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Communicative Musicality

A cornerstone for Music Therapy

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Communicative Musicality – a cornerstone for music therapy

Malloch, Stephen & Trevarthen, Colwyn (Eds.) (2009). *Communicative Musicality. Exploring the Basis of Human Companionship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Ulla Holck, PhD, Associated Professor, Head of the Music Therapy Programme, Aalborg University. Her Ph.D. thesis from 2002, 'ComMusical' Interplay in Music Therapy, relies heavily on infant research.

In 1979, Colwyn Trevarthen did an acoustic analysis of video recordings of mother-infant interactions, among others of Laura, a 6-week-old girl, and her mother. The analysis took place in his laboratory at Edinburgh University, and showed how the mother joined her daughter with imitative sounds that were modulated emotionally to invite the infant's coos and to acknowledge them in shared time. Seventeen years later, in 1996, in the Psychology Department at the very same university, Stephen Malloch listened to tapes of mothers and their babies 'chatting' with each other, recorded by Trevarthen in the 70's. One of the first tapes was the vocal interaction of Laura and her mother.

“As I listened, intrigued by the fluid give and take of the communication, and the lilting speech of the mother as she chatted with her baby, I began to tap my foot. I am, by training, a musician, so I was very used to automatically feeling the beat as I listened to musical sounds... I replaced the tape, and again, I could sense a distinct rhythmicity and melodious give and take to the gentle prompting of Laura's mother and the pitched vocal replies from Laura. .. A few weeks later, as I walked down the stairs to Colwyn's main lab, the words 'communicative musicality' came into my mind as a way of describing what I had heard.”
(Chapter 1, p.3-4)

Through Malloch' further work with spectrographs and pitch plots of the interactions of mother infant dyads, the theory of communicative musicality found precise formulation in terms of the parameters: *pulse, quality and narrative*. This was first reported in Malloch (1999/2000), in the Special Issue of *Musicae Scientiae*, known to many of NJMT's readers.

With their new book *Communicative Musicality – Exploring the Basis of Human Companionship*, Malloch and Trevarthen have elaborated extensively on the concept by inviting 35 authors from a very broad spectrum of research areas, such as musicology, music therapy, dance therapy, psychology, child and adolescent development, psychiatry, psychopathology, anthropology, applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, neuroscience and behavioural biology.

The book consists of 27 chapters, divided into the following five sections:

- The origins and psychobiology of musicality
- Musicality in infancy
- Musicality and healing
- Musicality in childhood learning

- Musicality in performance

When talking of ‘musicality’ the editors point to the innate human abilities that make music production and appreciation possible. They give the following definition of musicality, which can be seen as the essence of the book’s idea:

“We define musicality as expression of our human desire for cultural learning, our innate skill for moving, remembering and planning in sympathy with others that makes our appreciation and production of an endless variety of dramatic temporal narratives possible – whether those narratives consist of specific cultural forms of music, dance, poetry or ceremony; whether they are the universal narratives of a mother and her baby quietly conversing with one another; whether it is the wordless emotional and motivational narrative that sits beneath a conversation between two or more adults or between a teacher and a class. In the coordination of practical tasks, a shared, intuitively communicated understanding is necessary for success. It is our common musicality that makes it possible for us to share time meaningfully together, in its emotional richness and its structural holding, and for us to participate with anticipation and recollection of pleasure” (p. 4-5).
 “Musicality’s nature of engaging one with another, or many with many, intersubjectively, is intrinsic to musicality’s healing potential” (p.6).

In part one, the authors address central questions such as: Why and how are we musical? What is the evolutionary history of the hearing and production of our musicality? If musicality is an intrinsic aspect of being human, how does it express itself in our living, feeling, thinking and being? What is the basis for this in our psyche and biology?

The proposed answers come from different scientific areas: evolutionary theory and archaeological evidence (Brandt; Dissanayake; Merker), investigation of human and animal/ape cultures (Merker; Panksepp & Trevarthen), semiotics (Brandt), biology (Cross & Morley; Panksepp & Trevarthen) and brain science (Lee & Schögler; Panksepp & Trevarthen; Turner & Ionnides). All authors emphasize the vital role innate musicality has played and continues to play in creating and sustaining human social relationships, that enable us to achieve, think, and imagine more than we could alone.

In part two on musicality in infancy the concept of Communicative Musicality is taken back to its origins. It is shown how rhythmic organization between mother and infant allow both partners to sustain a coordinated relationship in time (Mazokopaki & Kuguimutzakis), and that vowel sounds expressed in musical ways engage emotions and serve as a vehicle for enculturation as to how to use feelings to share activities (Powers & Trevarthen). Spontaneous communication between babies can also be said to be musical (Bradley), and action songs and related games with a formal structure seem in particular to be the infant’s primary gate for cultural learning (Eckerdal & Merker). From a clinical point of view, mental illness in the way of depression strongly affects the ‘musicality’ of a mother’s voice, (Marwick & Murray), but culturally grounded loss of confidence, as seen in some immigrant mothers, also has a strong impact on infant care practice (Gratier & Apter-Danon).

In part three the reader is presented with different ways of using music as vehicle for healing and development. First from a psychobiological perspective; music used with children in Sarajevo and Mostar with post-traumatic stress disorders (Osborne). Then from a relational perspective; the power of music therapy in aiding the creation and restoration of meaning for a sexually abused child (Robarts), and fostering communication in children with autistic spectrum disorders or with Rett Syndrome (Wigram & Elefant). Communicative Musicality is also shown in dance therapy with a group of children, born partially deaf and blind with disabilities (Bond). In addition to the clinical examples, part three provides a meta-theoretical model of the continuum between communicative musicality and what is called 'collaborative musicing' (Ansdell & Pavlicevic).

In part four the focus is on musicality in childhood learning. By presenting the evidence for continuity between the musicality of infancy and childhood, all of the authors in this section present convincing arguments for treating the musicality of children with respect. The reader is given a thorough review of the literature on musicality in infancy leading to the childhood (Bannon & Woodward), followed by concrete examples of musicality between teacher-pupil exchanges in ordinary classroom settings (Erickson), examples of teaching music based on the here-and-now inputs of the children (Frölich), and a view of music education as an interactive social phenomenon that requires a responsive and receptive attitude towards both the student and the musical material (Custodero).

In part five, focus is on musicality in performance, and here the authors consider performance as ceremonial ritual (Dissanayake), as expressing biological rhythms (Osborne), as embodied coordination (Davidson & Malloch) and as facilitating enthusiastic, passionate creativity (Rodrigues, Rodrigues & Correia).

As can be seen, the book provides the reader with a broad perspective on Communicative Musicality. As my background for doing this review is music therapy related to infant research – and as the review is written to NJMT readers – the following critique will concentrate on the book as an edited whole and on subjects related to music therapy.

The many approaches to Communicative Musicality are the strength of the book and also clearly an acknowledgement of the editors' concept, since it can be investigated meaningfully within so many research areas. Due to the editors' wide perspective, some chapters investigate the basic essence of Communicative Musicality from an evolutionary, neurological or psychological perspective, whereas others serve as examples of Communicative Musicality seen in practice: in music therapy, dance therapy, class teaching etc. This difference, though, is not clearly explained for the reader, and at least this reviewer became a bit confused along the road. In the light of this critique, chapter 7 on *the neuroscience of emotion in music* is very central for understanding both the essence of the concept and the underlying choices for the rest of the book.

For many years, Colwyn Trevarthen has provided grounds for a strong belief in and support for the use of music therapy (e.g. Stige 1997), and in 2000, Trevarthen and Malloch stated their findings, including Communicative Musicality, to be “a foundation for a theory of music therapy” (Trevarthen & Malloch 2000, p.5). This reviewer’s Ph.D. thesis from 2002, ‘ComMusical’ Interplay in Music Therapy, relies heavily on this point of view. Pavlicevic & Ansdell also give support for viewing Communicative Musicality as a cornerstone for music therapy, but argue at the same time that it “needs further theoretical architecture on top of this foundation to provide an adequate working account of the full phenomenology of music’s power” (p.373).

They use the opportunity to present a model that combines musicality, musicianship and musicing. According to Pavlicevic & Ansdell, musicianship involves the skillful coupling of musicality to specific musical cultures, whereas musicing is a universal activity of musicianship in action. The model is clearly interesting for the music therapy field, but for this reader it is not clear why the model presents an argument for Community Music Therapy as a ‘new approach’ in contrast to ‘traditional’ music therapy, which they claim tends towards a narrow view of the mother-child dyad (Malloch & Trevarthen) or client-therapist dyad.

This critique of Malloch and Trevarthen seems already resolved in the book, as there is quite a bit of space devoted to musicality in rituals and performance in the ‘temporal arts’, including music. (This points to the difficulty of editing anthologies, since the individual author doesn’t have the opportunity to read the other chapters, before they write their own!)

When it comes to what is here called ‘traditional’ music therapy, one can easily argue that work with children with severe communication disorders, for example, (such as autism or Rett Syndrome described in Wigram & Elefant’s chapter), at best provides progress from (1) developing early communicative musicality by augmented use of cultural musical parameters, (2) to the mastering of children songs (musicianship) and further (3) to the process of taking this ‘back’ to the child’s own social context of family, kindergarten or school (Holck 2002; 2004).

Pavlicevic and Ansdell certainly have a point, when arguing against viewing music in music therapy as purely protomusic. But with Malloch & Trevarthen’s focus on musicality as the innate human abilities that make music production and appreciation possible, this discussion can easily move on.

These and many other essential discussions await us – thanks to this comprehensive – and demanding – book of Malloch & Trevarthen.

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Summary of the review

Malloch, Stephen & Trevarthen, Colwyn (Eds.) (2009). *Communicative Musicality. Exploring the Basis of Human Companionship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Ulla Holck, PhD, Associated Professor, Head of the Music Therapy Programme, Aalborg University.

With this edited book, Malloch & Trevarthen have elaborated extensively on the concept of Communicative Musicality, first presented in the special issue of *Musicae Scientiae* from 1999/2000. The concept is viewed from a broad spectrum of research areas, such as musicology, music therapy, dance therapy, psychology, child and adolescent development, psychiatry, psychopathology, anthropology, applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, neuroscience and behavioural biology.

The book's five sections focus on (1) the origins and psychobiology of musicality, (2) musicality in infancy, (3) musicality and healing, (4) musicality in childhood learning and (5) musicality in performance. When defining musicality, the editors point to the innate human abilities that make music production and appreciation possible and by choosing the word 'musicality' rather than 'music', they focus clearly on ownership, rather than only the action itself.

The many approaches to Communicative Musicality is strength of the book and a clearly an acknowledgement of the editors' own concept, since it can be investigated meaningfully within so many research areas. Due to the editors' wide perspective, some chapters investigate the very basic essence of Communicative Musicality, whereas others serve as cases of Communicative Musicality seen in practice; in music therapy, dance therapy, class teaching etc. Music therapy authors are J. Robarts, T. Wigram, C. Elefant, M. Pavlicevic and G. Ansdell.

Thanks to this extensive – and demanding – book of Malloch & Trevarthen, we can look forward to many good discussions within the field of music therapy.