

BOOK REVIEW

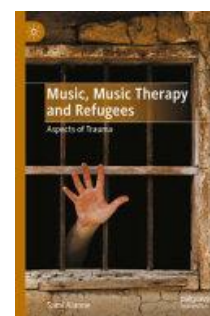
Music, music therapy and refugees: Aspects of trauma (Alanne)

Marianne K Brown¹

¹ City, St George's, University of London, UK

Book information

Title: Music, music therapy and refugees: Aspects of trauma
Author: Sami Alanne
Publication year: 2025
Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan
Pages: 281
ISBN: 9783031947650



Received 20 March 2026; Accepted 1 April 2026; Published 2 June 2026

Editor: Giorgos Tsiris; **Language consultant:** Vuyo Tshwele; **Copyeditor:** Anna G. Castells

This publication arrives in 2025 at a time where situating music psychotherapy within the lived realities of refugee communities seems utterly relevant due to the current global political climate. To demonstrate the history of refugees and some background about their circumstances in recent times, Alanne draws on a long history of displacement, from the conflicts that shaped the post-WWII international human rights framework to contemporary conflict zones worldwide.

The literature on music therapy and trauma has grown considerably in recent years, drawing on psychodynamic traditions and community music therapy frameworks, with key contributions from researchers, alongside the broader trauma-informed areas of care and understanding the impact of trauma on the body and mind. What this book adds to that body of knowledge is a sustained, clinically detailed account of psychodynamic music psychotherapy practice specifically with refugee clients. Alanne's work culminates in an original framework he terms "Ethical Musicality," developed in response to Trondalen's (2023) related writing. Rather than simply applying existing models, Alanne proposes a principled basis for practice that is both philosophically grounded and responsive to the vulnerabilities and strengths of displaced communities. What makes this work stand out is the author's ethical commitment to those refugees living in difficult circumstances. Alanne writes with the sensitivity of a clinician who genuinely listens and responds accordingly, a quality evident in every chapter.

Structure

The book moves with clarity through each chapter, beginning with the conceptual foundations (Chapters 1–2), progressing through clinical applications (Chapters 3–4) and broader social implications (Chapters 5–6), before arriving at a concluding normative framework. Chapter 1 establishes the historical and political context of refugeehood, giving readers the necessary grounding in the realities of displacement. Chapters 3 and 4 offer close readings of therapeutic encounters, illustrating how musical interaction can support emotional regulation and relational repair in ways that verbal approaches alone cannot always achieve. Chapters 5 and 6 broaden the lens to examine the social dimensions of working with hard-to-reach communities, making a case for music psychotherapy as a form of advocacy as well as treatment. This progression enables the reader to build understanding gradually before engaging with the more complex clinical material.

On music and trauma

Here I write about Chapter 2 as it holds significant resonance with my own research on music and trauma, and with my work in women's refuges. My thesis (Brown, in preparation) investigates the impacts, processes, and mechanisms of change in participatory music projects delivered at women's refuges in the UK for mothers and children. The research combines personal storytelling, practical music workshops, and cello performances to understand how music supports healing and rebuilding lives after trauma.

In Chapter 2, Alanne explores how music psychotherapy can act as a vehicle for acting out behaviour patterns, illustrating this with the case of a child with trauma and a refugee background for whom "musical activity of playing and composing in therapy was a means to separate oneself, through musical acting-out, from talking and feeling of trauma experiences in therapy" (p. 19). Alanne observes that clients may seek dangerous pursuits and life choices following trauma throughout a lifetime, but that by expressing these impulses through musical activities, the quality of life may be improved in future years.

The impacts of trauma on a person's life are carefully explained, with the author describing scenarios broad enough to resonate with readers across many circumstances. By nature, trauma can encompass a wide range of life experiences, and Alanne leads the reader to identify with this notion before drawing conclusions specific to his work with the refugee community, and to the greater risk of physical and mental health challenges when trauma goes unidentified and untreated.

At the intellectual heart of the book, Alanne's reframing of trauma offers a genuinely different lens through which to understand refugee experience, keeping the person firmly at the centre: "[...] at the bottom of psychodynamic understanding, including traumatisation, are the personal experiences, emotions, memories, the life history, and the meanings relating to oneself, the others, and their interpersonal relationships" (p. 49). His account of how musical interactions can meet clients at the point of feeling in a safe place, without threat or demand, reflects a Freirean sensibility that runs throughout the work: co-creative, trauma-aware, and oriented toward empowerment rather than deficit. By this I mean a degree of equality in the music psychotherapy, with the therapist co-creating music by meeting the client at a place of safety or comfort without instruction.

Critical reflections

This is a carefully argued and richly-detailed book, and it is difficult to find significant weaknesses. If there is one area where readers may find themselves wanting more, it is around the question of transferability. The clinical cases are compelling but necessarily specific, and it would be interesting to see further discussion of how the "Ethical Musicality" framework might be adapted by practitioners working in very different contexts, community settings rather than clinical ones, for instance, or in environments where access to trained music psychotherapists is limited. These feel less like gaps in the work and more like open questions that the book itself invites the reader to keep exploring.

Relevance to practice

Having spent over a decade delivering music workshops in women's refuges, much of that work has developed through experience, instinct, and the music itself. Reading Alanne has given me a language for dimensions of that work I had not previously articulated clearly. In particular, his discussion of musical acting-out speaks directly to moments I have witnessed in workshop settings, moments I now recognise as clinically significant in ways I had not fully considered before. In my ongoing practice conducting music workshops in hostels, this book will provide me with new perspectives and methods to draw on in trauma-informed work. It does not simply inform my practice, it reframes it.


Conclusion

The conclusion, framed around the concept of "Ethical Musicality," is where Alanne's original contribution develops most fully. The normative framework offered emerges organically from everything that precedes it, proposing a principled basis for music psychotherapy practice with vulnerable and hard-to-reach cohorts that is both philosophically grounded and practically applicable. This book is essential reading especially for music therapists, trauma researchers, and social workers engaged with displaced communities. It will also speak powerfully to musicologists with an interest in applied and community contexts and is adaptable to a broad scope of professionals working in both practice and academic settings. Alanne succeeds fully on his own terms, with sensitivity and care, producing a work of scholarly integrity, clinical utility, and genuine human warmth.

Author information

Marianne K Brown has dedicated over a decade to developing and delivering participatory music projects in women's refuges, work that forms the foundation of her ongoing PhD research at City St George's, University of London. Combining professional performance with scholarly inquiry, she investigates how music facilitates transformation, healing, and empowerment for survivors of domestic violence. A professional cellist trained at the Royal Academy of Music, Royal Northern College of Music, and Liszt Academy Budapest, Marianne has performed with leading orchestras including the Hallé, Welsh National Opera, and English National Ballet alongside solo and ensemble recitals. She holds an MA in Cultural Management (City) and an MSc in Psychosocial Studies (Birkbeck), teaches cello, and is a trained psychodynamic counsellor, bringing interdisciplinary expertise to her understanding of music's role in wellbeing and social change. She is currently Musician in Residence at a London Cancer hospital and has presented her research at conferences internationally

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6282-4378>

 Marianne.Brown@citystgeorges.ac.uk

Author contributions

Marianne K Brown: writing the original draft and reviewing following review feedback.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) usage

Claude AI was used for proof reading purposes.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to report.

References

- Brown, M. K. (in preparation). *Participatory musicking and arts activities for women and children living in refuge: Impact, process, outcomes, and mechanisms of change*. [Unpublished doctoral manuscript, City St George's University of London, UK].
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Trondalen, G. (2023). *Ethical Musicality*. Routledge.