# Book Review

# Music Therapy and Autism Across the Lifespan: A Spectrum of Approaches (2019)

Edited by Henry Dunn, Elizabeth Coombes, Emma Maclean,
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Music Therapy and Autism Across the Lifespan: A Spectrum of Approaches offers a comprehensive picture of current trends in music therapy practice with neurodiverse people throughout the United Kingdom. I have continuously practised music therapy in this field, in both Australia and New Zealand, since the start of my career, so I was excited to engage with this book as an opportunity for learning and reflection.

The foreword is provided by Professor Adam Ockelford, whose (2015) Sounds of Intent framework – developed through comprehensive international research – maps musical development in children with learning difficulties. Ockelford’s foreword demonstrates his profound respect for the capacity of music to engage and assist all people, and the important role of music therapists.

Since the book’s publication in 2019, identity-affirming language has been widely recognised as preferred by the neurodiverse community (Botha et al., 2021). I have thus used the term neurodiverse in this review where the book consistently uses autism spectrum conditions (ASCs). The te reo Māori term for autism, takiwātanga (in their own time and space), offers rich insight into Māori understanding of autism and informs our bicultural practice in Aotearoa (Rickson, 2021, 2022).

Dunn’s Introduction gives a brief overview of current thinking in the medical, scientific and neurodiverse communities in the UK. The book continues with a longer “Prelude”, followed by three main sections and a “Postlude”. These musical terms capture how major themes introduced in Warwick’s “Prelude” are picked up by contributing authors, modulated and riffed on, and finally brought together in harmony in Coombes and Maclean’s “Postlude”. Themes include the “journey into the unknown” with both new clients and new approaches; the importance of the client’s voice, whether physical vocalisations or an expression of self; the benefits of non-judgemental listening and attunement to the client’s inner world; and the necessity of positive relationships, creativity, and play to all human development. These themes are explored through case studies, clinical analysis, and some online videos. Stern (1985, 2010), Winnicott (1971), and Trevarthen et al. (1998) are commonly cited by contributing authors throughout the book as underpinning theories of practice.

Part 1: “Improvisational Approaches” is the largest section, with six chapters exploring how music therapists use improvisation to foster connection: with self, and with others such as peers, family members and the music therapist. Chapter 1 details challenges faced by researchers and clinicians in the TIME-A international music therapy study when quantitative and qualitative data seemed to tell conflicting stories (Bieleninik et al., 2017). Chapters 2 and 4 describe two relational models focused on attunement to our client’s inner voice and timing, while helping them move into a shared space and time. These two chapters offer encouragement and useful tools for music therapists feeling caught in the repetitive cycle of explanation and rationale for music therapy within education contexts. Chapters 5 and 6 describe music-centred models, designed to improve meaningful connection and a sense of shared space between peers. In Chapter 6, Robertson demonstrates through a case study how relaxing the boundaries between creative modalities can reduce overwhelm and defensiveness for a client experiencing vulnerability in a shared improvisation.

I found Bates’ discussion on the ethics of encouragement in Chapter 3 enlightening, highlighting layers of reflection I had not yet considered. Since the beneficent will of the therapist gently imposed on another person will ultimately impact their autonomy, how do clinicians navigate "helping” neurodiverse people to balance their desire to engage with their resistiveness to do so? By developing robust reflective practices, and then trusting both our attunement to the client and our own therapeutic decision-making: “Follow your own ethical rudder and know that your client’s hand is on the tiller as well as your own” (p. 93).

In Part 2: “Collaborative Approaches”, the focus shifts from analysing improvisational encounters, or a client journey, to how music therapists collaborate within multidisciplinary teams and engage with families. The family-based collaborative work discussed in Chapters 4 and 7 will resonate with Australasian music therapists familiar with the work of significant practitioners and researchers in our region (Rickson, 2021; Rickson et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2014).

In Chapter 8, Maclean & Tillotson use case studies to illustrate collaborative partnerships with health and educational professionals. I found their discussion of the push and pull between educational and therapeutic aims mirrored in my own experience, where goals often need to be framed in service of “learning”. In Chapter 10, Morrison leads a multidisciplinary team attempting to expand a young man’s experience of the world through music therapy, where previous therapeutic support has not met his complex needs.

Several authors in this section also describe potential or perceived vulnerability for the music therapist working in a shared space, whether this is a family home (Chapter 7), or a classroom (Chapters 8 and 9). Fawcett (Chapter 9) makes the compelling claim that, in the absence of a designated space, the music therapist can intentionally compensate with their therapeutic presence. In my own sessions, I often use familiar routines and an attuned therapeutic presence to offset the limitations of using a shared or changing space. It is rarely possible to have a consistent space reserved for music therapy in school settings. New Zealand music therapists have found creative ways to compensate for this – for example, having a mobile space, such as the Little Musical Caravan (Langlois Hunt, 2022).

Part 3: “Approaches Connected with Identity and Culture” consists of three lengthy chapters. I found myself needing to take in bite-sized chunks of text over several readings, to better grasp the rich explorations on developing the autistic self through non-verbal voice work (Chapter 11), and self-realisation through psychosynthesis (Chapter 13). A person-centred approach (Chapter 12) came closest to my prior expectations of how this section might address neurodiverse culture, through co-creating the therapy space with the client and rejecting a deficit or developmental framework for assessment and evaluation.

The book centres the Western social model of disability as the basis for understanding neurodiversity. I noticed a missed opportunity – especially in Part 3 – for explicit discussion of multicultural perspectives. Part 3 would also have benefitted from a chapter submitted by a service user or neurodiverse practitioner, to whakamana (increase the dignity and respect for) the neurodiverse and disabled perspective (Kalenderidis, 2020; Shaw, 2019, 2022). While attunement to client voice is a repeated theme, analyses in the book are still the perceptions of empathic, neurotypical clinicians.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Over two-thirds of the book chapters focus on pre-school or primary school aged children, with only four chapters covering clinical work in adolescence and adulthood. Creating a balance of contributions across the lifespan was not identified as a challenge by the editors, but seems to reflect the lack of opportunities for neurodiverse people to access music therapy and other services when they finish school.

This book is not intended to be a comprehensive handbook for music therapy with neurodiverse people. In the “Postlude”, the editors acknowledge that music therapy training and perspectives in the UK build on a rich foundation of improvisational approaches from pioneers such as Nordoff and Robbins (1977/2007) and Alvin (Alvin & Warwick, 1978/1992). Music therapists in Aotearoa New Zealand will likely complement improvisational approaches with a range of eclectic methods in line with our specific context and training (Hoskyns, 2017; Shaw, 2006; Storie & Hoskyns, 2016; Swaney, 2018; Talmage & Molyneux, 2014).

Neurodiverse people and their whanau may find this book valuable as evidence of the benefits of music therapy for the neurodiverse community. However, it is primarily targeted at music therapists and professionals in health and education. I would recommend it to practitioners looking to explore collaborative and improvisational music therapy approaches with neurodiverse people in childhood and beyond.

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<https://tinyurl.com/f7sppk27>

1. No author has submitted a biography within this book identifying as neurodiverse, although there may be authors who have not self-disclosed. No offence is intended by this constructive critique. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)