

CONFERENCE REPORT

The 3rd Music Therapy Charity Conference: 'The value of research for music therapy'

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CONFERENCE DETAILS

The 3rd Music Therapy Charity Conference

'The value of research for music therapy'

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"The value of research for music therapy" was the third Music Therapy Charity (MTC) Conference, held as a hybrid event co-organised by MTC and the Cambridge Institute for Music Therapy Research (CIMTR) at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, United Kingdom. The conference gathered around 100 music therapists, researchers, students, and representatives from charities and non-governmental organisations, who shared insights about evidence-based and best practices in music-based interventions. It fostered new ideas and collaborations among researchers, practitioners, and organisations.



Photograph 1: Keynote speech by Mark Ettenberger



Photograph 2: Keynote speech by Orla McDermott and Bryony Waters-Harvey

The two-day conference featured two keynote speeches, seven paper presentations, and four workshops. The first keynote speech was delivered by Mark Ettenberger, Director of SONO – Centro de Musicoterapia, Colombia. He shared his experiences implementing music therapy in 12 hospitals across Columbia with neonatal, child and adult patients, exploring the intersections, opportunities, and challenges of service development, clinical practice, and research. He emphasised the importance of culture and surrounding environment in hospitals, which play an importance role in the service development of music therapy in clinical contexts. The second keynote speech, presented towards the end of the conference by Orla McDermott and Bryony Waters-Harvey from the University of Nottingham and the University of Sheffield, focused on their experiences in developing and evaluating a manualised music therapy skill-sharing training programme in care homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. They discussed the importance and challenges of skill-sharing in clinical settings, emphasising the need to articulate and enhance staff self-awareness of "attuned" interactions with their residents with dementia. Both keynotes highlighted the importance of critically engaging with evidence-based practice and struck a balance between standardised and personalised approaches, which are important for improving service quality and therapeutic outcomes. These efforts have the potential to better address the needs of the targeted populations, hence enhancing the long-term impact of research.

Seven paper presentation were delivered by recipients of MTC grants, who reported on the progress and outcomes of their funded projects. These presentations emphasised co-production, person-centred approaches, and the value of diverse perspectives in music therapy research. Topics included the role of music therapy in fostering emotional connection, supporting mental health, and addressing the unique needs of underrepresented populations, including children in palliative care, displaced families, and individuals with rare neurological disorders. The presentations collectively highlighted the transformative potential of music therapy as a tool for healing, communication, and social connection. Several studies highlighted the importance of involving service users, caregivers, and practitioners in the research process to ensure meaningful outcomes. Methodological innovations, such as arts-based and mixed-methods approaches, were used to amplify voices often overlooked, such as children and displaced caregivers, and to address gaps in knowledge about music therapy's impact in varied settings. These approaches enable a more inclusive and holistic understanding of the needs and outcomes of diverse populations in context, particularly those who have been excluded from previous studies. Drawing insights and practices from other disciplines such as arts, philosophy, and cultural heritage, these interdisciplinary approaches help improve the accuracy of music-based interventions and create a more comprehensive picture of their therapeutic benefits.

In addition to the keynotes and presentations, four workshops were led by CMITR staff members, offering practical insights and takeaways for attendees. I attended the workshop by Rebecca Atkinson and Claire Molyneux, who shared their experiences evaluating clinical services, including the skills required to plan, gather, analyse, and report data. The music technology workshop led by Jörg Fachner showcased emerging, existing, and adaptive technologies capable of capturing non-linguistic and physiological data that are not commonly used in conventional approaches. These included tools for measuring audio and musical artefacts, body and eye movements, visual reception, and brain activities. While recent years have seen better acceptance and adoption of technology among music therapists, such technologies have the potential to better support the development of more personalised approaches and upscaling of standardised practices in music-based interventions in an interdisciplinary manner (Agres, Foubert et al., 2021, Agres, Schaefer et al., 2021), a goal that corresponds to the directions mentioned in the keynotes.

A recurring theme throughout the conference was the interconnectedness of service development, clinical practice, and research, as highlighted by Mark Ettenberger in his keynote. This interrelation underscores the importance of collaboration and knowledge exchange to enhance the effectiveness and further the development of music therapy interventions. The conference also emphasised the need for



Photograph 3: Jörg Fachner, Mark Ettenberger, and Clemens Maidhof demonstrating the use of a dry-EEG Headset to measure electrical activity in the brain when playing music

culturally informed and evidence-based practices, innovative methodologies, inclusive approaches, and practice-based research to address the diverse needs of service users effectively.

As an associate professor in the same faculty with some board membership experiences in local and international music organisations, I started to think about how small and local music therapy funding organisations, which rely heavily on donations and charitable activities, can remain sustainable. This reliance can be challenging, particularly during economic downturns, which often lead to reduced donor contributions and increasing competition of limited funds. At the same time, there are concerns over accessibility and diversity in funding opportunities in music therapy research and practice, as pointed out by Tang (2024) in his previous conference report. While challenges and uncertainties remain prevalent, I suggest that MTC could make efforts to enhance the inclusivity of its offerings, such as diversifying its officers and governors, and actively engaging with individuals and organisations that are underrepresented in the current regime of music therapy research. This could include initiatives such as establishing targeted funding schemes and bursaries for underrepresented participants, which help broaden access and promote social justice.

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