



## Conference report

# The Third Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Conference

*‘Exploring music in therapeutic  
and community settings’*

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*‘Exploring music in therapeutic and community settings’*

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Nordoff Robbins & Goldsmiths, University of London, UK



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“Music has been imbued with curative, therapeutic, and other medical value throughout history”. It is seen as “ubiquitous... emotional... engaging... distracting... physical... ambiguous... social... communicative... [affecting] behaviour and identities” (Macdonald, Kreutz & Mitchell 2012: 4-6). It is unsurprising, therefore, that people with many professional and personal backgrounds find themselves engaged in, and communicating about, music. From music therapy to neuroscience,

questions about music are being asked about its role, how we engage with it and the “effects” of doing so. Each field brings with it a set of assumptions and methods. These assumptions and methods help to inform research and practice. If a common goal of these disciplines and individuals is broadly the same – to understand music, its role, how we make music and why this might be important – then bridges of communication and collaboration might be fruitful. The bridges are

made strong by the combination of understanding what each individual researcher, artist, client, practitioner or professional has to offer. These bridges will help to reach a more comprehensive picture of music, its role, and its importance.

Since the inaugural conference, which took place in September 2013, the Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Research Conference series has worked to create a dialogue between music therapy and other disciplines and professions (Spiro & Schober 2014). This interdisciplinary dialogue is important to the work at Nordoff Robbins – an organisation that combines music therapy provision, education and research. This conference report provides an opportunity to share what we learnt at the 2016 Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Research Conference, through summaries and discussion of the sessions. We also invite expressions of interest for future collaboration and participants' own responses to the day.

On Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2016 people with an eclectic range of backgrounds, including music therapists, music psychologists, arts and health specialists and musicians gathered to build bridges during the conference at the Nordoff Robbins Centre in London, UK. The conference was co-organised with Goldsmiths University of London, a university which also validates Nordoff Robbins' masters and doctoral training courses. The conference entitled [\*Exploring music in therapeutic and community settings\*](#) (Spiro et al. 2016) featured six speakers who all undertook explorations through presentations of their own work or research. The aim of the day was to discuss how music is used in diverse contexts and how it is studied within different disciplines. This dialogue works to provide opportunities for multi-disciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration and discussion. The speakers therefore came from different backgrounds as researchers, music therapists and a mix of the two. Their talks covered different topics such as music therapy in different contexts with different populations, a discussion of challenges and relationships between practice and research, academic investigations of communication in music-making and research on musical interventions from the viewpoint of neuroscience and music psychology. The poster session also included presenters from different backgrounds covering evaluation, education and professionalism, stroke and dementia, and musical improvisation.

## MUSIC THERAPY IN DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES AND CONTEXTS

Music therapists work in different communities and contexts and these have different challenges and working relationships. Three of the speakers at the conference are practicing Nordoff Robbins music therapists working in different settings and with different vulnerable populations. They each spoke about their adaptability as practitioners and the larger network involved in music therapy in community settings.

Nicky O'Neill opened the conference by presenting her work with children with complex needs within an acute ward at Great Ormond Street Hospital. She discussed how she navigates the various relationships involved in working within this paediatric hospital setting (for related work see: O'Neill & Pavlicevic 2003). Each child may have any range and combination of referral areas (moods, moves and music) and their care involves various teams of people within the hospital setting. This type of setting presents its own challenges and O'Neill used a car analogy to describe how one might navigate within this context as a music therapist. She described how one needs to be both a race car, as the environment is fast-paced and has urgency, but also needs to be able to go "off road" and be creative when presented with a new challenge.

Esma Perkins, through a presentation of her work with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, also explained the complexity and intricacies of practicing music therapy within a wider context. She described through video examples and case studies how the individual closed music therapy sessions with students at Wargrave House School introduced a culture of, and comfort with, everyday music-making. This, in turn, she suggested has "therapeutic benefit for the whole school community".

Jimmy Lyons, through presenting his work at the Teenage Cancer Trust at University College London, investigated how in the context of a hospital, working with vulnerable populations and with different teams and collaborators presents its own challenges. Teenagers are in a multi-faceted developmental period in their lives. Lyons explained how his multi-disciplinary approach to music therapy, involving music lessons, individual and group therapy sessions both within the in-patient and outpatient wards happen flexibly within the hospital setting as a way to meet the complex and

wide ranging needs of both the teenage patients and their families.

These three speakers illuminated the multi-faceted nature of music therapy within a wider context. Music therapy, we learned, involves creative solutions to complex problems, meeting the needs of not only the patients but the wider community. They also work with a wide range of professionals and teams. Clearly, these approaches to music therapy do not occur in isolation (for example: Pavlicevic et al. 2015; Wood 2016, among many). Each speaker presented examples of case studies and corresponding video clips. Their presentations inspire a range of research questions, which might be narrowly or more broadly focussed. These research questions might use different types of designs and methodologies and might investigate further how music therapy happens in these contexts and the effects music therapy might have in different contexts with different communities. As the context and client groups vary, choices arise regarding appropriate methods and designs that might inform practice alongside fundamental questions. Such questions might include: What is happening in music therapy sessions and why? What effects of this work can be seen by whom and for whom? How might music therapy research inform music therapy practice as well as other disciplines such as music and health, or music education? These questions present opportunities for research within music therapy and within other disciplines. Just as the working environments and needs of clients of music therapists raise questions, so does the relationship between practice and research. This complexity was addressed in Claire Flower's presentation.

## **COMPLEXITY BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

Claire Flower is a music therapist working within the Cheyne Child Development Service at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital and is also working towards a PhD at Nordoff Robbins. From this position she confronts the tensions between research and practice. She described the feeling as being splayed across a fence, not on either side, but uncomfortably right on top of it. As part of her PhD research, which was inspired and continues to be influenced by her practice, she investigated a trio – client, parent and music therapist – and the relationship between the participants (Flower 2014). Using video analysis, she explored the

intricacies of this relationship. Writing a 'score' of the sessions, she was working to understand how each participant responds to one another, to the context of the session as well as to the music. She went on to explain how practice-led research can elicit questions of both the practitioner and the researcher, and how some of these questions can present tensions between the two roles.

This complexity and tension can not only be seen in an individual's struggle to meet the demands of both roles, but can also be seen in the practicalities of research design, methodology and ethics: represented in Flower's image of being between two fences – constantly teetering from one side to the other. Some research and some forms of practice do have differences: differences in assumptions, objectives and methods. However, instead of seeing these differences as fences, we suggest the image of a bridge. From this perspective, we do not have to be on one side or the other, separated by a wall or barrier. Instead, we can be directly in the middle, comfortably looking over the river as it passes by. A bridge gives the image of meeting half way, finding a way to overcome challenges through the building of a new pathway.

With three more speakers, we saw the variety of research approaches that can be relevant to music in therapeutic and community settings. The speakers work within different academic research communities and presented different topics with their own research designs and methods. Even though research and practice can sometimes be seen on either side of fences, a bridge can be built in the similarity of desire to understand music making and its therapeutic effects and its communicative abilities.

## **ACADEMIC RESEARCH INVESTIGATING MUSIC-MAKING WITHIN THE THERAPEUTIC AND COMMUNITY SETTING**

The inclusion in the conference of these speakers presented the audience with different perspectives and an opportunity to engage and think about connections with previous talks and possible interdisciplinary relevance.

Nikki Moran, a senior lecturer and program director of music at Reid School of Music, University of Edinburgh, discussed research that investigates music performance in different contexts, within and beyond the realm of western classical music (Moran 2013). She challenged the

notion and bias of music researchers and practitioners towards the prominence of Western classical music and musical notation. All of the studies she presented investigate some aspect of musical communication; from the nonverbal communication between players in North Indian classical duos to the communication of a conductor leading a small classical ensemble. She presented different methods and technologies, such as motion capture and video analysis that were drawn from different disciplinary frameworks ranging from ethnomusicology and sports science.

The keynote speaker, Lauren Stewart was a primary collaborator in organising this conference. Professor in Psychology at Goldsmiths, University of London and leader of a research group and MSc program in Music, Minds and Brain, she also gave examples of current research she and her team are working on. She first presented assumptions within neuroscience about music processing and engagement. Lauren Stewart explained how music is an active process as the brain works to make sense of the sound signals of the outside world. She explained how we learn to make sense of the musical world, revealing the expertise of the listener. She gave evidence of all brain areas being used in music processing as well as the idea that perception and emotion can dissociate. These descriptions gave a backdrop for the ideas, assumptions and understandings within music psychology and neuroscience research. The example studies that Lauren Stewart presented investigated how music making might play a role in the cognitive and motor rehabilitation of stroke survivors and patients suffering from chronic neglect (Bodak et al. 2014). She also presented different research methods and assumptions used within different disciplinary fields such as neuroscience, psychology and computer science. Pedro Kirk, a PhD student with Lauren Stewart, presented his work which uses digital music as a means of music making within a therapeutic setting, helping in the home rehabilitation of hemiparetic stroke survivors.

These speakers, academic researchers by trade, presented assumptions held and a wide variety of methods used within their fields and other related disciplines. They discussed how technologies have added to the types of research that can be undertaken and broaden the type of musical activity can be included in therapeutic music-making. The variety in the methods and research they presented gave insight into how music is being studied not just as a function or tool to be used but also as an experience in and of

itself. Both types of research draw from different methodologies, use new technologies and add to the conversation of music within therapeutic and community settings. All these presentations together left the audience with the task of finding similarities, thinking about challenges and seeking collaboration.

## **DISCUSSION: BUILDING BRIDGES OF COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION**

The conference ended with small and large group discussions exploring: (1) what research questions people would like to ask about the music therapy work presented and (2) how future initiatives in music in therapeutic and community settings could be informed by the music therapy work and the research questions and methods presented. The fruitful discussions led to questions of practicality when investigating research, presentation of evidence, and feelings of a need to collaborate. This activity was crucial to the conference as it allowed for active participation in the conversation and began to build the foundation towards a bridge of communication and collaboration.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the conference different perspectives, practices, contexts and methodologies were presented, each working towards understanding music and what role it plays in particular communities and contexts. Each speaker gave comprehensive insight into their own experience, challenges and understanding within their own communities and disciplines. To find a holistic understanding of what role music plays within society more generally, how and why music-making and music therapy should be used within different communities and contexts, and what methods or technologies might best tackle certain research questions, true interdisciplinary collaboration must take place. Each discipline has its own strengths, challenges and limitations, and collaboration is not always easy (Tsisiris et al. 2016). By working together we might be able to investigate and explore more fully music in therapeutic and community settings and contribute to the wider knowledge of music within society. This conference was a step along the path to more active collaboration and zealous discussion. This needs to take place so that the advantages of different perspectives can be combined. Working toward

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<sup>1</sup> The conference also included the announcement of two new publications: Wood (2016) and Cripps et al. (2016).

building bridges benefits the whole, allowing for a coming together leading to stronger understanding, practice and research.

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