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Relations of musical engagement: Social connection and wellbeing

Tia DeNora[1]

[1] University of Exeter, UK

Abstract

According to the existing research literature, an important feature in relation to music and wellbeing is music's role in fostering social connection. Just how music supports the growth of social ties, and just how such ties may provide mechanisms for wellbeing, are questions deserving of further attention. This article highlights and explores the material, social and technical dynamics of musical engagement, calling these (with a nod to Marx), 'relations of musical engagement'. Two case studies of two different relations of musical engagement are explored (community music therapy in a residential care home; music listening via a Music Streaming Platform – Spotify). The article suggests that it is not exposure to music in itself that enhances and supports social ties but rather that specific relations of musical engagement afford, to varying degrees and in different ways, resonant and shared experiences. These experiences consist of opportunities for creativity, expression, communication, interaction, and, thereby, connection with others. The relations of musical engagement associated with music streaming platforms, this article suggests, afford fewer musical resources for enhancing social capital, bonding and bridging between people. Such engagement does not easily afford real-time opportunities for shared experience. On the contrary, it may hold individuals within privatised niches that are isolating; impeding the development of social connection. By contrast, the relations of musical engagement associated with live, collective, active musical engagement afford, potentially collaborative and co-creative 'furnishing' of social environments. That furnishing in turn generates bonding and bridging capital, and supports collective, shared musical/social experience and the potential for strengthening community ties.

Keywords

musical relations of production,
music streaming,
connection,
affordances,
musical furnishing,
control

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Preface, c.2010

To begin, a story (from Ansdell & DeNora 2016). There was once a participant in a community music therapy for mental health café (the SMART café where Gary Ansdell and I conducted research between 2006-2012 (Ansdell & DeNora, 2016). The participant's name was Jeremy.

Jeremy was strongly attached to the music loved by his long-dead mother. The other members of SMART were not familiar with Jeremy's music, though they showed respect whenever Jeremy came to the front of the room to share his songs, a process that he spoke of as 'airing' those songs. Jeremy, in turn, did not relate to any other music shared at SMART and did not participate in the group singing of any other songs. His musical compass was narrow.

One day, Jeremy's psychiatrist suggested to Jeremy that his music might actually be holding him in unwellness. Jeremy became angry with that doctor. But then, the music therapist (Sarah Wilson) suggested that Jeremy join SMART's newly formed 'Music Theory' class (a kind of music appreciation/ talk about music group) where, through listening and discussion, Jeremy was exposed to and learned about new forms of music. *That activity led to the following:*

- Jeremy joined a choir. *Which led to:*
- He was exposed to, and was required to sing, music that was new to him. *Which led to*:
- He began to purchase and exchange CDs with other members of the SMART community. *And these activities led to*:
- Jeremy, whose mental health continued to fluctuate (music was by no means a miracle cure for his particular problems in living) began to connect with others who were different from himself. *Which led to*:
- Jeremy began to go out into the city, to shops, he purchased and shared CDs, and generally found relating to others easier.

Music seems to work, but how?

The research literature shows that musical engagement can energise, allay anxiety, help people relax, and charge or change the quality and intensity of emotional experience in real-time. There is now a full handbook of overviews on these themes (MacDonald et al., 2012). Knowing how to use music to promote wellbeing is, moreover, part of most people's common sense and part of their self-care (DeNora, 2000). Musical engagement can promote affiliation and empathy with people whom we may think of as 'different' from ourselves (Vuoskoski et al., 2017). And musical engagement can, as we saw with Jeremy, promote social connection; itself understood as a constituent of wellbeing. Musical development offers a means for the development of a wider and more robust social network of contacts (Procter, 2011). It can draw individuals out of isolation and into the orbit of others, in ways that may eclipse otherwise one of the recognised causes of ill health: loneliness and private suffering.

Music, in this sense, can be understood as a form of 'proto-social capital' (Procter, 2011). It supports processes of interaction with strangers or acquaintances, thus expanding an individual's social capital or ties and bonds with others (Putnam, 2001). As Ruud (2020) suggests (drawing on the work of Rosa (2019), these experiences of wellbeing are linked to the individual and collective experience of '*resonance*'– an opening up of opportunities from where a sense of wholeness, connection, pleasure, confidence, fulfilment, and empowerment becomes possible. For these reasons,

Ruud (2020) suggests, music is a cultural immunogen; it is a medium that can prevent illness and the sense of being unwell. Resonance, in other words, is wellness and can boost immunity.

But music is not a magic cure. It is dual-edged. On the one hand, music may secure a person's sense of identity and their orientation to the social world, virtually cocooning them with comfort, pleasure, familiarity. As such, it may dispel or mask noxious stimuli (Bull, 2000). On the other hand, and as with Jeremy above, musical cocooning can hold individuals within their musical, 'comfort zones' and prevent them from developing rich cultural and social repertoires for being and functioning in varied, sometimes surprising worlds. Such cocooning may also suppress the desire to venture into otherwise unpleasant circumstances, where it might otherwise be possible to alter those circumstances; culturally remaking them by introducing new or counter cultural materials. And musical cocooning may promote and reinforce health-demoting habits such as addictive or violent behaviour (McFerran & Wolffl, 2015; Sorcia-Reyes, 2022). There are, in other words, healthy and unhealthy uses of music (Saarikallio et al., 2015), or, put differently, there are uses of music that may promote lines of conduct or feeling that are unwanted, whether by the person themselves or by someone or group associated with or concerned for that person; such as a health professional, friend or family member. Thus music, depending on its circumstances of engagement, can be both immunogen *and* pathogen. It is possible, in other words, to feel short-term comfort as a result of musical cocooning while simultaneously reinforcing longer-term, health-demoting habits or unhelpful forms of introversion.

What, though, is it about music that helps (and/or harms)? This question has been elusive though it is increasingly clear that music is much more than a stimulus and that its so-called 'active ingredients' involve matters far greater and more complex than mere exposure of brains, or bodies, to music stimuli. Increasingly, the focus has turned to music as social practice, and in particular to contexts of musical engagement characterised by material, technical and interactional dynamics. In what follows, I consider how these dynamics, musics, and 'relations of musical engagement' both enable and constrain possibilities and opportunities for musicalised action and musicalised social connection; in ways that can be consequential for music's role as a cultural immunogen. By 'relations of musical engagement', I mean the social and technical quality of how people relate to music and thus each other, mediated by music's formats and techniques of performance, listening and/or dissemination. I explore this notion through two case studies (case studies in social science research focus on empirical, real-life events or phenomena – whether people in action or specific events or processes) of two very different relations of musical engagement – (1) live, semi-improvised, group music making in a care home setting and (2) individual music listening via a Music Streaming Platforms (MSP), explored through a specific listening task. In both, I explore three interrelated research questions:

1. To what extent can real-time features of musical experience be affected by music's relations of engagement?
2. How collective and how collaborative is the social structure of the relations of musical engagement?
3. In what ways do the answers to Questions 1 and 2 have implications for music's role as a medium of wellbeing and as a medium of social connection?

Case study one: Loch Lomond in Hill House

Here are two views of Gary Ansdell at work in Hill House. These photos were taken in March 2020 at the start of lockdown and during the Covid-19 pandemic. On this day, and for the first time, Gary is convening, via skype, a community music therapy session with residents, staff, and visitors at a residential care home called Hill House.



Figure 1: Two views of Gary Ansdell at work in Hill House

The photo on the left shows Gary in his home, looking into the camera eye of his laptop. The photo on the right shows how Gary appeared to the people in the living room at Hill House, more than one hundred kilometres away from Gary's home, when he appeared on their large TV screen.

One of the people taking part in this session is Angus, a resident at Hill House and a person who is living with a form of dementia. Angus especially loves Scottish songs, particularly a song called *Loch Lomond*.

> By yon bonnie banks and by yon bonnie braes,
> Where the sun shines bright on Loch Lomond,
> Where me and my true love were ever wont to gae,
> On the bonnie, bonnie banks o' Loch Lomond.
>
> Oh! Ye'll take the high road, and I'll take the low road,
> And I'll be in Scotland afore ye,
> But me and my true love will never meet again,
> On the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond.

The research on Hill House includes hundreds of hours of micro-analysis of short segments such as this one (Ansdell & DeNora, 2026). Our focus was on the interrelationship between the smallest of details; for example micro-gestures, partial musical engagements such as humming a fragment or singing one or two phrases, communicative behaviours, the orientation of gaze, comportment, posture and micro-movements. We traced video stills by hand in order to help notice micro-features of embodied interaction and to explore how comportment, posture, facial posture, and gestures are part of the process of how people perform themselves as types of musical actors (facilitators, responders, quasi-dancers, conductors) and perform these roles to others through micro-acts. We found that such acts can hold, extend, heighten and communicate musical pleasure. Additionally, we discovered that this micro-realm of musical enactment occurs in ways that, because they are not fully conscious, are available as participatory acts even when people may not possess language or the capacity to remember propositional information. As such, this research can be read as a complement to work on care performance (Wood, 2020, 2025) and the long-standing tradition of social performance and analysis of conversation (Goffman, 1956; Reed, 2010). It demonstrates the utility of case studies, when ecologically valid understanding of music 'in action' is the goal (Ansdell & DeNora, 2026; DeNora, 2014).

Hence Loch Lomond:

In the time it takes for Gary to complete the first verse of this song, a lot happens, musically-socially speaking.

As the session begins, Angus is sitting quietly, a mug in his left hand, leaning forward. Here, for example, at the start of this session, before the music begins, Angus' chin is tucked in towards his body, his lips are loose and slightly parted. He looks relaxed, or possibly unfocused, unengaged.

But in the time it takes to sing through the words, "bonnie banks" (8 seconds), Angus has moved his chin slightly out and up and closed his lips. His mouth now looks firm, his cheekbones are slightly raised. By the time we have heard, "and by yon bonnie braes" his little finger outside the handle of his tea mug has relaxed while his chin, by contrast, becomes determinedly firm.

We are not sure but we think we can also see his mouth move rhythmically - perhaps he is saying or half-singing the words of the song, as we have seen him do when we have been with him in person. We are not sure, but we also think he might almost be smiling.

Gary plays with the rhythm as he sings, "will never meet again." That is, this time he seems to do something that is more than pausing, and maybe it is also called to our attention by the little flourish of his hand before the major fourth chord. Elsewhere, Gary and I speak of this as Gary's 'bespoking' (personally tailoring) music, making music live in ways that are deeply attuned to what is happening within an ongoing real-time scene – the very opposite of mechanised music. It is almost like a tiny, semiotic particle of 'swing' rhythm, subtle, and it is gone in a flash, a miniscule *lilt* that takes no more than two seconds. Gary is, in other words, tailoring the music so that it may afford (offer and support) on-going activities within this scene, so that it may support actors' small forays or ventures into creativity within musical time.

Up until this point, the staff members at Hill House that we can see have been busy with set-up and technology. But now, during these two seconds, they do something special. Two of the care staff at Hill House, Don and Rick, are standing about three metres apart. Don is standing in front of Angus, while Rick is further back, in the middle of the room. But now they have begun to walk in parallel, each

with a visible spring in their step. Don seems to be rhythmically pointing out bits of the song, first with one index finger, then both as he walks in sync with the musical pulse (due to the lag between sound and sight over the internet we find it difficult to exactly be sure what is going with what at this stage).

But then something else happens. When we look again at Don and Rick it seems (is it possible?) that they are dancing. Rick is looking up at the TV screen (where the camera also is). He is smiling. The 'dance' (if it is a dance) that Don and Rick perform takes about two seconds within this first-time-ever of online music. But over the next few months of Skype sessions, 'small performances' such as this one grow; they become more flamboyant. Today, what these two care workers add gives something extra that helps bring the music to life. What happens and is over in seconds is an important event. Sometimes tiny things have large consequences.

As Gary sings the last line of this first verse, Angus lifts his tea mug to his lips and begins to drink. Noticing this, Rick turns quickly and begins to walk –quickly and not in pulse with the song– toward Angus. By the time that Ed has finished the phrase, Rick is standing behind Angus' chair, his arm on the back of it. Rick and Angus are together at the close of the first verse. Twenty-four seconds have passed.

Rick then remains standing behind Angus, just as the first verse of the song ends ("on the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond"). Gary continues with the song. Bernice uses her biscuit hand to gesture across to her left, to Angus, and then up to Rick. Rick leans down toward Angus and speaks and Bernice turns more directly toward them both. *They are now a group* of three, all busy with something – munching a biscuit, drinking tea, talking, listening and watching – but also now *together* in the music.

Case study two: musical engagement with MSPs (Spotify)

Spotify has 696 million users and 268 subscribers. It has also received a good deal of criticism from researchers and from the media (Born et al., 2021; Hesmondhalgh et al., 2023; Hodgson, 2021). These criticisms can be organised into the following themes that illustrate the emerging critique of Music Streaming Platforms (MSPs) which:

1. Reinforce musical engagement as a solitary activity
2. Encourage 'click-bait' culture (short attention span/need for attention grabbing products)
3. Reinforce existing tastes/preferences
4. Privilege well-known artists and tracks ('popularity bias')
5. Are biased against musicians from smaller countries (e.g., in favour of American artists)
6. Are biased in favour of musicians/tracks associated with large record labels (due to record company's payments to Spotify for specifically promoting their artists)
7. Cocoon users within what they already like which might:
   (a) reinforce attitudes and practices associated with existing tastes including any negative or health-demoting or anti-social practices or attitudes
   (b) impede connections between otherwise diverse social groups ('bridging capital'): through what Procter (2011) speaks of as musical, 'proto-social capital' (music as a meeting point between different kinds of people

At present these criticisms are mostly untested hypotheses – in other words, the existing literature, though thoughtful and very well-informed, remain mostly speculative. As Hesmondhalgh has

observed, '(2023, p.8), '[w]e know little yet about the kinds of experiences that result when people click on such lists, and what conscious and less conscious responses might be involved'.

We thus need to know more about how Spotify suggests follow-on tracks after a listener has searched for a new and so-far less-listened to musical artist. That is the first question. Related to it, a second question: what, if anything, might a listener do or say in relation to a Spotify-recommended track. In what follows, I explore these questions – still somewhat speculatively –by grounding them in real-world experiences of a handful of *actual* music listeners.

Method: I recruited volunteers to undertake a short exercise. For the purposes of this article, this tiny sample is, in Atkinson's sense (Atkinson, 2022, p.3), an 'aliquot' - 'just enough' data for the research purposes which, here, are heuristic. The aim was modest: to have an aliquot of data to 'think with', specifically to think about musical engagement via MSPs and the implications of that engagement for social connection and thus, musical wellbeing.

I asked volunteers to complete the following task with the aim of eliciting information on how Spotify might recommend a next track after a user searched for a new, and therefore still obscure, artist. The new, still obscure artist/band I chose for this purpose was music therapist Brynjulf Stige's *Marm*. *Marm* are not only still fairly new and thus fairly unknown, but they are based in a non-English-speaking country and one with a relatively small population. All of these factors are relevant for an artist's profile on an MSP.

The instructions to volunteers were as follows:

1. Search within Spotify for *Brynjulf Stige, Marm (name of lead singer and his band, Marm)*
2. Choose any track from *Marm/Stige* that Spotify offers. Make a note of the title of the track.
3. Let Spotify choose your next track. If the track offered by Spotify is another track by *Marm*, let it play to the end and then wait for Spotify to choose the next track after (if it is *Marm* once again let Spotify choose a next track, etc, until it recommends something that is not *Marm)*.
4. Make a note of what Spotify 'chose' for you each time (Artist Name and Track Title) and, if you like, any further observations (e.g., did you enjoy Spotify's recommendation, or find it to be counter to your tastes, did you listen to it in full, have you since relistened to any of the tracks you heard in this exercise?).

I also completed the exercise. The intention was that the 'data' to be collected from this speculative, heuristic-empirical exercise (understood as a case study of Spotify use) would be: (a) volunteer reports and (b) Spotify's recommendations after volunteer search requests. Reporting on the results of this exercise, I now consider each of the above critiques. The critiques are reordered so as to illuminate an interrelated progression, beginning with Spotify bias and moving on to implications for wellbeing, all of them highlighting a particular relations of musical engagement that MSPs, Spotify in particular, seem to afford.

What's wrong with Spotify?

In English, to ask 'what's wrong with …' carries a double meaning. It might mean, 'tell me the things that are wrong with …?' But it also carries a rhetorically challenging, slightly defiant meaning as in, 'I don't think there is anything wrong with ….'

Thus, in what follows, I consider the question, 'what's wrong with Spotify' in both senses, taking each of the critiques listed above in turn (but not in their original order):

Critique number 3, Reinforces existing tastes/preferences:

Spotify uses three forms of digital analysis to search for 'matches' to listener-chosen tracks. These are: *Music Information Retrieval* (features of musical sonority such as harmony, timbre, genre), *natural language processing* (analysis of lyric content), and *collaborative filtering* (network analysis that considers how all of Spotify's listeners have connected the current listener's choice with other tracks, on the basis of which it picks tracks that most listeners choose or hear paired with the track the current listener selected). The ways that these three processing features actually work, and how they are weighted, is unknown. Royalties are paid for plays with a duration of more than 30 seconds. In other words, if a listener clicks off of a track 29 seconds into it, no royalties are paid. And royalties are not paid per play, but proportional to the share of all plays of all music by all listeners, a mode of allocation that benefits well-known and often played artists (and larger record companies). Moreover, since 2020, some record companies have been able to pay a fee to have their artists given priority in the algorithm's selection process (McDonald, 2024, p.41 – 95% of total royalties went to 200,000, out of 10,000,000 artists on Spotify). These sponsored artists' royalties are then divided between the record companies who have paid a fee to Spotify and Spotify itself.

From the sample comments about the suggested track and from the descriptions of the artists on Spotify (supplemented with background research on each artist), it would *seem* that the music suggested by Spotify was offered as an attempt to match Marm's, in terms of network data, musical features and/or lyric content and that some of the participants noticed the attempt to 'match' (even if they thought it was a bad match). Follow-on tracks suggested were: *Timber Timbre, Stein Torleif Bjella: Osykiskkanndu Vera sjol*, and *Lars Winnerback: Elegie* which all three of my volunteers considered to be 'in the same vein' as one put it.

In this way Spotify does seem as if it may choose next tracks in ways that may reinforce listeners' existing tastes and preferences. Needless to say, these issues require a great deal more research, with a much larger sample, and a more strategically designed task.

Critique number 4, Privileges well-known artists and tracks ('popularity bias'):

McDonald (2024, p.47) claims that of the top 1000 artists on Spotify, only 38 are nominally indie. He also claims that 75-80% of listening is linked to major record label artists. There would seem to be both a push, from Spotify, and a pull, from listeners, that produces this statistical effect.

It does, in short, seem that Spotify has a 'popularity bias'. Each suggested artist in each of the three case studies here were associated with monthly listeners of over 4000 [in the case of *Timber Timbre* over 100,000]). And if there is a popularity bias, there is also probably a bias in favour of artists from large labels and larger countries (critiques 6 and 5), compounded if and when large labels pay for their artists to be more frequently suggested to listeners.

Critique number 1: Reinforces musical engagement as a solitary activity:

Do MSPs promote solitary musical engagement? From the data it would seem the answer is – not always (for example, participant 2 was considering sharing her new music over the weekend at a family gathering). Additionally, we know from the research literature that different groups of users use MSPs and mobile musicking in different ways, some of which are highly social (Bergh et al., 2014). But - the most current research suggests that most of listener-engagement with Spotify happens individually, and often in ways that *younger* listeners are not always willing to discuss with others (Hanrahan, 2018, 2019). (In contrast to Hanrahan's research, my volunteers ranged in age from 30s to over 70 years old.)

Critique 2: Encourages 'click-bait' culture (short attention span/need for attention grabbing products)

The small sample does not enable comment on critique number 2. However, a former Spotify software designer (McDonald, 2024) has suggested that music streaming caters, 'to the readiest popular receptors' which become important to music creators because royalties are paid only after a musical song is allowed to play for more than thirty seconds. The importance, within Spotify of first impressions and first few moments of musical encounter could, McDonald suggests, kill off more complicated or more 'difficult' forms of music without ever doing anything specifically negative against it.

Critique 7 (cocoons listeners) in ways that may reinforce health-demoting or anti-social practices or attitudes and/or impede social connection

If a platform such as Spotify does indeed, as suggested above, hold listeners in their comfort zones, promote solitary musical engagement, and reinforce musical listening habits, does that impede connection with others and in particular does it impede bridging capital, the discovery and connection, musically mediated, to others who might be otherwise different from themselves? And it is likely to reinforce negative habits or behaviour patterns? I suggest it is worth considering this issue more fully because, I will suggest, Spotify *may* be promoting and reinforcing a kind of 'negative' form of musical agency. My discussion here is speculative; it focuses on the question of just what kinds of agencies Spotify's relations of musical engagement may enable and constrain. Specifically, I will advance the argument that Spotify is associated with a 'negative' form of musical power.

Discussion: Negative versus positive musical power?

In Spotify it is difficult to use free-search terms because its indexing and search capabilities are non-transparent. It is thus difficult, perhaps impossible, to search for specific strings of terms. For example, I searched Spotify for 'Norwegian indie band like Bob Dylan but in Norwegian' (thinking just possibly it might, given my search history, offer Marm). It did not. Instead, it offered The Beatles' song, *Norwegian Wood*.

In other words, Spotify recognises genre and style and song titles. But its ability to process more complex and less precise search terms is limited. There is, I suggest, a form of disempowerment here. As McDonald (2024) puts it, with Spotify, listeners can find, 'anything you are able to name'. Less easy to find the music that you can, at present, only begin to name, vague notions of what you *might* like or wish to hear. Instead, searching may need to proceed as a process of elimination – a form of negative power (i.e., the listener can click off a suggested track and/or request a new suggestion or make a new search). The listener has only, as Jane Austen once put it in relation to women's power over their life trajectories (in relation to marriage), 'the power of refusal'.

There is a further negative form of agency associated with MSPs such as Spotify that is relevant in connection with its relations of musical engagement. Within a given track of recorded music, listeners cannot change what the music does. They can, of course, alter the volume, or listen to a track in different contexts and spaces (which may reframe how the work is perceived – as discussed at the start of this paper) but it is not possible, for example, to re-negotiate how, say, Glenn Gould plays the opening aria of the *Goldberg Variations* or how John Lennon renders *Norwegian Wood*. The rendition, in other words, remains always the same, even if or when it is experienced differently.



Figure 2: Degree of user control and degree of collective musical making

'Possibilities for action' – what kind of wellbeing, and what kind of togetherness?

The vertical axis of Figure 2 points to the degree, within the production of ongoing music, of control over how that music will proceed. To take two examples from this Figure, free-improvisation is associated potentially with a high degree of control over each musical instant, whereas pre-recorded music allows no material control apart from control over volume, filters and on/off. (Community Music Therapy, as it occurred at Hill House, because it is typically convened by one (a music therapist who typically selects songs and presents musical materials in supportive formats), lies close to free improvisation (it is rare for a participant to take on the role of the 'community music therapist' for

example, even if there are degrees of agency involved. Listening together (e.g., between peers, friends), by contrast, offers at least the potential for shared control of the music engagement situation.) (It is important to note however that the categories and positions on this graph represent ideal types. How musicking actually happens, in real-time situations may alter the classification system [for example, there may well be community music therapy sessions in which the music therapist takes a backseat and becomes, effectively, one of the group, just as there may, and are, situations of shared music listening where one person or a sub-set of a group dominate]. The figure is presented here for heuristic reasons – as an aid for thinking about relations of musical engagement.)

Thus, Spotify, as previously discussed in the context of negative power, offers a lesser degree of control over music's ongoing shape and quality than, for example, Case Study 1, community music therapy in Hill House. The ongoing musical activity in Case Study 1 was responsive, in real-time to what people (the music therapist, the residents, the staff) did, and how they performed the music/themselves in real time. Live music-making, musical engagement situations such as choirs, bands, chamber music, or freely improvised music also offer potentially a greater degree of musical agency than Music Streaming Platforms - scope for creating/co-creating what happens in micro-time. These live situations and their relations of musical engagement offer opportunities for the real-time *musical furnishing* (DeNora, 2013) of the ongoing situation. The term furnishing refers to the projection and insertion of bespoke, situation-specific aesthetic materials into a social environment in ways that offer at least potentially opportunities for action and experience within a shared environment, and that may be conducive, or afford, some opportunities while making the uptake of other opportunities more difficult. Furnishing is integral to relations of musical engagement – as a concept it points to the aesthetic politics of how social ecologies are made and shaped for ongoing action.

Of course, if one were to remove earbuds and broadcast a Spotify track within a social space (e.g., a train carriage, or a waiting room or a care home lounge), one is furnishing that space and that furnishing is entirely possible via the use of pre-recorded music. However, community music therapy and live music making affords greater scope for such furnishing and for nuanced instances of furnishing – and in micro-time. For example, as we saw in the *Loch Lomond* example, a note may be held, a tempo increased, a switch of some kind may be made, a micro-musical nudge may be acted upon collaboratively one way or another, in response to what each participant may offer musically; and through musicalised gestures, for mutual orientation. These micro-acts, or furnishings, are conducive of –indeed the actual stuff of– being musically together in time and space and situation.

These activities are also ways of framing and reframing how music is perceived/experienced. Playing with tempo, repeating, spontaneously shifting or adding something new all furnish the musical-social moment so that it may 'hold' or enhance ongoing social action and affiliation (as we saw in the example of Loch Lomond where care staff interacted in musically mediated ways with Angus). There may be, as in Hill House, more and less dominant musical participants, in general or from within specific musical works or styles. For example, in a situation of community musicking it is not unusual for the music therapist or convenor to lead the musical action as Gary can be seen to do in Loch Lomond. But as we saw, the music therapist, Gary, led with the aim of facilitating the furnishing process - to open spaces where people could, as desired, achieve things musically/socially.

This form of musical leadership, or convenorship; restructuring and supporting music's flow *from within the music*, means that specific moments within music may produce surprise, be associated with risk (and thus *trust*; see Burke & Onsman, 2026) and in ways that potentially conjoin individuals within ongoing, shared, social experience. That experience is constituted from music's 'present moments' (cf. Ruud, 1998; Stern, 2004, p.66). And when/if surprise happens, when musical adaptations happen socially, participants can be seen to be performing themselves to each other (and of course also to themselves), thus co-creating musical resources for deepening and broadening social ties. In DeNora's sense (DeNora, 2013), this performing 'furnishes' an environment with musical affordances, which is simultaneously the production of a group-orientation from within, and developing from, micro-moments. Listening to pre-recorded music, even collectively, cannot achieve these tasks to anywhere near the same degree, though talking about pre-recorded music and sharing it, or features of it, is a furnishing activity, adding cultural frames and meanings to the shared environment through conversation both in real-time and online (e.g., via comments in social media). Indeed, as we saw with Jeremy above, his musical horizons originally broadened, along with his social capital, through a class that involved listening to pre-recorded music *combined with* live talk about that music.

Furnishing thus includes the ways in which musical actions can 'project' materials out into a social space where those things can be shared, where they may be 'caught' (DeNora, 2021, pp.40-41). As DeNora has outlined, research on emotional contagion (Gibbs, 2001) shows how moods and emotions are 'caught', through mimicry of gesture or expression, stances and vocalising. In some accounts on contagion, that mimicry is understood to trigger mirror neuron firing (Hatfield et al., 2014) in ways that induce sensations, shared affect, participation or belonging. Through this type of 'interaffectivity', as Daniel Stern terms it (Stern, 2004, 2010, 2018), emotions can become infectious. They can spread, from one or two individuals; to groups of individuals. This contagion involves a kind of affective resonance, or reciprocal modulation between people that consists of a relational process of affecting and being affected (Mühlhoff, 2019). And this resonance lies at the heart of, I suggest (following Ruud, 2020), the mechanisms of music – the 'how' of music promoting wellbeing.

Within Hill House, just as we saw in our work ten years earlier in the SMART mental health music café, this mutual musical orientation facilitates the making of new friendships. Imagine, now, Jeremy, the man introduced at the start of this article, had he only had Spotify, had he only remained at home for music listening and never participated in SMART (and had never been supported by Gary and the group to extend his musical horizons).

Final thoughts

Is the conclusion to this article that Spotify should be rejected and all music engagement should happen live, in communal settings? Of course not. Personal music listening to the music of one's comfort zone should be understood as part of the 'five a day' of musical care and musical self-care. It can support people in their practices of self-care (Schurig, 2023; Skånland, 2011, 2013, 2020). When people are stressed, commuting, travelling or away from home, involved in forced migration, new residents in institutions of one kind or another (hospitals, prisons, care homes, mental health facilities) or if they are refugees or asylum seekers, personal listening may offer a kind of life-line or way to hold on to culture, memory, identity and a sense of self as agent (DeNora, 2021; Tota & Hagen, 2015).

Additionally, personal listening need not, as already described, remain entirely private in ways that do not lead to furnishing. Spotify listening can be discussed and/or shared on a speaker (or with shared earbuds). To a great extent, as with anything (e.g., wine, potato crisps, skiing, mountain climbing, broccoli, cold water swimming, drinking water) there are both risks and opportunities with MSPs. That said, if the development of social connection and resonance between people, and between perhaps, potentially 'different' types of people (across generations, cultures, economic situation, or any other type of social 'difference'), is a valued goal; and if it (as suggested by the literature) contributes to wellbeing, then collective, collaborative, live music making is arguably a vital cultural immunogen.

Author information

Tia DeNora is Professor of Sociology at the University of Exeter. She is author of *Making sense of reality*, *Hope: The dream we carry* and most recently *Caring for Music* (with Gary Ansdell). She is writing an experimental, multi-media book with Raymond MacDonald and works with Wolfgang Schmid on the IMAGINE project at the University of Bergen.

T.DeNora@exeter.ac.uk

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Ελληνική περίληψη | Greek abstract

Σχέσεις μουσικής ενασχόλησης: Κοινωνική σύνδεση και ευεξία

Tia DeNora

Μετάφραση: Μαρία Ραπτοπούλου

Περίληψη

Σύμφωνα με την υπάρχουσα ερευνητική βιβλιογραφία, ένα σημαντικό χαρακτηριστικό σχετικά με τη μουσική και την ευεξία είναι ο ρόλος της μουσικής στην ενίσχυση της κοινωνικής σύνδεσης. Το πώς ακριβώς η μουσική υποστηρίζει την ανάπτυξη των κοινωνικών δεσμών και πώς αυτοί οι δεσμοί μπορούν να λειτουργήσουν ως μηχανισμοί για την ευεξία, είναι ερωτήματα που αξίζουν περαιτέρω προσοχή. Το παρόν

άρθρο αναδεικνύει και διερευνά τις υλικές, κοινωνικές και τεχνικές δυναμικές της μουσικής ενασχόλησης, αποκαλώντας τις (με μια αναφορά στον Μαρξ) ως «σχέσεις μουσικής ενασχόλησης». Εξετάζονται δύο μελέτες περιπτώσεων που αφορούν δύο διαφορετικές σχέσεις μουσικής ενασχόλησης (την κοινοτική μουσικοθεραπεία σε μια μονάδα φροντίδας ηλικιωμένων, και την ακρόαση μουσικής μέσω μιας πλατφόρμας ροής μουσικής – Spotify). Το άρθρο προτείνει ότι δεν είναι η έκθεση στη μουσική καθαυτή που ενισχύει και υποστηρίζει τους κοινωνικούς δεσμούς, αλλά μάλλον ότι συγκεκριμένες σχέσεις μουσικής ενασχόλησης προσφέρουν, σε διαφορετικούς βαθμούς και με διαφορετικούς τρόπους, συντονισμένες και κοινές εμπειρίες. Αυτές οι εμπειρίες συνίστανται σε ευκαιρίες για δημιουργικότητα, έκφραση, επικοινωνία, αλληλεπίδραση και, κατά συνέπεια, σύνδεση με τους άλλους. Οι σχέσεις μουσικής ενασχόλησης που συνδέονται με τις πλατφόρμες ροής μουσικής, όπως προτείνει το παρόν άρθρο, διαθέτουν λιγότερους μουσικούς πόρους για την ενίσχυση του κοινωνικού κεφαλαίου, τη δημιουργία δεσμών και τη γεφύρωση μεταξύ των ανθρώπων. Μια τέτοια ενασχόληση δεν προσφέρει εύκολα ευκαιρίες για κοινή εμπειρία σε πραγματικό χρόνο. Μάλλον, μπορεί να περιορίζει τα άτομα σε ιδιωτικοποιημένους χώρους που προκαλούν απομόνωση, εμποδίζοντας την ανάπτυξη κοινωνικών δεσμών. Αντίθετα, οι σχέσεις μουσικής συμμετοχής που συνδέονται με τη ζωντανή, συλλογική και ενεργή μουσική συμμετοχή προσφέρουν τη δυνατότητα για συνεργατική και συν-δημιουργική «επίπλωση» των κοινωνικών περιβαλλόντων. Αυτή η επίπλωση, με τη σειρά της, δημιουργεί κοινωνικό κεφάλαιο σύνδεσης και γεφύρωσης, και υποστηρίζει τη συλλογική, κοινή μουσική/κοινωνική εμπειρία καθώς και τη δυνατότητα ενίσχυσης των δεσμών της κοινότητας.

Λέξεις κλειδιά

μουσικές σχέσεις παραγωγής, ροή μουσικής, σύνδεση, προσφερόμενες δυνατότητες, μουσική επίπλωση, έλεγχος