

CONFERENCE REPORT

The 11th Nordic Music Therapy Conference 'Let's face the music'

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CONFERENCE DETAILS

The 11th Nordic Music Therapy Conference

'Let's face the music'

26–29 June 2024, Aalborg, Denmark

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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Napak Pakdeesatitwara (Na) is a registered music therapist working in Bangkok, Thailand. His areas of interest include older adults, rehabilitation, mental health, sustainable approach in music therapy, and health tech innovation. His PhD research at the University of Melbourne focuses on empowering sustainable therapeutic engagement with music in people with chronic health conditions. Napak also works as a vice president of the Thai Association of Music Therapy (TAMT). His responsibilities include research, academic, international relations, standards, and ethics. [npakdeesatit@student.unimelb.edu.au]

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The 11th Nordic Music Therapy Conference (NMTC) was held in a hybrid format. The presenters came from across the world to present in person in Aalborg, Denmark, while the audience could join in person or online for selected elements of the programme. The hybrid format allowed people from anywhere in the world to access the rich and diverse perspectives presented at the conference. We, two Asian graduate researchers currently studying at the University of Melbourne, were honoured to participate and present at the NMTC for the first time. Coming from different lands (Hong Kong and Thailand), we were excited to share what we learned from our research and connect with fellow international colleagues.

Attending a conference is a journey that connects us with people and places both while travelling and at the destination. Our journey started from Hong Kong to Bangkok. Then, we flew to Copenhagen and made a transit to Aalborg. Our first impression of Aalborg was "healthiness." The city was clean, the air was fresh, healthy food was easily accessible, and the city was planned in a way that enabled healthy living. Moreover, the city offered us a sense of healthiness and tranquillity (Photo 1). Thus, we found Aalborg a perfect fit to hold this conference and to live healthily throughout the conference period.



Photo 1: Healthiness and tranquillity in Aalborg (photo by Amy Howden)

Walking across a long promenade of Limfjorden (Photo 2), we arrived at Musikkens Hus (The House of Music), the conference venue. The Viennese architectural studio Coop Himmelb(l)au designed the building. We were impressed by the contrast between the flowy curves in the building and its cubic outer shapes (Photo 3). This place seemed ideal for interactions and knowledge exchange among 291 participants from 28 countries. Soon enough, we were drawn to the lively discussions in the foyer. Some participants expressed excitement about meeting and hearing from each other after the COVID-19 pandemic.



Photo 2: A scene of Limfjorden from the 3rd floor of Musikkens Hus (The House of Music)



Photo 3: PhD graduate researchers from the University of Melbourne in front of Musikkens Hus
(From left to right: Sunny, Amy, Lesley, and Na)

The evening opening ceremony established a sense of invitation, respect, connectedness, and humour, which was maintained during the three-day conference. The theme "Let's Face the Music" provided a powerful platform for music therapists, researchers, and educators to explore the profound role of music as a therapeutic mediator. It all started with the catchy theme song of the conference, "Face the Music Tonight." True to the conference theme, participants were invited to face and engage with the multifaceted nature of music's influence across diverse contexts and populations. For instance, Hanne Mette Ochsner Ridder questioned whether music is an escape from reality or a resource to help us face reality.

The conference arrangement details were participant- and sustainability-oriented. Lunch was offered and consisted of multiple healthy options for people with different diets. Another notable example is the plantable seed name tags that allowed us to plant small flowers and vegetables after the conference. Upon reflection, we realised that the idea of planting and sharing seeds could be a thematic thread to link our experiences and perspectives captured in this conference report.

Throughout the three-day event, presenters and interactive workshops were thematically grouped into therapeutic contexts (e.g. disability, neurorehabilitation, families, mental health), music therapy practice (e.g. assessment, approaches), professional topics (e.g. supervision, training, research) and other broader topics (e.g. music, health and culture, gender diversity). This grouping allowed participants to hear different perspectives within the same topic area. Although we sometimes faced difficulties with the room and equipment, the committed crew members and the warm-hearted audience supported each other. We felt at ease in this warm atmosphere, although being a first-time presenter could be nerve-racking.

In many conferences, poster presentations are often overlooked by attendees, although they hold academic merit and involve efforts no less than oral presentations (Glass, 2020). Some posters are completed research studies and deserve equal respect to other presentation formats. Due to the venue's schedule, the posters' location was changed multiple times (e.g., hallway, basement, foyer). We acknowledged and respected the committee's efforts to overcome logistical challenges. We hope that, in the future, the posters would be held in the foyer for the duration of the conference, allowing extended time to absorb the information and for in-depth discussion between the authors and other attendees. Nonetheless, this conference succeeded in shining light on the poster presentation through a one-minute pitching session in the foyer of Musikkens Hus. The foyer was full of attendees who celebrated each pitch with applause and raised their champagne glasses.

During one of the lunchtime sessions, the committee led workshops that encouraged attendees to actively "face the music" through singing, drumming, instrumental playing, and dancing at different spots in the venue. Deliberately, the committee introduced us to the same folk song in each workshop. We were touched by the celebratory moment where all participants converged all the music-making modalities into a big farewell during the closing ceremony. We are all natural music makers; this integration of diverse musical expressions symbolised the unique, holistic, transformative potential of "facing the music" together.

We found that the idea of "harmony" was prominent and consistently conveyed through academic discussion, presentations, and comedic storytelling (i.e., "the cow story"). Our key takeaway is to set aside any potential arrogance and create dialogues on different music therapy perspectives with others and within our minds. Through conversations with others, we see similarities, differences and resonances, allowing us to grow collectively as a profession. These dialogues and open-mindedness for others' ideas and visions are our first step towards harmony and growth of the profession. Moreover, no single perspective works best for everyone at any time. Through internal dialogues, we might piece together, in our minds, a more holistic reality of the client and the music. In a roundtable (Hakvoort & Gattino, 2024), Davide Woods further reflected that we can also use different perspectives sequentially depending on what fits our client at each moment. Apart from upholding standards and ethics to deliver music therapy to our clients safely, music therapists should strive to understand different theoretical perspectives and understandings that may complement our work. More importantly, some more significant challenges and opportunities require our collective efforts to pursue.

Being a music therapy practitioner, educator, and researcher can be lonely because not many of us are in each workplace, especially in Asia. Coming to this conference, we experienced strong threads of connection that hold music therapists together in person, over great distances, and through time. These threads helped us feel that we are not alone and should be confident in what we do. After the conference, although we were exhausted from the long week, we felt recharged and motivated to finish up our ongoing research. We received the seeds of passion and knowledge from the conference attendees and will plant them in our work. We believe these seeds will flourish in our diverse soils and bear unique fruits for others in the future.

Finally, to reflect on our collective experiences in the conference, we want to respond using lyrics from the Cantonese song *Seed*, sung by Hong Kong singer Jacky Cheung:

May the warmth in our hearts make the seeds of love blossom. Let sincerity and blessings spread throughout this world.

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