

Music Therapy Working in and with Community: A Convergence in Montréal

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Focus on community within the music therapy literature has appeared as a relatively recent phenomenon, with particular attention rising out of the development of Community Music Therapy (Ansdell, 2002; Curtis & Mercado, 2004; Pavlicevik & Ansdell, 2004; Stige, 2002; Stige & Aare, 2011). Community Music Therapy developed, however, as a grass roots movement and as a result there has been much attention on and work in community within clinical music therapy practice which predates this literature. This interest in community has also been evidenced across other divergent music therapy perspectives beyond that of Community Music Therapy, including community engagement, empowerment, feminist, and multicultural approaches, as well as recent social justice work in music therapy (Curtis, 2000, 2006, 2010; Faire & Langan, 2004; Hadley, 2006).

In this article, I will examine the diverse roots of community focus in music therapy as they have played out in my own practice, the points in which they complement or contradict, and the places in which they are located on the continuum from private to public sphere. These, along with the dynamic interplay between personal transformation and community transformation, will be looked at within my work with older adults, with adults with disabilities, and with survivors of violence. Attention will then turn to the convergence of faculty interest in community and the creative arts therapies at Concordia University. The article will conclude with information about opportunities for future convergence and collaboration in terms of conferences scheduled for May 2012 in Montréal with the themes of Community Music Therapy and Feminist Music Therapy.

A look at the various writings on my clinical work over the years might initially raise questions about identity. Am I a Community Music Therapist? Am I a Feminist Music Therapist? Am I a social activist? The brief answer would be “Yes”. Evolving over time and predating any formal writing in these areas in music therapy, my work was initially based on an intuitive understanding of the importance of community. Preliminary forays in the 1980’s were informed by normalization theory and centered around my work with older adults in Toronto and my work with adults with disabilities in Cleveland. For both, the focus was on moving with the clients into the community, facilitating their engagement with the community, and moving beyond a physical presence to a social and interactive presence. From an empowerment framework, the ultimate goal was to facilitate the necessary skills development such that they could eventually engage with the community independently (Curtis, 1988). With the adults with disabilities, for example, the focus was on participating in community musical events and organizations. The scope went from the more pragmatic (such as planning independent bus travel and exploring available options to fit musical interests) to the more sophisticated (such as friendship and networking skills).

While the focus of my earlier work was on working *in* the community, it was not until later that I expanded the focus to working *with* community. Personal transformation, whether it takes place in the private sphere of the therapy room or moves into the public sphere, is insufficient unless it is accompanied by social transformation. With adults with disabilities in Georgia, for example, the focus was not only on engaging the clients in the community, but also on changing the community itself, challenging stereotyping attitudes through advocacy for and self-advocacy of the clients in their community performances. This work was informed by later community engagement, Disabilities Arts Movement, and Community Music Therapy theory and writing

(Curtis & Mercado, 2004). The nature of the work is very individualized and this is in keeping with Pavlicevik and Ansdell's (2002) description of Community Music Therapy: "[It] is a different thing for different people in different places. Otherwise it would be self-contradictory. You can't have something which is context and culture sensitive but which is a *one size fits all anywhere* model" (p. 17).

Community and social transformation are also a critical part of my work with survivors of violence (Curtis, 2000, 2006, & 2010). Working to facilitate recovery from the harm of violence is insufficient unless accompanied by work to change the socio-political landscape in order to eliminate violence. Informed by Feminist Therapy theory, my Feminist Music Therapy work with women and children survivors of violence not only can work for social change; it is obliged to do so. In many ways, Feminist Music Therapy dovetails with Community Music Therapy. Both have grassroots development and a diversity of definitions and descriptions. Both are being used by and with a diversity of people. Both work in and with community. Feminist Music Therapy diverges in its use of a feminist lens to understand and change society. This feminist lens highlights the importance of gender and its interaction with such multiple issues as race, class, age, ability, and sexual orientation. Community is at the core of Feminist Music Therapy which works towards personal and societal transformation on the part of both the client and the therapist.

Having looked at areas of convergence in music therapy work in and with community, this paper closes with a look at another area of convergence –interest and work in community in Montréal. The newly-opened Music Therapy program at Concordia University finds itself ideally situated in a Creative Arts Therapies Department with a strong tradition and a clear direction for the future in terms of community. The department has historic ties to the community with its

Centre for the Arts in Human Development. It is moving towards the future with a convergence of interest in community on the part of two of its Music Therapy faculty – myself and Guylaine Vaillancourt (Vaillancourt, 2010). This convergence has set the stage for a unique opportunity for the 2012 conference of the Canadian Association for Music Therapy – “*Avantgarde*”(Curtis & Vaillancourt, co-chairs) .

Set in the vibrant city of Montréal, *Avantgarde* will provide opportunities for music therapists to connect, to share, and to dialog about the most current trends in our field, such as Community Music Therapy, Feminist Music Therapy, and others which are shaping our future. Alongside the *Avantgarde* conference will be an International Conference on Feminism in the Creative Arts Therapies. Mark your calendars and plan to join us there.

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