

[More From This Issue](#)

[Current Issue](#)

[Back Issues](#)

[Guidelines](#)

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Me Making Music, Music Making Me: Unexpected Travels in Music and Music Therapy

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Introduction

Personal stories illuminate the particular while also hinting at the universal in its many variations. I offer my story because of its very ordinary and everyday nature. The particulars of this version evolved through reflection and conceptualization, that is, recalling personal anecdotes of lived experience and lived meaning as well as situating them in theory. I hope that in reading about these select details of one life, you will experience what van Manen (1999) described as pathic knowing, a felt sense of knowing and being that permits more intentional action. Conceptual links are explicated with the intent of fostering an intellectual response geared more to scholarship and theory. But most importantly, I invite you to read as a "engaged, dialogical partner"(Bochner, 2001, p. 149), thinking with my story rather than about the story (Frank, 1995).

To think about a story is to reduce it to content and then analyze the content. Thinking with stories take the story as already complete; there is no going beyond it. To think with a story is to experience it affecting one's own life and to find in that effect a certain truth about one's life. ...the stories are the materials that I use to model theorizing – and living – with stories. (p. 23)

My formal experience with music as a lifelong endeavor began with piano lessons introduced at eight years of age, continued with studies in music, music therapy, and counselling psychology, and recently culminated in a position at the University of Saskatchewan where I pursue a research program in music therapy, gender, and health. In some form or another, music has always been present in my life. These travels, in and with music, have been enriching, unexpected, and varied. For many years the focus was performance-oriented; however, these days I play infrequently. Rather, I do more listening to music, more reading about music, more thinking about music, and more talking with others about music.

This paper is organized developmentally and parallels three musically distinct phases in my life – from 8 until 18 years, 18 to 28 years, and 28 to 38 years. Each phase is characterized by personal and professional factors that, together, offer variations on the common theme of music as a lifelong endeavor. They also illustrate the two phrases, "me-making-music" and "music-making-me," which were coined in thinking about my experience with music as a lifelong endeavor.

"Me-Making-Music, Music-Making-Me"

Ultimately, I believe music involves a simultaneous giving and receiving between musician and music. There is the experience of making something whilst also being made and the experience of being in service to music whilst also being served by music.

The term, "me-making-music," refers to the creation and production of music. Acquiring skill, honing technique, developing an ear, experimenting with different genres – these are cornerstones of musicianship. They are the legacies of practice, practice, and more practice because there are no short cuts. There is only hard work, concentrated effort, and sustained discipline. With this, musicians acquire the ability to sound silent scores and make tangible an infinite world of feelings and visceral experience. Music has been called a non-verbal language and although people need not know this language in order to understand and value it, musicians must attain an ease and versatility with the language.

"Music-making-me," on the other hand, is about the discovery, creation, and production of a self. Music brings musicians face-to-face with themselves, offering a vehicle for self-expression and self-exploration. Exploring the nuances of music goes hand in hand with exploring the nuances of one's self. Music reveals individuals, both to themselves and to others. As such, identity is manifested in music. Music therapist Even Ruud (1998) described music as a way a "doing" or enacting identity. A musician represents the score but the score also represents the musician. Both these processes have characterized my life.

From 8-18 Years: Music as Hobby and Relationship with Self

Music was a hobby throughout the growing years that took me from girl to adolescent to young woman. These 10 years were all about the experiencing of music, the non-reflective making and exploration of music. Music was an unfailing source of pleasure, gratification, and enjoyment. Intrinsic pleasure kept me going forward, incidentally acquiring skill but always compelled and sustained by the pleasure. I was not terribly disciplined with the practicing. Periods of concentrated practicing were cyclical, ebbing and flowing with annual recitals and Royal Conservatory of Toronto exams. I completed the Royal Conservatory of Toronto series with my desire for music, pulling the technique along, a necessary means to an end rather than a direct goal.

Piano was a solitary endeavor. I would spend hours in the basement, sight-reading through the old piano scores left in the piano bench of a piano left behind by its previous owners. We also brought our own piano to this house, so I would play on one and then the other, enjoying and exploring each distinctive timbre and touch. This was fun! I loved to discover new music, try new sounds, play with rhythm, improvise, adopt different styles. Trying out new pieces was like playing dress-up, assuming new looks and evoking different characters. Sometimes the music echoed a certain mood I had, and other times, the music was just playful experimenting, trying something to see how it felt or how convincing I could be. I disappeared out of myself and into the music. I entered into a different kind of consciousness, a music-marked time and space. This is what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has described as *flow experiences*, "states of concentration so focused that there is an absolute absorption in an activity that seems to make time and emotional problems disappear" (p. 109).

Looking back, I understand that music was a place where I privately and freely explored feelings, sensations, half-formed impressions and subconscious rumblings. Elsewhere, I was quiet, private, and cautious. I did well in school and caused little trouble at home. Although I never could have articulated it at the time, I now recognize that music was one way for me to see, know, and hear myself. The piano provided me with a voice, a word that has been used by feminists as a metaphor for women's descriptions of their intellectual and ethical development (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). Music gave me a way to express myself safely and stay connected to an inner adolescent world of emotion and tumult. I could play loud and ugly, or I could play soft and pretty. My identity was not limited, anything was possible. Researchers (e.g., Brown 1991; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hammer, 1990; Rogers, 1993) have found that girls are particularly vulnerable psychologically during adolescence. I wonder what helpful role music might play in the lives of girl musicians?

Although playing was primarily a private experience, there were also audiences. I remember expressing displeasure with my siblings by silently going to the piano and then playing loudly, defiantly, and judgmentally. Although I found cathartic relief in these angry musical tirades, they also erected an impenetrable wall because no dialogue was possible. I vented in one-way communication.

There were also annual piano recitals and occasional music festivals. I clearly remember the audience's response at one particular recital. Even though I have no memory of the performance itself – I was lost in the moment, immersed in the music and oblivious to anything but the sounds and my own private reverie – I do remember the abrupt intrusion of applause and praise. The quality of the response told me that something "special" had happened, something I now realize spoke to my abilities as a musician. However, I had no identity of myself as a musician

at that time. Music making was just something I did, something that was private and personal. The paradox is that although I experienced music as personal and private, making music also exposed me. I felt hidden and concealed in music; but, just as I found myself in the music so others could see me in the music. Music feels safe because its meaning is abstract and evocative. Nonetheless, meaning is sensed and herein lies a duality that music therapists are trained to use skillfully.

I also remember a music festival adjudicator who shocked me with the comment that a musician's job was to convey the composer's wishes, to be true to the composer's intent. The idea that a faithful rendering of the composer's wishes was a musician's responsibility and duty stunned me. I felt exposed, deeply embarrassed, and shamefully selfish. Yes, I attended to volume, tempo and phrase markings; but, this was ultimately filtered through me to create something expressing me, something instinctive and of the moment. Playing the piano had always been about me making music. What kind of musician was I?

Many years later, I found a hint of an answer when reading the biography of cellist, Jacqueline du Pre (du Pre & du Pre, 1997) who apparently once said "There are two ways to make music: one is to play technically well, playing exactly what is written, perfectly. The other is simply to make music, which is what I can do." (p. 147). That is, music can be about skill, and it can be about self-expression and self-sustenance. Making music appeals to both will and heart, and in my first 10 years, it was the latter.

From 18-28 Years: Music as Career and Relationship with Others

The next ten years favoured music as an activity of will. Music became a career and a subject of full-time study. I completed undergraduate music and music therapy degrees, and worked as a piano teacher, ballet pianist, keyboard demonstrator, music recreationist, and music therapist. Music was no longer a playground where I randomly and freely ran about. Rather, it was a place to concentrate, be disciplined, and strive for mastery. These years meant measuring up as a musician in a community of musicians. Success was hard-won and my identity as a musician felt fragile. The satisfaction of studying music full-time was hampered by anxiety about evaluation. Ear training, for example, was a paralyzing ordeal.

But music also continued as an aid and a comfort. I used music to study, collecting favorite records at the music library and then retiring to a listening carrel to study in a distraction-free, insulated music cocoon. Music also marked the rites of passage accompanying early adulthood. When a first romantic relationship ended, I satiated myself with music – listening over and over to the second movement of Rachmaninoff's *Third Piano Concerto*. These lived experiences of music listening are not unusual. Cziksenti-mihalyi (1990) speculated that music listening enhances goal achievement by filtering out distracting information and keeping boredom and anxiety at bay, and Storr (1992) suggested that the inherent elements and patterns of music give structure and coherence to inner experience that allows for processing and resolution.

There were other rewards during these years of music study. I remember the amazement with which I heard and saw my fingers effortlessly run up and down the keyboard. I felt esteemed by family and friends. I discovered my singing voice and the pleasure of group musicmaking. A choral performance of Brahms's *German Requiem* stays with me, an experience of ecstasy and inhibition, being lost in beauty created with others, witnessed and shared by the audience. This making of music with others was new. I also took up guitar as a second instrument and discovered the exquisite simple sound of a single melodic line.

Subsequent studies in music therapy, which focused on the healing and transformative properties of music, solidified my confidence in playing, singing, and connecting with others in music. I moved fully into the shared joy of music and playing with others. There was the abandon of an angry frustrated piano improvisation with a fellow student where I had the amazing experience of being met and held in music, an experience that music therapist, Mary Priestly (1975), has identified as a key element of therapeutic musical improvisation. There was another magical improvisation with a group of adolescent clients. One easily distracted and emotionally immature boy was given the responsibility of striking the xylophone three times to indicate the end of the improvisation, and that moment still resonates with me. There was a stillness that held each of us as the final sound hummed into silence. Individually and together, we held on, organized in sound for several satisfying minutes in these adolescents' otherwise chaotic lives. The experience succinctly exemplified Sear's (1968) belief that music is associated with three key conditions: (a) experience within structure, (b) experience in self-organization, and (c) experience in relating to others

From 28-38 Years: Music as Research and Relationship with Meaning

I had only been out of university a few years when I felt compelled to return to academic life. I recognized a deep desire to keep learning and, as well, a desire to better travel with and help those in difficulty. This led to Master and Doctoral studies in counselling psychology. Along with becoming a mother of two boys, I trained and worked as a counsellor and began to research music therapy. It was an exacting and demanding ten years. Piano-playing stopped, music listening increased, and illness arrive in the form of chronic inflammatory arthritis and iritis. As I researched music in my academic life – first as a coping resource for musicians (Nicol & Long, 1996) and then as a meaningful lived experience for women with chronic illness (Nicol, 2002) – and as I struggled in my personal life, a reciprocal process of personal transformation and professional knowledge evolved. Mundane everyday "noise" was muted by wearing a walkman, listening to music, and living in a preferred, music-framed world. With my children, I discovered the joie de vivre of playing in music. We made up lyrics, juxtaposed rhythm, improvised, danced, had fun, clearly demonstrating the appropriateness of Carolyn Kenny's (1989) conceptualization of improvisational music therapy as a "field of play." Different but equally important were symphony concerts, which moved me to tears, letting emotions and an inner life surface that were otherwise unheard in the clamour of daily life. These concert moments were stand-alone, uninterrupted music moments and stand-alone, uninterrupted me moments – a simultaneous "me-listening-to-music" and "music-listening-to-me." What relief and balm.

The impact of times like these was profound; however, the meaning was of a felt nature, not articulated and cognizant. It was only in doing my doctoral research that I began to put words to these music experiences. In speaking with six women about their experiences of music listening in the context of living with chronic illness, I engaged in a reflective process, over several years, of integrating my experience with others' experiences and with theory. In keeping with Anthony Storr's (1992) comprehensive review of theoretical, empirical, biographical, fictional, and poetic texts, I came to know and appreciate why music is a *raison d'être* for many people. Music is a constant touchstone. Whatever else, there is always music.

There was much turmoil in these years of graduate study and new parenthood. There was a lot of just getting by and holding onto a belief that it would all work out. Music was an intimate part of this – something to formally study, but also something from which to reap understandings that aided in the day-to-day of everyday life and in glimpsing the depths and heights of the extra-ordinary.

Conclusions

Music is my work and my pleasure. My life can be told through music, and music can be told through me. I have undertaken these travels in music with both intention and effort, but the travels remain unpredictable because music has also undertaken me. And this is the ultimate reward. I make music, music makes me, and this is a life-long, life-sustaining, and life-learning process. I am now in the early years of a fourth phase that seems to involve a consolidation of purpose, meaning, and direction but who knows exactly where I will travel?!

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