarthen, 1992) and an 'intuitive dance' (Trevarthen & Malloch, 2009) captures a precise and poetic description of the first elegant intimate musical interaction, convincingly documented through his revolutionary video analyses. In this sense, Trevarthen's work strengthened my perceptions of what it fundamentally means to be with others.

I have especially been fascinated by – and felt akin to, I guess – Trevarthen's attitude towards the newborn's responsive capacity (Stensæth, 2017). In my view, Trevarthen, more than many other theorists, put the newborn, as an active and independent Other, in front. This way, he showed that it takes to tango, always. The Other, even as a newborn infant, is needed to create an interesting interaction for both parties. Curiously, the word 'interest' stems from 'inter essential', which means essential for both. They are both there to argue, dispute, doubt, have fun, and create enough uncertainty to make the interaction fascinating enough to want to continue. This aspect could refer to level two in Trevarthen's description of psychological planes in transactions between human beings, which he described as "risk-tempting, playful and humorous testing of the springs of interaction, communicated by teasing, mixed wickedness with affection" (Trevarthen, 1992, p. 128). Next to the mother's safe and empathic containing of the infant, these elements are descriptions of what is needed to avoid the dyadic interaction to freeze or end, which is the last thing they would want.

Through Trevarthen's work (for example, 1989, 1992), it became evident that the newborn's capacity to respond is vital to creating the first life-giving we-community. This, to me, shows not only *what* the newborn child can do. Instead, it also indicates *how* and *why* the human mind is always ready to conceive, explore, and communicate social realities. In my understanding, we are all born with a responsive mind to be reflected by other people's minds. Trevarthen's descriptions of the basic social interplay were not just transferable to music therapy. They were, and still are, transferable to any human interaction.

I, Gro, had the pleasure of meeting Trevarthen on several occasions. One memorable encounter was when I was a new PhD fellow more than two decades ago. “Why don’t you hold on to the term ‘golden moments’ instead of using ‘significant moments’?”, Trevarthen asked from his seat at the back of the room after I had presented a paper of my research in progress. He was right, of course, not least due to the project’s qualitative and phenomenological research methodology. I have since carried with me this encouraging engagement: go with your intuition, find your path in research and practice, and trust in your individual thinking.

From a theoretical point of view, I am especially inspired by Trevarthen’s belief in and research into *intersubjectivity*, which involves a feeling of ‘I know that you know that I know, I feel that you feel that I feel’. Trevarthen and Stern opened up the field of the different formats of intersubjectivity to my understanding of communication in music therapy and life in general. Through engaging research, they showed that significant changes in therapy are due to a series of microscopic changes. These microprocesses and non-verbal modalities are constantly at play in music therapy (Trondalen, 2016).

In musical interactions, whether through expressive improvisation or receptive approaches, the local context, attunement, meaning, and the act of sharing itself have become fundamental aspects of my research and music therapy practices. However, these shared moments of experience are not identical. They are genuine to each individual and may be experienced as implicit bodily sensations and/or expressed in words.

Trevarthen (1980, 1999) advocated, from the beginning of his research on intersubjectivity, for a *primary* intersubjectivity, a ‘precisely timed turn-taking’ already present from the start of an infant’s life where the objective of togetherness is simply to *be together*. He has indeed influenced my understanding of intersubjectivity as a means of comprehending lived experiences and personal awareness through relationships facilitated by music. Intersubjectivity is thus a theoretical term with real-life implications (Trondalen, 2019).

Summing up, we are deeply grateful for the life and work of Colwyn Trevarthen. In trying to find words to explain what music therapy is, how and why it works and is effective, we have found his words enormously valuable. In Norwegian music therapy, where there is a particular interest in foundational perspectives, Trevarthen’s work on basic preverbal human action and interaction has had and still has a great impact. Many of us have been inspired by the ways he reveals that improvisation is at the center of everything and that the interactions have musical features as if they were contributions to a musical improvisation, including children with unusual life starting points (see, for example, Hauge & Tønsberg, 1996). Tonhild Strand Hauge and Gro Hallan Tønsberg, who collaborated closely with Trevarthen on their work with congenital deaf/blind children and their seeing-hearing partners, learnt that Trevarthen was genuinely interested in music therapy. He clearly expressed the importance of developing educational and therapeutic approaches, such as music therapy, that use sound, music, movement, and gestures to regulate and release emotions as well as enhance intersubjective contact.

As music therapists, we like to think of musicality as an inborn capacity. Then, as a closing note, we want to ask: Can musicality, as an inborn (pre-active) capacity, be ethical? Can the art and practice of communicative musicality be ethical? It might not seem so at first. However, if we think about it differently, if our inborn musicality makes us feel alive and connects us to others, could *not*

being met on our inborn musicality create loneliness and social isolation? (Trondalen, 2023). This indirectly relates to ethics. We need communicative musicality to realize our participation in the world (Stensæth, 2018). The infant needs musical forms to be able to actively *take part*. This gives them the first experience of connecting and engaging in co-being and reducing loneliness. We all need it to highlight our shared human vulnerability. Reflecting on these aspects can help us understand ethics better. They might help us understand how being present and close, face to face, and involved in musical relational turn-taking, calls upon what Karette describes as a 'closeness ethics' in us and an aesthetical awareness in the I–You relation (Stensæth, 2017). Or, as Gro suggests, when tied together, music and ethics link profoundly, offering real-life perspectives that would otherwise be inaccessible to us (Trondalen, 2023). This, in turn, becomes an ethical musicality.

Trevarthen shows us all the complexity that is present when we welcome the infant's arrival into our world. It is not only the mystery of being and co-being, but also ethics, aesthetics, actions and interactions, doing, sharing, time, synchronicity, creativity, humour, and risk tempting. All of this is both fascinating and magnetic because we have sensed it ourselves.

We are the infant. I am the infant. You are too.



**Photo 2:** A sunny afternoon. From left: Trondalen, Bråten, Trevarthen and Stensæth (2012)  
(photo taken by Bonde)

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