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Music Therapy in South Africa: Compromise or Synthesis?

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My neighbour at Pretoria University Music Department is Meki Nzwei. Master drummer and music ethnologist, he speaks with passion and authority as befits an elder in Africa. We disagree on many things. And the more I listen to what it is that I disagree with, the more I think he has a point or two. Meki, who hails from Nigeria, maintains that music in Africa is healing, and what is music therapy other than some colonial import? Why is music therapy separate from music-making? Why is it calling itself thus in South Africa, instead of imbibing African music-healing traditions? My blood pressure rises instantly, and I suggest to him that perhaps African music-healing, too, might absorb something from music therapy. This is where Meki and I are at the moment. I think that this is where music therapy in South Africa - and much of Africa - is at the moment.



The history of music therapy in South Africa goes something like this. For the past forty or so years there has been consistent interest witnessed by the enthusiastic membership of the Music Therapy Society of Southern Africa and by the regular visits over the years of well-known figures including Clive and Carol Robbins, Charles Eagle, Julienne Cartwright, Sybil Beresford-Pierce and Joe Moreno. There was an attempt at a music therapy training course in the early 1980s: a post-graduate Diploma in Remedial Music at the University of Cape Town, which floundered after two intakes since graduates were not eligible for state registration with the Medical and Dental Council.

I returned to live in South Africa in the early 1990s. Like other "arts" therapists (art / drama / music / dance-movement therapists) who had trained abroad, I had the extraordinary experience of being examined by two occupational therapists for state registration without which arts therapist may not practice. I made it and became registered as part of the Professional Board for Occupational Therapy.

In 1996, I approached the Music Department at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg to gauge their interest in hosting a music therapy training course. They were delightfully enthusiastic. And they offered no support whatsoever. I withdrew my suggestion after three months. Having just returned from training in the USA, I then approached Kobie Temmingh in Pretoria and suggested that we team up and begin planning a training course. We met several times. And since I had been involved in planning the Master's in Music Therapy Year Two curriculum with Gary Ansdell at Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy Centre in London in 1995/6 I sought permission from Pauline Etkin, Director of the Centre, to use this as a blueprint for our own training course. We approached the Music Department at the University of Pretoria in 1997 and their support was instant and tangible. We were offered an hourly fee to work on developing the curriculum, which we did. By the end of 1999 we were through the last hurdles of getting the two-year post-graduate Master's programme through the University Senate and through the Medical and Dental Council (renamed the Health Professions Council of South Africa - HPCSA). On 30 March 2001 our first six graduates will have their graduation ceremony. In a year's time we will hopefully graduate another six music therapists. The first validation of our course by the HPCSA takes place in June of this year.

This is the music therapy story in South Africa now. Our graduates struggle to find work in special schools, in large hospitals, in rehabilitation centres, old-age homes and in orphanages for children with HIV/AIDS. Many do not share the same language or worldview as the children and adults with whom they work. Yet the passion of their commitment and their excitement about music therapy is undiminished. So far as I am able to gauge, ours is the only music therapy training course of its kind on the African sub-continent.

But we are in Africa. And in Africa there is a long tradition of music healing. Can there be a synthesis of these two music-based practices towards something new? Would this be a compromise, resulting in a thinner practice or a richer one? As a Western-trained improvisational music therapist, having listened to and partaken in healing rites, I am not altogether convinced that African music healing and music therapy are especially closely related. But I am utterly convinced that music therapy can learn an enormous amount from the African worldview and from music-making in Africa - rather than from African music-healing as such.

The situation of state registration is slowly shifting. The Professional Board for Occupational Therapy formed an arts therapists' standing committee in 1996 in order to elicit our needs and negotiate better representation of the arts therapies on the board. The forming of SANATO (South African Network of arts therapies Organizations) in 1997 as well as the setting up of the Arts Therapies sub-committee by the Professional Board has resulted in closer co-operation and a more consistent profile for the arts therapies professions. Our competencies document was approved in 2000. Now state registration examiners are appointed by the Arts Therapies' sub-committee. In addition, SANATO is represented on the Professional Board's Education Subcommittee, and we are currently lobbying for an Arts Therapies portfolio on the Professional Board.

At this very early stage of the profession, and because of our small numbers, it is difficult to see ourselves as separate from our arts therapies colleagues. We presently total 10 registered music therapists and another 10 registered in another Arts Therapy' modality. Our numbers are small, our workloads enormous, and our spirit undiminished.

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