

Book Review

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Karette Stensaeth, *Responsiveness in Music Therapy Improvisation: A Perspective Inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin*. Barcelona Publishers: Dallas, TX, 2017; 193 pp.: ISBN 9781945411236, £28

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There are few (if any) music therapy texts that have drawn so heavily on Mikhail Bakhtin's work. Karette Stensaeth lists other music therapists – Gary Ansdell, Mercedes Pavlicevic, Rudy Garred and Brynjulf Stige – that have used Bakhtin's ideas, yet none have engaged with his work in such detail. Furthermore, none have used his ideas so comprehensively in relation to improvisation in music therapy. So, this book is unique in its scope and depth.

Stensaeth sets out her purpose clearly: ' . . . to outline novel perspectives on responsiveness in music therapy improvisation that might provide a fresh conceptual framework for the broad value of active and creative music-making in therapy' (p. 3). What Stensaeth discovers and the journey she takes, comes across as powerfully personally significant. Beginning with her initial encounters with music and her discovery of music therapy, she opens a door into a philosophical field of play, and takes us on a rich, multi-layered, intimate and expansive journey. As well as viewing music therapy improvisation through Bakhtin's philosophical lenses, she uses it to embrace fundamental existential and ontological questions that may resonate with many music therapists, namely 'what is music therapy?' and 'what is your role as a music therapist?'

I would describe my own approach to music therapy as having a relational focus, based on person-centred practice, as set out by Brendan McCormack and Tanya McCance (2016), and informed by psychodynamic theory. For me, improvisation is absolutely central to my practice and this can manifest in many varied ways. It rests on an embodied and relational conception of improvisation which does not always involve active music making, and so in this way differs from Stensaeth's focus on an *active* creative music therapy approach. This was something I had to consider as I progressed through the text. I hope that my own point of view and cultural background allows open and constructive dialogue in the Bakhtinian spirit so described.

The book originates from Stensaeth's doctoral study. Therefore, it centres around research into her own music therapy practice. She begins the book by re-defining core concepts in music therapy, as if setting out her music therapy room and choosing which instruments she would like to have available.

Stensaeth writes from the point of view of a Norwegian-based and Norwegian-trained music therapist, steeped in that culture, thinking and practice. She firmly situates her 'active' music therapy ontology as having grown out of a particular Norwegian music therapy scene and time. Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins are identified as core influences (p. 18) and in practice she embraces their Creative Music Therapy (2007) approach, despite pointing out that Bakhtin's existential dialogical philosophy diverges from their ' . . . assumption that the client's personality is developed from within, using inner resources . . . ' (p. 19). Other influences include Ken Bruscia and Even Ruud, and these music therapy threads underpin both her approach to music therapy and her terminology. In line with her music therapy approach, Stensaeth (p. 17) has chosen the term *music therapy improvisation* (Pavlicevic, 1997, 2000) over, for example, *clinical improvisation* (Aigen, 1991; Seabrook, 2017) or *improvisational music therapy* (Bruscia, 2014; Wigram, 2004).

The particular focus on Bakhtin, and philosophy and theory in general, clearly distinguishes it from other more practically oriented music therapy texts exploring improvisation, for example, Bruscia (1987), Nordoff and Robbins (2007), Gardstrom (2007) or Wigram (2004), and Stensaeth also separates herself from – though briefly refers to – a relational intersubjective approach, as detailed by Trondalen (2016). Intersubjective perspectives and work from developmental theorists such as Colwyn Trevarthen are glanced over only briefly in the course of the book and more psychodynamically informed perspectives on music therapy are not referred to at all.

Another distinguishing feature of the book is that Stensaeth aims to address her topic from an insider perspective, embracing an 'indigenous ideal' (p. 5). In doing so, she invites a celebration of particular music-therapy-ness, or music therapy *communitas* (Ruud, 1998). Keeping in mind the focus on a particular understanding of music therapy improvisation, I took this as a call to music therapists generally to engage with the text dialogically; to approach the concepts as infinitely layered and continually unfolding alongside their own thinking and practice.

In this spirit, Stensaeth ends with a question: 'Is the book itself answerable? Indeed, this is not up to me to decide; instead, now the responsibility lies with you, its reader. Remember, however; that there are no last words . . . ' (p. 174). For me, this recalled David Toop's (2016) introductory words to his book *Into the maelstrom: Music, improvisation and the dream of freedom: before 1970*, 'Like improvisation itself, we can only begin' (p. 7).

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) was a Russian philosopher whose extensive work spans phenomenology, sociology, linguistics and history of literature (p. 73). His philosophy of dialogue has been influential in many different fields and his core idea of *responsiveness* is the red thread on which Stensaeth's thesis is based. Introducing the reader to this concept, she transposes his idea of responsiveness directly: '... responsiveness in music therapy improvisation emerges as a situated process and as an enactment of everyday living in music-related terms' (p. 14).

For Stensaeth, music itself is a universal force and music therapists act as companions or accompanists, not simply to the music or sounds of their clients, but also their lives. For Bakhtin, *action* is a key term and in Stensaeth's music therapy improvisation, responsiveness happens *in action-with-other*. Bakhtin, she writes,

... would also claim that as an artistic action, music therapy is most music therapy when it happens in the course of action – it is not defined by the words with which we describe it or the metaphors through which we create images of it. (pp. 15–16)

In setting out her understanding of action and the importance of the term in music therapy improvisation, Stensaeth also briefly highlights connections between Even Ruud's (1998) broad definition of music therapy as offering 'increased possibilities for action' (p. 39) and views from theorists outside music therapy, such as sociologists Dag Østerberg and Ivar Frønes. For music therapists who do not read Norwegian, this provides important insights into otherwise unknown work, and also further locates her thinking culturally. Drawing mostly on Østerberg's work, action and intention are set out as a fundamental dialectic process in Stensaeth's music therapy improvisation. With the focus on these theoretical frames, I found that I missed the nuance of a music therapy inter-action as a relational experience here. Perhaps, this was my culturally situated reading of the text, but this feeling stayed with me throughout the book.

Following on from this contextualisation, Stensaeth outlines 'narratives' of two excerpts of improvisational dialogue from a music therapy session with a client Jakob and also provides written musical scores. She does not refer to how or why she chose the two excerpts but makes clear that the music therapy session was arranged as part of her doctoral study. Eleven music therapy 'observers' were enlisted to view the sessions and make comments.

The 'narratives' are a combination of voices from her personal logs, comments from the observing music therapists, and Stensaeth's own observations of the session. Here, she chooses to designate herself differently depending on her role as music therapist (Karla) and observer (music therapist). I found that this splitting of voice, in addition to a third-person narrative, affected my sense of coherence of the text. It also served to somehow dislocate the narratives from the overall narrator voice (Stensaeth as researcher and writer) and so the chapters suddenly felt removed or abstracted in the book. This layering of voices appears to be a Bakhtinian notion – perhaps, a polyphonic literary device he used – yet, in this differentiation of voice and with Stensaeth's focus on Bakhtin's theories, I also found myself losing a sense of Jakob's voice.

We reach a full exposition of Bakhtin's theories in chapters 6, 7 and 8, yet it feels as though the reader may already have a feel for how Bakhtin thinks. I found these chapters dense, theoretically laden and full of fascinating and intricate information. For somebody who has not encountered Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy before, Stensaeth provides an in-depth and manageable introduction to the key concepts of *answerability*, *dialogue* and *carnival* in chapter 8, with related terms such as *addressivity*, *the utterance*, *heteroglossia*, *ventriloquism* and *authorship* also included.

Stensaeth identifies enjoyment as a fundamental part of the improvisational musical encounter, wondering aloud if music therapists are all but jesters? Her exploration of Bakhtin's *carnival* and its relation to improvisation was of particular interest given my own research in embodied experiences of humour in music therapy (Haire and Oldfield, 2009; Haire and MacDonald, 2019). Bakhtin's carnival embraces a societal suspension of reality, ideas of chaos, bawdy humour, rule-breaking and an unashamed celebration of the body and all its pleasures. In a music therapy context, for me, it speaks to an idea of improvisation as an embodied experience in which rules are embraced, tested and rewritten, and there are clear links to humour and improvisation. A central element of improvisation in music therapy for me is that it pushes against perceived aesthetic structures or ideas of form, while embracing fundamental interactional structures of being with 'other'.

Towards the end of the book, Stensaeth returns to Bakhtin's core concepts of responsiveness, dialogue, answerability and carnival and in a reflective synthesis moves to further integrate these ideas with her growing conceptualisation of responsiveness in music therapy improvisation. Through merging her reflexive and multi-voiced narratives with Bakhtin's ideas of dialogue and answerability, she is able to consider responses in music therapy as 'musical-relational responses' (p. 98). Through the density of these final chapters and her merging of different complex ideas, I struggled to keep an embodied sense of music therapy improvisation alive. The further Stensaeth moved into Bakhtin's philosophy, the more dislocated from the music therapy improvisation narratives, and my own music therapy practice, I began to feel.

Arriving at a resting place with 'musical answerability', Stensaeth outlines her theory of responsiveness in music therapy improvisation: 'Musical answerability is most of all an adequate form to verbally express how I understand responsiveness in music therapy improvisation as authentic human life and an open-ended dialogue' (p. 156). Musical answerability, it seems, gives Stensaeth words and meaning with which to adequately articulate what happens in music therapy improvisation.

Before reading this book, I was hugely excited and intrigued as to what it might hold for thinking around music therapy improvisation yet my own assumptions about the broadness of the title 'Responsiveness in music therapy improvisation' meant, I frequently had to remind myself of Stensaeth's firmly situated ideas of music therapy improvisation along with her task of thinking music therapy *with* Bakhtin (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012).

This is wholly intended as a music therapists' text. Indeed, I would not recommend the text for people with no prior knowledge of music therapy. The book overflows with philosophical and theoretical material which makes it difficult to stay with for long periods of time. While I found Bakhtin's work relevant and expansive in relation to dialogues in music therapy improvisation, at times the book somehow seems to creak under the weight of Bakhtin's thought and for me, misses the wideness of what improvisation can mean in a broader context. I would have been interested to hear in more depth about how Bakhtin's philosophy could work with other theorists from musical, improvisational, relational and psychodynamic fields. I felt I was left hanging with Stensaeth's words:

One could say that my theory on musical answerability, because it reveals an intuitive form of interplay other than that which is influenced by the early interaction analogy, for example, could reveal how normal interaction could be promoted when the starting point for one of the parties in the relationship is abnormal. (p. 172)

I found too that there were times when the theoretical density outweighed an embodied thread of responsiveness, and answerability in music therapy. Stensaeth's style of chunking up the writing into short paragraphs worked to give regular breaths as she addressed deep and complex concepts. However, this chunking also broke up the text and sometimes affected a sense of coherence. There were moments too, when I wondered whether meaning had changed with translation. In summarising the main characteristics of her theory of answerability, the sudden use of the word 'quaint' (p. 156) seemed incongruous.

While Bakhtin's concepts of responsiveness, dialogue, answerability and addressability provide interesting lenses through which to conceptualise music therapy improvisation as set out by Stensaeth, I found that an overly intellectual position sometimes distracted from the situated practice of music therapy improvisation. The purely philosophical approach felt incongruous with my practice and I was left with questions around what it is about Bakhtin's philosophical theory of dialogue that moves beyond, for example, Mercedes Pavlicevic's (1997) *dynamic form*, Daniel Stern's (2004) description of *vitality affects* and Stephen Malloch and Colwyn Trevarthen (2010) theory of *communicative musicality*.

So, are Bakhtin's ideas useful in relation to music therapy improvisation?

For many music therapists, this book may be their first introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin and his philosophy of dialogue is relevant and fascinating to translate into a music therapy context. Although not bringing anything startlingly new to theories around music therapy improvisation, Stensaeth's book does offer a way-in to Bakhtin, and her Bakhtinian lens does offer different conceptual perspectives to think with. Bakhtin's theories and ideas about dialogue are profoundly absorbing and provoke deep existential searching into what it means to be improvising with someone in music therapy.

Stensaeth's open stance in relation to dialogic thinking challenged me to remain dialogic in my own thinking and I found myself reflecting on the book long after I read it; continuing to dialogue and question and turn over ideas that she had surfaced. When Stensaeth returns to her opening question 'what is music therapy?' I found myself recognising that the book had provoked useful self-dialogue around what *my* music therapy is.

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