



The Modern Idea of Creativity and its Influence on Music Therapy

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, improvisation has been recognized as one of the most important tools for music therapy. Several accounts have been made concerning the importance of improvisation, each from a particular music therapist's point of view. In this essay, my objective is to consider how modern, Western ideas concerning improvisation have informed the practices and philosophies of music therapy. I begin with a comparison of traditional Japanese ideas concerning creativity and modern Western conceptions of creativity and improvisation, focusing in particular on the influence of 'reflexive modernity'. Next I consider the influence of reflexive modernity on improvisation within contemporary music therapy, discussing the psychologized tendencies of modern music and music therapy. I conclude by invoking Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'line of flight' to advocate for a model of music therapy that connects the music and the individual to something outside as in *The Otoasobi Project* in Japan and in various non-Western healing traditions.

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INTRODUCTION¹

I was born in Japan and studied music composition, not in Japanese music but in Western contemporary styles. Then I learned about Paul Nordoff's work with physically and cognitively disabled children, which emphasized musical improvisation. That is how I started to study music therapy and came to play music as an improviser.

As an Asian person who has studied Western music and music therapy in Japan, I have considered a simple question: is Nordoff's approach to music and music therapy universal for children all over the world? The related question "is music universal?" is being asked increasingly within community music therapy and culture-centered music therapy (Stige, 1998). These fields often focus on the diversity and multiplicity of cultural forms, but rarely on the ideological underpinnings of Western musical improvisation. Therefore I would like to investigate some of the discourses surrounding musical improvisation within Western music, and their influence on music therapy.

One of the foundational texts concerning musical improvisation in music therapy is Paul Nordoff's *Healing Heritage* (Robbins & Robbins, 1998) in which he examines different parameters of music and their implications for music therapy practice. Kenneth Bruscia (1987) has compared different models of music therapy that emphasize improvisation. Tony Wigram's *Improvisation: Methods and techniques for music therapy clinicians, educators, and students* (2004) is a practice-oriented resource designed to help music therapists incorporate improvisation into their music therapy sessions. However, in this literature there seems to be no discussion concerning the Western assumptions that underpin the idea of improvisation among music therapists.

JAPANESE AND WESTERN IDEAS OF CREATIVITY

In order to compare Japanese and Western ideas of creativity, I would like to begin with a traditional Japanese poem²:

ほのぼのと明石のうらの朝霧に島がくれゆく舟をしぞ思ふ 古今和歌集

*In the gloaming
Across Akashi Bay
Through the morning mists
Vanishing between the islands
I follow a boat with my thoughts.*

The author of this short Japanese poem, written in a style of poetry called Waka, didn't specifically express anything on his mind. He merely told of a boat vanishing, and didn't say whether it was beautiful or sad. Many Japanese have shared this aesthetic for centuries. I think this aesthetic can be found in the attitudes of many contemporary Japanese artists including new improvisers like Taku Sugimoto or

¹ This essay is a revised version of the keynote speech presented at the SocArts International Symposium 2010 held at Exeter University.

² Unknown (2011) Topic unknown. Trans. by Dr. Thomas McAuley. Accessed 25 March 2015: <http://www.temcauley.staff.shef.ac.uk/waka0552.shtml>

other so-called “silent school” musicians who often remain silent for extended periods, waiting to emerge with musical statements that are ambiguous, fragile, and vulnerable. Ambiguity, fragility and vulnerability seem to underlie many aspects of Japanese aesthetics of artistic creativity. Some Japanese philosophers explain that these attitudes are rooted in the Buddhist world-view of uncertainty (Kobayashi).

Let us compare this attitude to Western ideas concerning improvisation and creativity. In Western culture, improvisation seems to be generally understood as a process of creation. Jason Toynbee (2003) has pointed out that artistic creation is often discussed as a transformational process in which an inchoate state is developed into a new idea with a ‘definite form’. Toynbee refers to George Steiner’s *Grammars of Creation* which claims that the link between transformation and creation can be traced to the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation (Toynbee, 2003: 104). We might trace the idea of creation in Western discourse even further to the first verse in the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”.

I cannot help but wonder if Western ideas concerning creativity have been influenced by these grand narratives of divine creation and transformation. However, modernism has offered alternate, and highly influential, narratives concerning artistic creation, notably the idea of ‘reflexive modernity’ (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994).

REFLEXIVE MODERNITY, ARTISTIC CREATION, AND IMPROVISATION

Reflexive modernity refers to processes through which different aspects of modernity self-consciously reform and reconstruct themselves from a reflective viewpoint at a “meta” level. I would suggest that modern conceptions of creativity in the arts—including improvisation—can be explained, in part, through the idea of reflexive modernity. Take, for example, Derek Bailey’s (1993) idea of non-idiomatic improvisation. Unlike idiomatic modes of improvisation (such as jazz), non-idiomatic improvisation can be understood as a self-reflexive mode of improvisation that does not rely on traditional or preexisting musical languages. In this regard, non-idiomatic improvisation, with its emphasis on continual innovation and inventiveness, bears the influence of reflexive modernity. These modern Western ideas of creativity and improvisation have had a significant, if generally unacknowledged, influence on the field of music therapy.

IMPROVISATION AND MUSIC THERAPY

Music therapy, an allied health profession that began in the United States and Britain around 1960, explores the therapeutic effects of a wide range of musical activities from listening to participative modes of music making including singing songs and playing instruments. Musical improvisation has become an increasingly important tool, especially within the Nordoff-Robbins approach. Likewise, improvisation is an important part of psychodynamic music therapy (also known as analytical music therapy), which was developed by British music therapist Mary Priestley. As Leslie Bunt points out, ‘improvisation’ is one of essential four ‘I’s’ in music therapy practice, together with ‘imagination’, ‘intuition’ and ‘intellect’ (2002, p. 45-50). Improvisation, in short, has been recognized as one of the most important tools for music therapy in recent years.

Different music therapists have stressed the importance of improvisation to music therapy for a variety of reasons: Mary Priestley (1994) connects improvisation to the psychoanalytic methods of Freud or Jung; Even Ruud (1998) describes improvisation as a 'liminal experience', referring to the work of cultural anthropologist Victor Turner; Brunyulf Stige (1998) views improvisation as a 'language game' by referring to Wittgenstein; Mercedes Pavlicevic (1997) has discussed the communicative aspects of improvisation by referring to Daniel Stern's conception of 'affect attunement'. These accounts can be regarded as efforts to grasp the significance of improvisation from each music therapist's particular point of view. However, the problem is that all of these accounts tacitly adopt the modern Western model of musical improvisation without question or hesitation. In contrast, I would like to examine two aspects of these specifically modern and Western ideas of improvisation and their influence on music therapy practice: first, the tendency to frame music therapy sessions as a series of progressive linear narratives, and second the 'psychologization' of music.

PROGRESSIVE NARRATIVES AND PSYCHOLOGIZATION IN MUSIC THERAPY

Many music therapy case reports are written along a progressive line from the start to the end, something Kenneth J. Gergen has called the "progressive narrative" (2009, p. 39). In some cases, when the sessions do not develop along such a line, the therapist takes it as failure and reflects as to why the therapy did not work. This can be understood, in part, as a consequence of quantitative research methodologies. But this emphasis on the progressive narrative also bears traces of reflexive modern notions of arts creation and improvisation, namely, the idea that improvisation must be innovative and developmental.

Likewise, the psychologization of music can be regarded as a result of reflexive modernity. Japanese Lacanian sociologist Aiko Kashimura (2007) has used the concept of psychologization to explain the effects of reflexive modernity on society: she suggests that the reflexive, ever-changing nature of modern society brings instability in people's minds; as a result, they tend to rely on more logical things, or logics that seem to be stable, and therefore seek a psychological account of what is happening, applying it to all aspects of personal and social phenomena, including music and music therapy. For example, music therapists tend to concentrate on the interior, private aspects of a client's improvised music making, interpreting their musical expression as if it has no connection to the outside world or universe. We may call such modes of music-making, which so clearly bear the influence of reflexive modernity, 'psychologized music'. Although such psychologized modes of musical improvisation may have psychotherapeutic benefits within music therapy settings, they deprive the music of its full restorative potential.

I cannot stop imagining that music's greatest transformational power is its potential to extend beyond the individual and beyond itself—to the earth, to the sublime, to the spiritual. When we consider music in non-western, non-modern societies, it is easy to find music's links to spirituality, to the dead, to the cosmos and so on. Modern societies have tended to regard such connections as superstitious or naïve and have tried to sever the links between the musical and the extra-musical. But again, I want to stress music's potential, within music therapy practice and in general,

to articulate—and articulate with—concepts, ideas, and traditions that are bigger than itself.

CONCLUSION

I began with a comparison between conceptions of creativity within Japanese literature and modern Western improvisation, the latter of which bears traces of reflexive modernity. Then I proceeded to discuss the influence of those traces on improvisation within music therapy, namely the psychologization of music which may well have psychotherapeutic benefits, but does not explore the power and profundity of music to its full potential.

The central point that I would like to share is the importance of drawing a ‘line of flight’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) from music therapy to something outside the individual. Carolyn Kenny’s (1982) attempts to develop music therapeutic rituals are suggestive in this regard, in part because she did not try to rationalize her practice using modern Western music therapy language. Another incisive model is the celebratory chaos of *The Otoasobi Project* in Japan (discussed elsewhere in this volume). We have much to learn from such alternative approaches to music therapy and from opening up discussion about received music therapy practices and their benefits. Doing so puts us on a path towards reconciling different understandings of improvisation and creativity and their potential for extended health.

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