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Vol 4(3), November 1, 2004  
mi40004000158

## "Music Therapy is Changing" and So Am I: Reconstructing the Identity of A Music Therapist

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### Introduction

Identity is an important aspect for music therapists, both professionally and personally. This is a story of how one music therapist reconstructed his professional and personal identity, as a social creature and a musician, through the encounter with new theories in music therapy.

### A Missing Piece of Myself - as a Social Creature

A year before graduating from the music therapy program at Eastern Michigan University in the U.S., I began asking myself repeatedly if music therapy was the right occupation for me. There was nothing wrong with the program. In fact I was and remain proud of the training I received there. It was I that was not satisfied with myself. I had been asking myself "what good can music therapy do to this world?"

At the time, the world seemed to me such a sad place, full of unsolved problems. There was wide spread environmental destruction and unequal distribution of wealth, as well as rampant poverty, war, hate, prejudice, ethnocentrism and so on. Perceiving the world that way, I felt I should do something more than music therapy to prevent this world from falling apart. Yet, then arouse the question of what then should I do. I could not come to an answer to the critical question because the roots of the problems that concerned me seemed so deep and complicated. I even sought therapy to confront my feeling of helplessness.

I finally broke out of my state of melancholy with the help of my friend next door. She simply said to me, "Forget about the world if it's falling apart. Live your life as you like". What she said provided me with a totally opposite viewpoint, liberating me from the question. I was relieved. After that, I decided to go on with the music therapy, the thing I found most fulfilling.

Since then and for the past seven years I have dedicated my energies to music therapy practice in Japan. Throughout, I have never questioned the value of music therapy to the world. This, of course, does not mean I forgot my former concern. I have always been and remain concerned about the direction the world is heading. Yet I still feel what I do is too small to influence the society as a whole. The suggestion of my friend helped me to move on with my life but the question of how to improve the world remains within me.

### Another Missing Piece of Myself - As a Musician

After five years of private practice, I began feeling a sense of burnout. Working with the same children with Down syndrome for many years, with the same type of goal of increasing their leisure musical skills, using their preferred type music, I was not getting as much excitement as I used to when I started my music therapy practice. My work with them just felt to me all the same although I was using different songs and musical experiences. There were various reasons for my feeling, but I must admit one of them was my own musical boredom. I paid

attention to how to set up the session room, how to cue the clients, how to encourage them to continue the steady beat and all the necessary efforts to bring them successful experiences. But I was not paying attention to the music that "I" played.

The sense of burnout brought me a series of questions: Where should I go with these children? Am I going to do this with them for the rest of their or my life? Their leisure skills may be acquired in the tiny musical world that we create together. But then what? I was in that kind of professional state when I was first introduced to Community Music Therapy.

## **Encountering Community Music Therapy**

When I consulted one of my senior colleagues and also a good friend of mine, Rika Ikuno, about my sense of burnout and future direction in which I could precede, she informed me of the theory of Community Music Therapy and suggested that I may find some clues for the future therein. I became interested with the idea of facilitating the "growth" of the clients as well as the people around them. The more clinical experience I have, the more convinced I am that we are the same human beings regardless the existence of disabilities. Sometimes I wish more people could see from the perspectives of those who have disabilities.

I read some of the clinical examples of Community Music Therapy literature, which helped me to picture how community music therapists work in their settings. Still I had a hard time grasping the theoretical and philosophical aspect of the approach. It seemed to me like I was only seeing the surface of the work and not fully appreciating the true value of Community Music Therapy work. I was also curious if people in the community actually realize the change that occurs in them from the impact of Community Music Therapy. Are they aware that they too are clients in Community Music Therapy?

Thus I was very anxious to hear the keynote speech on Community Music Therapy by Brynjulf Stige when he came to Japan to participate in the fourth annual conference of the Japanese Music Therapy Association.

## **Inspiration from Aesthetic Music Therapy**

The theme of the Japanese Music Therapy Association's fourth annual national conference was "Music". There was another guest keynote speaker, Colin Lee, who developed another new theory in music therapy called "Aesthetic Music Therapy".

Before the conference, I was more interested in hearing the keynote speech by Stige; however, interestingly, the presentation on Aesthetic Music Therapy by Colin Lee (2004) helped me to grasp the fundamental philosophy of Community Music Therapy. It was the simple idea that the *music* plays the central role in bonding people together. It was basic and had somehow been long forgotten in me.

The part that I was impressed with and inspired by most in Lee's presentation was his work with the string quartet in the University where he works. He considered the members of the string quartet as clients in music therapy. The goal would be something like "to increase their new musical insight by improvisation". I was astonished to hear that he perceived these well-trained musicians as "clients" and had them explore musical possibilities. Even though he said he was "scared" to have them as clients, the outcome of the session was successful. The aesthetic improvisational music therapy experience brought the musicians new insights in music and influenced their performance style.

This helped me to grasp the idea of having non-disabled people as clients of Community Music Therapy.

## **Integrating Two Theories Within Me**

From the clinical examples in Community Music Therapy literature, I knew that the people from the both sides, the client in the traditional sense (those with disability) and the people in the community where the clients live, participate in the same musical experiences. Yet I was experiencing this awkward feeling: those with disabilities would still be the one to be helped by the other non-disabled participants. This feeling might have been the origin of my previous question of "Are they ("non-disabled clients") aware that they too are the clients in Community Music Therapy?"

It is certainly not negative if the non-disabled participants of Community Music Therapy become caring to those with disabilities. But this carries the possibility that only good-minded or caring people would participate in this kind of music project in the first place, and those who are not

interested in people with disabilities would not participate due to the perceived absence of personal benefit. This would not nurture community growth.

However, providing this kind of aesthetic improvisational music experience, as Colin Lee attempted to do with the string quartet, and having all the participants explore and get in touch with their musical possibilities, everyone will be treated equally regardless of the existence of disabilities. Simple reconstruction of pre-composed music may make the difference between two groups (those with and without disabilities) more prominent. In addition, it may not be "age-appropriate" or "challenging" enough for the non-disabled participants. But by bringing the "aesthetic" improvisation or improvisational elements into the Community Music Therapy experience, the experience would be mature and meaningful. In the improvisational environment, no one would know the outcome of the musical experience, including the facilitating music therapist him or herself to some extent. Also the attitude towards the aesthetic improvisational music experience may foster in the non-disabled an ear for listening or perceiving the unique "musical expressions" of those with disabilities. This kind of musical interaction may nurture mutual understanding, which could eventually lead to change in the community change at the grass roots level.

Now, when I take a closer look at the clinical example of "Upbeat" from Stige's presentation or his book *Culture-Centered Music Therapy* (2002), I understand his mention of how he brought the new musical insight of "improvisation" when working with the community choir. The experience for the choir was not something that they did for "Upbeat," but was itself beneficial for the choir since it heightened their musical possibilities.

Although Lee and Stige are two different theorists and practitioners, I thought they both "believe in the power of music", as Tarry describes (2001). Stige himself said (2004) they are both coming to a "Music-Centered approach" from two different angles. So it was not surprising that Lee's presentation helped me to grasp the spirit of the Community approach.

It was good to actually hear Stige talks about Community Music Therapy in person. As I previously mentioned, it was difficult for me to comprehend the underlining belief and philosophy or source of energy that drives the Community Music Therapists to do his or her work from the written text. From the presentation I was able to grasp Stige's fundamental belief in social equality for those who are in disadvantage position.

## **Reconstructing my Own Identity**

In his presentation, Stige mentioned, while quoting Ikuno, "Music Therapy is changing, and it continues to change to be a more complete form". I felt the same way with myself. This community approach is going to help me to find a missing part of myself, as a social creature, that wants to contribute to society in a larger context than music therapy in a traditional sense. I am not thinking that Community Music Therapy is going to save this world. But I think Community Music Therapy can help people understand each other better by providing shared aesthetic musical experiences. It can be a strong force for social change. With this approach in my possible working field, I feel more like myself. I feel more empowered, having found a missing part of myself. I feel like I have a new voice to better express myself.

Lee's presentation on Aesthetic Music Therapy also helped me to find another missing, or long forgotten piece of myself; that is my musicianship. He made me realize that I needed to be keener to the music and musical experience when working with clients. If I were keener to the music that my clients and I had created, probably I would not have felt the sense of musical boredom I described earlier.

I am thinking of using the bass guitar for my session. It had been a major part of my musical life but was rarely played during my college and music therapy practice years. I do play the piano and guitar to provide the accompaniment, but never practiced as hard as I did with the bass guitar. The bass guitar is probably the instrument that makes it possible for me to get in touch with my musicality. It also is the instrument that I am able to play freely enough to provide the strong musical experience with others. Mere thought of using the bass guitar to the session gives me such excitement.

The change has already begun within me, applying this new perception of musical possibility to my clients. For instance, I attempted the instrumental improvisation with elderly clients who have dementias. I never imagined doing improvisation with this population before. But it felt natural to have the improvisational interaction with this population since I allowed myself to let the music be the center of my session. One woman with dementias, having limited interaction with others, was looking straight to me while playing her tambourine along with my single

melody improvisation on the pentatonic scale on the keyboard. The experience reassured me to let the music be the center of my work.

Lee and Stige helped me to determine the direction in which I should precede. Their presentations inspired me to create with some research ideas in the framework of Community Music Therapy. I am interested in having both of my elderly clients and their care staff members do the improvisation together to investigate if the experience will bring the change in their communication, which appears to me not very constructive.

Two theorists showed me what music therapy is and can be. At the same time they showed me my own potential. It is interesting that the more complete the music therapy becomes with the new theories, the more complete I also become as a music therapist and as a person.

Music is a human behavior. Its potential flows into every area of humanity. I feel that my perception of music now has a new dimension. With this heightened insight about music, I feel empowered with my reconstructed identity.

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### To cite this page:

Yuji Igari (2004). "Music Therapy is Changing" and So Am I: Reconstructing the Identity of A Music Therapist. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*. Retrieved from <http://www.voices.no/mainissues/mi40004000158.html>

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