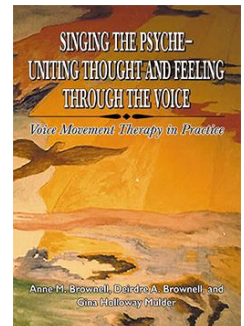


BOOK REVIEW

Singing the psyche: Uniting thought and feeling through the voice (Brownell et al., eds.)

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Title: Singing the psyche: Uniting thought and feeling through the voice **Editors:** Anne Brownell, Deirdre Brownell & Gina Holloway Mulder
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REVIEWER BIOGRAPHY

Tina Warnock founded Belltree Music Therapy CIC in Brighton in 2009, having worked on NHS music therapy teams in London since 2001. In 2018, she began working closely with Diane Austin, initiating and undertaking the first UK-based distance training programme in Austin Vocal Psychotherapy (AVPT). She continues to be involved in the growth of AVPT in the UK and Europe as a teacher in training, alongside her postgraduate research and clinical and supervision practice. Her vocal psychotherapy clients include people with cancer, respiratory disease, trauma, mental health issues and learning disabilities. Her publications have focused on the music therapist's voice, sense of self and therapeutic approach. [tinaw@belltree.org.uk]

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My interest in the interrelationship between the voice and the self was ignited in the late-nineties, and in part propelled by the prequel to this book, *'Therapeutic Voicework'* by Paul Newham (1997). Hence, when I realised this new publication was written by graduates from Newham's training programs, I was immediately intrigued. The title *'Voice and the Psyche: Uniting Thought and Feeling Through the Voice'* prepares us effectively for what is to come.

The focus of this book is Voice Movement Therapy (VMT), its foundations, history and form, and the ways that practitioners have gone on to use it in their rich and varied work settings. It became apparent early in the reading that this international group of practitioners align themselves firmly with the Expressive Arts and Arts in Health communities, as opposed to the Creative Arts Therapies or Allied Health Professions as is the case for music therapy in the UK. VMT has clearly gathered momentum in recent years, with several contributors having completed PhDs and other research projects on their VMT work. For example, Irene Kessler's PhD dissertation 'Sounding Our Way to Wholeness' and Deirdre Brownell's 'Re-embodying the Voice' (see references: Kessler 1997 & Brownell, 2020), and in chapter two Sophie Martin describes her pilot project researching the efficacy of VMT with young women who self-harm (Martin, 2013). A core group of practitioners have also formed an international members association for VMTs, further evidencing their passion, vocational calling and sense of ambition for the method.

In the context of the music therapy profession, the ethos and foundations of VMT align most closely with Austin Vocal Psychotherapy (AVPT), developed by Diane Austin since the 1990's (Austin, 2008). There are some striking crossovers between these two approaches which I will be comparing and contrasting later in this review.

Chapter 1, 'The Voice Unchained' sets the scene by detailing the origins and history of VMT and outlining the core principles. As the personal histories of key influential figures Alfred Wolfsohn, Roy Hart and founder Paul Newham's are described, it becomes clear that each experienced childhood trauma and issues of identity which led to a search for a sense of wholeness through vocal exploration. Newham combined his vocal discoveries with his knowledge of psychoanalytic theory, dance movement and physical theatre to create VMT, which aims to help people discover how facilitating a more embodied voice can support a "greater expression and expansion of one's sense of self" (p.24).

Clear descriptions by Brownell give the reader a good understanding of how muscular patterns concerned with the voice are intricately connected with our emotions and how these can be manipulated to "unearth and work with unconscious material" (p.17), integrating mind and body. The Core Principles of VMT (pp.17-28) describes in detail the ten vocal components and five non-vocal principles upon which all the work is based; together they provide the tools for VMTs which aim to facilitate the full spectrum of human expression, and many examples are given throughout the book to demonstrate how these can be applied.

The second chapter 'Psychology and Soul Work' is comprised of contributions from eight different practitioners and introduced by Anne Brownell. It is the most substantial section of the book and contains descriptions of a vast array of different projects. With a strong focus on trauma, VMTs describe their projects with people who have been displaced, sexually abused or struggling with self-harm, addiction and psychiatric disorders. Their approaches are highly varied, including choirs run "using the lens of VMT" (p.41), singing pre-composed songs, and individual body-based work using breath, movement and vocal interventions. The depth of the work is striking, and with safety in mind, I wondered how the practitioners manage the strong feelings arising in the sessions. It was reassuring to learn that they have supervision structures in place in their various roles and many of the practitioners have additional credentials as psychological therapists (detailed information can be found in the Contributors section). These credentials, however, do not seem to be a prerequisite to undertake the training.

In Chapter 3, 'Channels of the Voice – Affect and the Brain', author Deidre Brownell shares her personal background and describes the two main channels of communication worked with in VMT "the cognitive (words used to convey meaning) and the affective (the tones of voice used to reflect the bodily sensations which underlie them and convey how we are really feeling)" (p.112). In-depth case studies with clients with selective mutism, stroke, Parkinson's disease are moving and intuitive, and at times it felt like I was reading a book about music therapy. Brownell describes how she is "meeting a person where he is and giving him some control over what he does" (p.123), matching her client's keyboard playing with her voice and introducing other instruments such as the harmonica.

Common therapeutic terms are used throughout the book, but particularly in this third chapter – mirroring, reciprocal engagement, attunement, containment, transitional objects, transference and countertransference, secure attachment, emotional regulation – all give the impression of a held, therapeutic relationship. It was surprising to discover how many crossovers VMT has with music therapy and vocal psychotherapy practice without any mention of relevant literature. In general, academic references are few and far between, even where links to theories and practices from other disciplines are obvious. For example, Bruscia, Austin, Wigram, Pavlicevic, Winnicott – all come to mind whilst reading. I wondered how much of this knowledge is accessed by VMT practitioners during and after training.

Chapters four and five are both introduced by Gina Holloway Mulder who trained with Paul Newham in the late 1990s and is based in Durban, South Africa where she runs her own VMT training programme. She addresses the link between unexpressed emotion and illness, disease and addiction and describes projects which encourage participants to “enter into a process to contact and develop a voice” so they become “more alive, better and more able to look after themselves” (p.154). The case examples that follow engage with deep unconscious material through the use of the VMT tools, incorporating Jungian concepts such as the Shadow, archetypes, active imagination and parts of the self or ‘sub-personalities’.

Whilst reading this book I noted similarities and differences between VMT and AVPT. There are some obvious similarities, particularly in the central use of the Jungian concepts mentioned above and the individuation process. Both methods utilise the thinking from developmental psychology; in VMT this is mainly through guided physical movement and vocal exercises, whereas in AVPT, developmental processes such as merging, and the separation of self and other, are considered in the context of two voices within vocal improvisation. Key differences are in how they approach the process; VMT draws specifically on the vocal components and non-vocal principles outlined in the first chapter and engages in detail with the anatomy of the voice, within a framework of guided activities to address the therapeutic aims. AVPT more closely resembles a sung psychotherapy session where the content and pace of the session is guided by the client, with the vocal psychotherapist using vocal and verbal interventions in a responsive manner. While the vocal therapist may encourage certain breathing exercises to connect with the body, the sessions mainly involve the key interventions vocal holding and free associative singing in combination with two holding chords on the piano, intermixed with talking. Psychodrama methods are also commonly used in AVPT to, for example, sing about, to, or as a significant person in one’s life. One important difference is that almost all AVPTs have a master’s in music therapy prior to training, whereas VMTs have a wide variety of academic and vocal backgrounds; this creates a significant difference in how musical improvisation is used to support the process.

The fourth and fifth chapters include several accounts of how periods of vocal development came alongside times of personal growth and change. For example, Phillips describes how the use of myth in story and song can “open paths to show us who we really are” (p.191) and Harrold writes: “Our voices are the doorway between our concept of ourselves (cognitive) and the felt sense of our own presence (affective)” (p.219). Since I have experienced this connection between my own voice and sense of self (Warnock 2011, 2019), I found this very affirming.

Holloway-Mulder describes the impact of the VMT training on her experience as both a therapist and a performer, and how it enables practitioners to better meet their clients’ needs. This theme is explored further in chapter five when Mali Sastir describes her own personal transformation that took place during her VMT training:

I was encouraged not just to face but trust the dark in myself – not to fear it but to discover its treasures [...] it is through the experience of sharing the work – of performing, being witnessed and received – that the personal has a chance to expand into something larger than the individual self. (pp.205-206)

Having undertaken some shadow work in AVPT training, and seen others experience significant transformations in their personal lives over the training period, I resonated strongly with this. I also understand how these personal shifts translate into our therapy practice; by ‘going there’ ourselves, we become better able to accompany our clients’ process. The fact that both VMT and AVPT offer a two-year, process-based learning experience involving deep engagement with the voice and the

psyche makes them uniquely connected, and I believe there is potential for each to learn from the other.

The final chapter 'Towards a living harmony' written by Gina Holloway, focuses on the importance of community and how VMT projects have brought positive change within communities and workplaces in South Africa following the impact of apartheid, the pandemic and world conflict. It describes how working with body-based methods in groups supports healthy dynamics on a micro and macro level.

This book presents VMT as an embodied practice which has many strengths and great potential in a world where there is a growing understanding of how the body, mind and spirit are connected (Van der Kolk, 2016). The lack of references to current psychological theory such as attachment or object relations theories, or evidence of learning from music therapy or vocal psychotherapy disciplines was surprising. I feel that if VMTs really are unaware of these significant bodies of knowledge, they are limiting opportunities to integrate their practice with other health professionals, for the benefit of their clients. The application of a VMT's skills seems dependent on the individual practitioner's background and other credentials which vary widely, so my impression is that the quality and type of support offered by practitioners is equally varied. I very much enjoyed reading this book, particularly the rich case studies which brought the method to life, and I believe it could be a great resource for any therapist with a desire to deepen their knowledge of the interconnection between the voice and the psyche. Music therapy training courses vary greatly within and between countries in how much time they give to this subject, so any additional inspiration such as this is very welcome!

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