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# Musical performance within the music therapy process with people having autism spectrum disorder

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## **Introduction**

At the request of the Danish Journal of Music Therapy, I will present some considerations on music therapy for people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Brazil. My main focus is to present and discuss the role of musicals performed by clients with ASD as a part of the music therapy process, as this new trend in Brazil could inspire Danish clinicians.

In addition to the clinical results, the positive consequence of the musical performances has been a much greater awareness on music therapy in the autism field in general, among autism organizations, in the national press, and in the political sphere. Musicals of course does not consist of the only solution to improve the recognition of music therapy in Brazil, but they represent a successful proposal that is constantly expanding. In order to give a framework to this issue, the article starts with a short overview of music therapy in Brazil.

## **Music therapy in Brazil – a short overview**

The origin of music therapy for people with autism in Brazil started with the movement

of music education for people with special needs that emerged around 1950 (Barcelos, 2001). Music therapy is a profession recognised in Brazil by the Ministries of Education, Work and Social Assistance, but there is no professional regulation of music therapy at the national level. According to the last survey conducted by the Brazilian Union of Music Therapy Associations, there are approximately 2000 music therapists in the country (Oselame, 2016), but there is no estimate of how many who works in the autism field.

Music therapy for people with ASD happens mainly in specialised centres for this population, special schools and private music therapy clinics (Gattino, 2015). The number of institutions offering free music therapy services is small, and there is no government subsidy to help families finance the work of music therapy.

The approaches and theories that underlie music therapy practice in Brazil for people with ASD are related directly to the clinical development in the country. In this sense, the main models present in the country are the Benenzon Model, Interactive Music



*Clients and their family members in action (A Different Symphony).*

Therapy<sup>1</sup>, Music-centred Music Therapy<sup>2</sup>, and Neurologic Music therapy (Gattino, 2016). Work with songs and improvisation are among the primary methods used by music therapists. Considering innovative trends in the clinical practice, family-centred music therapy is something new in the country. Another contemporary trend is the performance of musicals within the music therapy process. Due to the relevance and impact of these musicals, they represent the focus of this article and will be discussed in the next section.

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1 Humanistic model created by the Brazilian music therapist Lia Rejane Barcelos.

2 This term refers to the Brazilian model created by André Brandalise, which is different from the model with the same name created by Kenneth Aigen.

### **Musicals for people with autism in Brazil: from the music therapy perspective**

The first Brazilian musical for people with autism was performed in 2001 by the “Integro Theatre Company” and led by music therapist André Brandalise. Recently, two musical companies were established, Concerto Azul in the city of Rio de Janeiro (Senra, 2017) and A Different Symphony (Steinkopf, 2017). The Concerto Azul is based on public events facilitated by music therapists in Rio de Janeiro for children with ASD (Senra, 2017). A Different Symphony from 2015 stands for the productions of musicals for children with autism and their relatives (Oliveira, 2017). The rehearsals and meetings with the parents are carried out by an interdisciplinary team composed by a

psychologist, occupational therapist and a music therapist who coordinates the activities (see figure 1).

In order to explain the process of producing and performing musicals for people with ASD in a music therapeutic context, the work of Andre Brandalise (2015) in the "Integro Theatre Company", is described in detail below.

Parallel with the process of creating musicals, the clients receive individual or group music therapy sessions (Brandalise, 2015). The sessions are held mainly in a clinic, but when a presentation is approaching, the group do some activities in a theatre. Among the essential objectives for musical performance are the stimulation of musicking, free expression and creativity, as well as to find

### **Integro Theatre Company**

Gabriel is a 30-year-old man who has been attending group music therapy since he was six years old. In one group session, Gabriel showed some behaviours related to creativity and performance that made the therapist (André Brandalise) realize that the therapeutic space perhaps was too limited. One of the goals for the music therapy was to expand the 'musicking possibilities' understood as the creation and performance of relationships through the music. In the specific setting, Gabriel presented an enormous amount of energy focused on the creation of ideas that led the therapist to start to combine music therapy and aspects of theatre (i.e., characters, puppets, costumes, songs, and lyrics related to the characters). This combination, which became part of the music therapy process, led Gabriel to express: "Theatre helps us to express ourselves. It brings us joy and music in doing it. We talk, we think how we feel and much more" (Brandalise, 2015, pp.1). According to Brandalise (2015), this 'much more' encompass the creative encounters, insights, and peak experiences that may be experienced throughout the therapeutic process and reflects the need for music therapists to broaden their clinical eyes and ears.

After Gabriel's expressions, Brandalise began to notice that other clients were open to this kind of experience, e.g. the inclusion of elements of theatre to expand the musicking possibilities in music therapy. The combination enabled him to offer the clients a broader and a more creative and transformative perspective in terms of intervention: a creation of a theatre company based on the music therapy process.

Year after year, Gabriel has now participated in the performances of the company. Each cycle in "Integro Theatre Company" ends with the presentation of a musical after which Gabriel and the other clients have a resting period. Hereafter

the process of construction the spectacle of the following year begins. The resting period is important so that clients can gain new ideas and motivation for another year of show. In addition, the pause is important for the music therapist, since the process of constructing a musical is always very exhausting. In Gabriel's case, every time a new cycle begins, he comes back more motivated and with many ideas.



*Gabriel performing on stage*

and facilitate the development of interests, potentialities and abilities of clients within intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. Some intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects are easier to develop when the clients are involved in a musical in comparison with an ordinary music therapy group session.

Considering the intrapersonal aspects, clients perform tasks to the musical in accordance with their physical and psychological possibilities; there is a motivation to be part of a group presenting something for an audience; they develop responsibilities, because each of them needs to take care of specific roles. About the interpersonal aspects, clients need to create and solve challenges related with the musical in a collaborative manner. If they have different opinions on a song to one scene, for example, they need to figure out how to find out the best solution in a way that everybody will agree. In other words, the musical creates concrete situations where intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships can be worked with in the therapeutic process.

Through musical and scenic experiences, the clients perform annual pieces developed and rehearsed within the music therapy process assisted by three professionals; one music therapist, and two co-therapists. The role of the music therapist is to organise the group activities performed in the musical, allowing a constant space of listening and expression on the part of the patients. The main therapist does not impose what will be realised since the patients themselves have autonomy to choose the direction of the musical. However, the main music therapist seeks to intervene when the group faces challenges and difficulties. In these situations, the co-therapists aims to relate the problem or chal-

lenge with intra- or interpersonal aspects. For example, if clients are having difficulties to define a theme song for the piece, the main therapist can give suggestions based on the themes and elements already drawn in by the clients. The roles of the two co-therapists in the clinical process is to provide support and help to the clients, as well as assisting in the construction of the nine clinical stages performed for the elaboration of the music (presented below). Unlike the main music therapist, the co-therapists are responsible for practical activities related with the musical. For example, one of the co-therapists is responsible for working with costumes and scenarios, and the other is the music director on story creation and performance.

Brandalise (2015) describes the following nine stages when creating a musical at Integro Theatre Company:

1. Creating characters, fantasies and scenery: for example, one of the clients, who make puppets at home, creates a puppet and bring it to the group. Based on how the puppet maker describes his puppet, a song can be composed, and other characters can be created to interact with the puppet. It is not mandatory that all the clients create puppets. However, one of the clients has this potential and the music therapist facilitates a space in a way that the client can bring the puppets to use in the musical.
2. Creating a story: The music therapist facilitates the organization of what has been created by the clients. He helps them to relate content that was brought by one member to a character that had been created by another member, for example. The goal of this stage is to help

- the members to establish relationships among their creations. In this sense, the story is the combination of the content brought by each member. This stage ends when the members have created a draft of the script that narrates the beginning, middle, and end of a story.
3. Creating a soundtrack: clients discuss the context of their story and decide which kind of songs the group needs to compose. They then begin to examine and test action sounds (to support specific stage performance, for example), musical themes, styles, lyrics, possible arrangements, and other elements. At this point, the therapeutic focus is on how the clients relate to their musical production to express their feelings and emotions, even if the activity is focusing on the soundtrack of the musical.
  4. Hiring professional musicians to be part of the live band: One of the objectives of this stage is to promote the interaction between the clients and different instruments and musicians. For example, in one of the songs, hired musicians played the guitar and cello, instruments with which members were not familiar.
  5. Concluding the script: The goal here is to ensure that the performance is not too long (maximum 40 minutes) and that the story has an exciting dynamic (e.g. balance between moments of tension and relaxation). The most critical part of this stage is that the script should function as a representation of a work routine that provides support, consistency, and predictability.
  6. Building the stage and the production of the costumes: When the script is completed, the company can hire professionals to create the stage and produce the costumes.
  7. Recruitment of support staff to the stage: The stage support team is composed of a maximum of two people from outside of the company who can provide support during costume changes, toilet breaks and other events. This support staff can also help playing in the band during the presentation.
  8. Promotion of performance: The music therapy team is responsible for performance promotion. Although the parents are not involved until this part of process, they start to help the clients here to promote the musical and to send the publicity for different places.
  9. To promote social inclusion through performance in a professional theatre in the city of Porto Alegre (Brazil): The musical production is performed in a theatre and is presented to parents, relatives, teachers, therapists, doctors and everyone else involved with each of the company members. The general public is also invited to attend. The primary goal at this stage is to integrate clients, families, professionals and regular audiences.

Brandalise (2015, pp. 5) “consider music therapy to be present at all stages of musical production. When clients begin to express their content to us, they are verbally and musically supported by us”.

**Discussion on roles**

Musicals within the music therapy process are based on a social and community view.

Hence, the context of the action expands, since it involves the network of social, cultural and historical relations of the participants (Arndt, Cunha & Volpi, 2016; Brandalise, 2015).

Musicals in music therapy has different characteristics when compared to performance of musicals outside a therapeutic context. The first difference lies in the goals of the musical. In music therapy, the focus is on the process and how the client can work out their individual goals through the group dynamics being performed. In other words, in music therapy the focus is not only on the final product of the musical, but on the goals reached individually or in groups by the clients. Even if the name of the show is "musical" and music is at the centre of the process, it is not the end goal for the clients.

Another critical difference is the role of the music therapist in the musical. The music therapist is not a mere artistic director or producer of a show; his/her work is focused on offering experiences to clients so that they have the possibilities to work out their stated goals in a treatment plan. Also, the music therapist, because of his/her specialised training, has a peculiar way to listen and interpret the musical manifestations of the clients in the context of musicals. The music therapist observes the clients' musical manifestations to perform interventions for the non-musical goals of the clients. In addition, the music therapist has a therapist-client relationship in the production of musicals and not a director/producer-actor relationship. This point is of crucial importance, because the focus is on therapeutic all the time. The idea of musicals is not to expose clients or merely to promote music therapy; the differential is to offer a therapeutic proposal

where patients can expand their possibilities through music where others can watch and recognise these efforts made by clients.

However, given many advantages creating musicals within the music therapy process some problems can be highlighted. Some clients have more facility to work only in individual settings where the therapist can tailor the specific demands/goals personalizing the treatment plan and the interventions. In addition, for some clients the performance to an audience might be too challenging. Instead of spending time preparing the clients for one presentation, the therapist can use this time to work on more complex and deep intrapersonal and/or interpersonal processes. Also, adding a last aspect, the amount of energy are necessary for the music therapists to carry out two different roles in the therapeutic process: therapist and head of the musical. As explained in the vignette, the therapist assumes many tasks and the therapeutic processes can be affected if the therapist has difficulties managing these roles.

### **Impact of musicals for people with autism in Brazil**

In addition to the clinical goals, the positive consequence of the musical performances has been a much greater awareness on music therapy in Brazil. Musicals has played a crucial role in raising awareness about music therapy for people with autism, showing that therapy goes beyond what is done in the music therapy setting and can insert the whole family into the treatment, as well as the participation of other professionals in a transdisciplinary perspective. Also, an important benefit of the musicals has been a wide dissemination of these events in the national press, including radio, television,

newspapers and social media and the impact of the projects within the political sphere. After the performances of musicals, music therapists have obtained audiences to speak in the parliament, as well as managed to publicise the work done for the mayors of the cities where these events were held. The impact of the musicals has not diminished the request for traditional clinical treatment in Brazil. On the contrary, there has been an increase in the demands for music therapy, primarily related to the ASD associations of parents and professionals. Music therapists responsible for musical production are continually carrying out training in other states of the country on how to structure a musical creation, and the results of these musicals are being transformed into research (Senra, 2018).

The point of change about how people perceive music therapy for people with autism in Brazil, when compared to other therapies, was the understanding that music therapy has a tremendous artistic potential evidenced by the performance of musicals. For many years, music therapists in Brazil were concerned to show that music therapy was guided by the same principles of other therapies, e.g. speech therapy, physiotherapy or psychotherapy, and that the only difference was the use of music as a form of intervention and interpretation of the client's manifestations. Even in the field of research, there has always been a great effort to create intervention protocols as they are performed in other therapies, although respecting the singularities of music therapy. However, this homogenization of the work of the music therapists did not have a significant impact on Brazilian society in order to spread the knowledge on the profession, since the number of music therapists is small compared to

other areas. However, many music therapists realised that it was possible to explore the artistic focus inherent in the music therapy process to attract more people to have contact with music therapy. Although the focus of music therapy is the creative expression by itself, the music therapy experiences can be transformed into a product to be presented. With the initiatives to offer music therapy as an artistic product derived from a therapeutic process, more people in Brazil became aware of the way music in music therapy can help people with autism to engage and achieve therapeutic goals such as being in public, tolerating changes, processing a broad set of stimuli, among others.

One negative impact of the musicals in music therapy for people with ASD is to deal with the musical as 'product' that is possible to 'sale' to different audiences in order to promote the music therapy profession. The artistic view of the music therapy could in this case be related with a performance that somebody can 'contract' to show something 'inclusive' that people with ASD can participate, receiving more publicity and visibility in the intention to receive more money.

Ethically, the music therapist has to balance the roles between taking care of the therapeutic process of the clients and the wish to promote one a 'product', which might help in the professional recognition of music therapist and the music therapy as a profession. It is highly tempting to receive wide dissemination and diffusion of the media through the realisation of a musical in music therapy, because a musical can touch people and shows that individuals with autism can be 'cute' and 'bright'. However, this exposition may confuse the general understanding with a notion that we pity clients with autism and



that they are presenting themselves only as a matter of being included in society. Actually, musicals in music therapy consist of a form of social justice for people with ASD, where they can express themselves and participate in an artistic experience, where their potentialities and difficulties are worked within a therapeutic process based on the musical experiences.

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