

## **Music Therapy Professional Practice Experiences in Two Places, New Zealand and Australia**

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### **Editorial Note**

This “Community Voices” collaborative article has been submitted to an open, single peer review process.

### **Abstract**

In this article music therapist Megan Spragg reflects on her training as a music therapist and professional practice in New Zealand and Australia. Megan discusses the development of her private practice into a thriving business, and describes opportunities as well as challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The article concludes with recommendations for people considering a career as a music therapist.

### **About Me**

As a New Zealand trained music therapist working in Melbourne, Australia, the opportunity to explore ideas around home, community, work and experience has allowed me to focus on the core values and ideals of being a music therapist wherever I am based. Home is a big word, for me New Zealand, and particularly Christchurch, will always feel like home. It is where I grew up and started my adult life and worked for a number of years. It is also where my family and closest friends are based. However, having been in Melbourne for nearly eight years, I now also consider this space home. It is where I have a business, a family and a community that I’m engaged with on a day to day basis. When I arrive back here, it is easy to navigate and the world makes some sort of sense. When I arrive in Christchurch, it is familiar territory but things have changed a lot in the time I have been away and the place is not as familiar as it once was. My identity is that of a New Zealand Pākehā woman, a Kiwi, living in Australia.

## **Becoming a Music Therapist in New Zealand**

I chose to become a music therapist because I was looking for something that I could do where music helped people. My mum found an article on music therapy and suggested I follow that up. I did, meeting with music therapists in Christchurch and spending a year working with Dr Daphne Rickson in Christchurch as part of my Honours degree study. I trained at the New Zealand School of Music (NZSM) and had not really thought about training anywhere else; it suited me at the time to stay in New Zealand and learn there. During my training I undertook practicums in aged care, dementia care, physical disability, mainstream education and special education. I appreciated the experience I gained in all my placements and found the school environment one that resonated most strongly with me. I was fortunate to have placements in two schools, and was able to focus my masters research on using music to facilitate verbal interaction with adolescents in a mainstream setting. (Potter, 2008) So much so that when both of my final placements offered me paid hours after graduating, I took these and used them as a base for developing a portfolio of work, mostly within the education sector.

So I am a Registered Music Therapist who trained in New Zealand and after training worked for a number of years in education settings as well as community care for both adults and children with disabilities. I am also a French Horn player who has played in a number of orchestras, and while living in Christchurch was involved in the show music scene, playing as part of show orchestras for a number of both community and professional groups. Being part of many different musical groups enabled me to be more flexible both in my approach to music and in using music to enable people to develop new skills of their own. It caused me to become very aware of my own skills as a performer and how I could use those as a therapist. It connected me with a tight community of musicians in my local area, and allowed me to be able to hear their perspective on music and life, which was both creative and engaging for me.

I was drawn to working with at-risk families through my local church and the response to the Christchurch earthquakes of 2010 – 2011. I began working as part of a team to help younger mothers with small children cope with heightened anxiety and pressure while raising children. This also stimulated my interest in how younger children and their parents respond and react during music times together, and the longer lasting effects that these times could have for them, in a positive way.

## **Music and Music Therapy Practice in Australia**

After moving to Australia, I looked for some musical groups to join, to build my network of musical friends, but also to provide me with musical input as this was the first time I was working in one place for the majority of the week. I found and joined a Melbourne group of Horn players, the Hornstars, who met purely to play horn music together once a month. I also started to play in some community orchestras and have really enjoyed being able to play in such venues as the Melbourne Town Hall, Recital Centre, and the Sidney Myer Music Bowl. I have also visited a number of regional Victorian towns to play in local theatres, parks and town halls. This taught me a lot about the need in one's life for community and healthy hobbies that feed one's interests.

While pregnant with my daughter, my contract finished at the job I had moved countries five years before. The contract was not renewed for budgetary reasons. This was a real blow to my confidence as a music therapist and as a person. I felt that I somehow had let the school down or I was not good enough for the job any more. However, after much soul searching I realised that this was not about me, but rather about the situation the school was in. There was nothing I could do to change their decision, so I aimed to end well and do my best to leave a space that made music therapy a position they always wanted to have as part of the school.

I was fortunate enough to be head hunted by Arts Centre Melbourne (ACM), to cover for one of their music therapist's maternity leave, and started there when my daughter was eight months old. This position opened a whole new range of opportunities for me. Working with an experienced music therapist colleague, as well as educators, artists and producers, was a great way to explore the possibilities for music therapy in a very different and creative space. The impact of music therapists on teams across the organisation was immense – training staff about disability and sensory awareness, advocating for those with disabilities to access programmes, and providing a music therapy technology based programme for children and adolescents. This was challenging for me, but also exciting. This was where I really became interested in training others, using the skills and knowledge that I had as a music therapist. The work there, along with some private work, also rekindled my interest in working with younger children and their families, and in developing resources that they could use outside the music therapy space.

## **Business Development**

This interest caused me to pursue an idea which had been brewing in my brain for some time, to release an album of original songs for children that have come out of therapy sessions and pair it with a resource book for carers, teachers and parents (Spragg, 2019). This became an exciting reality in 2019 and couldn't have happened without the resources available to me here in Melbourne, including friends and colleagues. This has also led to me formalising my private practice into Sounding Board Music Therapy<sup>1</sup>. After my contract at ACM finished, I began developing this into a more extensive practice incorporating resources, music, sessions, supervision and training sessions for music therapists, carers, teachers, students and parents. Because of my connection with New Zealand, I was fortunate to also be able to offer training and resource development sessions in Christchurch this year and have my album and book used by New Zealand Registered Music Therapists – a dream come true for me. As I write, planning is underway for a second album and resource book, focusing on younger children and family work.

In 2020 COVID-19 hit. Like many small businesses, I found myself desperately trying to shift everything online while still providing great care for my clients. On the whole this was successful, particularly with those clients who found themselves homebound and could actually have more time for sessions. I even picked up a few new clients because of this option. The tricky part of COVID-19 here in Melbourne and around the world has been the length of time required to keep going in the midst of uncertainty. As I write, Melbourne is in its second lockdown with triple digit cases every day and the outlook is rough for the wider metropolitan area. Some clients, particularly younger ones, are struggling to sustain attention in online sessions, so this has been quite disruptive to getting things on track for them. For others, online sessions take away the distractions of everyday environments and allow better focus and concentration.

Apart from using video conferencing platforms for sessions and training webinars, I have also explored using Facebook for open groups with great success. My open community group for parents and young children has shifted to a regular Facebook live video at the same time as our weekly session. This enabled attendees who were part of the community around this group to continue to chat together, enjoy the music and provide in-session feedback. As restrictions have relaxed and then tightened again here in Melbourne, this group has become a great space for this to happen. Many people are watching either the livestream or the video later in the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.soundingboardmusictherapy.com>

week, and commenting as they watch. Some participants gathered in houses to enjoy the session together when restrictions were relaxed; with tighter restrictions again now, they are commenting in Messenger groups during the music session. For me as the music therapist, this is such a different way of working. I can't see or hear participants' reactions and I plan around a theme rather than responding to clients in the moment. However, there is a richness that happens when people engage, comment and send messages – this validates the purpose of this group. Overall, COVID-19 has enabled new business options for many music therapists, which I am sure will continue after the pandemic. However, these come at a cost to businesses, therapists and clients, particularly changed options in the type of sessions available, and the difficulty of long-term lack of face-to-face contact.

## **Reflections**

Reflecting on my experiences in two different countries, I am struck by how rich an experience I have had in being able to work and live in two countries with strong music therapy practices, where the core of the profession is about relationship and development. What a privilege it is to know that my work has a significant impact on the people in my care.

New Zealand music therapists are open to new ideas and people. This means that they often work in settings where there may never have been anything like music therapy before, with limited resources, but with a lot of people supporting them from the sidelines. Their work is generally a broader approach to music therapy – usually very hands on, but also able to incorporate elements of the space they are in. Music Therapy in New Zealand is particularly people-based, which makes it a very strong reflective profession. The importance of the Treaty of Waitangi to New Zealanders is increasingly acknowledged in the country. The awareness and use of Māori language and cultural traditions in music therapy settings is a beautiful approach that is quite unique to New Zealand. Music therapy always strikes me as a very welcoming and embracing profession within New Zealand, full of rich culture and genuine care for people.

Australian music therapists are interested in where people studied and who was in their year group. With more than one music therapy training course in Australia, it seems important for people to find known connections in their profession. The number of music therapists in Australia is also much greater than in New Zealand, so this need for connection makes a lot of sense. In general, Australian culture is a little more competitive than New Zealand as well: where you live, the car you drive, the people you know seem important. Rather than being a negative, this means people tend to push for better

things in their field and to be the absolute best that they can be, leading to higher expectations from clients and customers as well. Australian music therapists tend to think outside the box, working in a larger variety of places than New Zealand music therapists and playing well above their pay grade in work settings. Australian music therapists see themselves as not only clinicians but as consultants, with expertise in many different areas of practice. This has taught me a lot about business and working for myself as a therapist – it has caused me to think longer term about some of the work I'm doing, rather than taking what is offered each month. I have learnt that being more strategic pays off in terms of a business model.

For those who are training, or considering training, to become music therapists, I offer the following thoughts to help you develop your own ideas as you begin your professional journey.

### **1. Don't be afraid to try new things**

The more out of your comfort zone you find yourself, the more the real joy and reward of the work. Being able to improvise and adapt, not only musically but in work and life situations, is probably the most difficult and most rewarding skill to develop. As Gina Leveté says in her book, *No Handicap to Dance*: "Improvisation is a wonderful outlet for expression and a creative game for the imagination" (Leveté, 1993, p.26). As we improve at the art of improvisation we find ourselves working more creatively in many areas.

### **2. People are the most important thing**

If you can see beyond the disability or presentation and find the person behind it, then the music therapy relationship will be able to grow into a powerful force for change in their life. When I have supervised students on placement, the biggest struggle many have is to see beyond the definitions and complex diagnoses, and see people as people first. Those that persevere with this skill make great therapists. This reflects a well known Māori whakataukī (proverb):

He aha te mea nui o te ao?

He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata.

What is the most important thing in the world?

It is people, it is people, it is people.

### **3. Find somewhere you can volunteer with a therapist**

Volunteer at an aged care facility or a hospital or a school, and become used to the environments you could find yourself working in. Being comfortable in an environment enables you to focus on the work of music therapy.

### **4. Read as much as you can!**

Soak it all in but don't forget to relate it to the experiences you have as you train. Ask questions of your supervisors, lecturers and fellow students, so that you can process your learning well. This ability to ask questions and take on board answers remains important as you develop your own career.

### **5. Take every opportunity that comes your way**

Take part in research, writing, reading, working or musical input for yourself. Keeping one's brain active and engaged in the profession allows one to keep the excitement of the work. As a new graduate I took every work opportunity that came as I worked out where my professional direction was going and this has set me up really well for my current work.

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## **Acknowledgements**

As a final thought, I would like to take the opportunity to thank those that have supported me along my music therapy journey, from allowing me to ask questions, to inviting me to work with you, to being objective sounding boards for many varied ideas. The community of support means I am still excited and energised by being part of the music therapy world.

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