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# Aesthetic Sense and Sensibility: Arts-based Research and Music Therapy

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# Editorial

## *Aesthetic Sense and Sensibility: Arts-Based Research and Music Therapy*

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### Part One: Science Fiction

#### **Ein Heldenleben (A Hero's Life), Op. 40: Richard Strauss**

The year is 2091. I am walking down a simulated path in the woods created by artificial intelligence. My destination is unclear but my mission is not: In the midst of crippling global unrest and environmental decay, I was sent what appears to be an extraterrestrial message to "look for evidence of the humanity that binds people together." Artists have become increasingly valued for their methods and sensibilities. No longer minimized as mere entertainment, people have begun to realize that the artistic process holds certain knowledge that is needed at this crucial moment in time.

Post-positivistic researchers have worked on the computer intelligence that has led to the creation of this wooden path that I am now walking. Phenomenologists and grounded theorists have conducted endless interviews and observation to understand the essence of being in nature. The knowledge gathered by these mixed methods have played a pivotal role in bringing me into this moment; I can actually feel the earth below my feet and I intuitively have a deep sense of trust for this space, artificial as it may be.

As I continue my walk, the road becomes rocky and moss distorts the clarity of my path ahead. I become disoriented and panic until I remember to look up toward the virtual night sky. As I do, I become aware of the moonlight, which illuminates a tree line that veers to the right. I move my body to turn and a glittering sparkle by my feet reveals a small object on the side of the road. Surprised, I reach down, pick it up, and discover what looks to be an ancient whistle with markings that read "one note at a time leads to a symphony of wonder and tragedy, which grow on the same vine."

A voice from outside the simulator says, "We did not program that into this artificial intelligence. Don't trust it. It could be an anomaly and is probably nothing to worry about."

"You can't tell that to a musician," I say lightheartedly and yet dismissively. "Why else would you bring me here? I have to play it!"

#### **Hummingbird Chorus from *Madame Butterfly*: Giacomo Puccini**

I pick the whistle up and gently breathe into the mouthpiece. One clear oscillating tone rings out. Its overtones and

warmth are unbearably gorgeous, and I find myself all at once altered and present. Suddenly, the path to the right lights up and glows with fireflies, each one with its own unique tone, which combine to make a shimmering symphony. I can hear mission control in my earpiece; they sound nervous. "Don't worry, we'll figure out how to solve this problem. Give us an hour to locate the mistake in our algorithm."

Ignoring their panic, I turn off my headset. This is not an irregularity of an artificial intelligence; this is intelligence unfolding: natural, instinctual, and perhaps Divine.

#### **Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten: Arvo Pärt**

As I continue my journey, I notice that the music is slowly changing. Each time a firefly's light disappears, the space begins to feel emptier. My heart beats fast; I can't turn back now and I am propelled to move forward. The last firefly light dims and I stop. All that is around me is wind and the vastness of space. Doubtful, I mumble to myself, "What have I gotten myself into? I should not have come this way."

Suddenly, I feel a deep rumble underneath me and the ground begins to crumble. I begin a long, slow decent. As I plummet down, the inertia of my movement pushes the whistle out of my pocket and it floats in front of my face. I had forgotten all about it. I reach for it, press my trembling lips against it, and muster up whatever breath I can. As I blow into the whistle, my lungs fill back up, rushing with cool air. Out from the whistle, the glow of a thousand fireflies emerges; they have been with me the entire time.

#### **Death and Transfiguration (Tod und Verklärung), Op. 24: Richard Strauss**

One by one, the fireflies spread out around me, helping me gracefully land. Curiously, though I have been falling down for quite some time, I find myself not underground but back home, outside the artificial simulator. This place is familiar but everything is different. The glow of the fireflies illuminates people and places I have never seen, both beautiful and tragic. The fireflies begin to separate, making their way to different individuals in this space. Without the slightest bit of fear of being cliché, I think, "These are lights that shine within each of us."

The last firefly flutters in front of my nose. I put my finger out and feel a surge of energy rush through my body. I have to sing; I have to create. As I do, some people join me with their light, while others are curious but appear to need more time to trust what has been given to them. Some have decided to turn off their light and remain hidden. "I failed. Why can't

everyone accept this light?" I think to myself. But just then, I notice a younger person, reminding me of myself, looking down the same path I started on earlier. I reach out to share my whistle with this person for their journey.

"Thank you, but I won't need it," they say in a grateful tone.

"Why?" I ask curiously but already intuit the answer.

"I trust that this path will provide me with what I need to bring back."

"I look forward to seeing what that will be," I say.

### Part Two: Aesthetic Sensibility, Clinical Practice, and Research

This special focus of *Music Therapy Perspectives* seeks to explore one of the bonds that connect art, research, and music therapy practice: *aesthetic sensibility*. Aesthetic sensibility is revealed within the delicate spark of creativity; a moment where training, craftsmanship, intuition, lived experience, and social, cultural, political, and historical situatedness collide. The spark ignites into a passionate artistic process, which yields an artifact and/or performance. People encounter the art and can be moved by it, reject it, judge it, critique it; sometimes, it stays with a person and continues to reveal itself over the course of time. Whatever the reaction, it all goes back to the sensibility of the people who sought to explore, invent, and discover through the act of creation.

I first saw the term *artist-as-researcher* used by [Finley and Knowles \(1995\)](#) to describe the integrated role of an investigator in ABR. As a music therapist, I found comfort in this expression. I had always compartmentalized various aspects of my professional self: musician and music lover, clinician, researcher, educator, and advocate. ABR provided me a space where these various parts comprised a whole; where they could sometimes sit in tension, while at other times integrate fluidly. Music therapists are in a distinct position to contribute to ABR due to their daily encounters with aesthetic material and translating it into information that impacts treatment, education, supervision, and research in music therapy. ABR can provide a space for music therapy clinicians to translate their talents, expertise, and sensibilities into research. The aesthetic knowledge revealed within ABR can bring new understandings of musical processes in therapy and allow the complexities of social phenomena relevant to music therapy be seen via artistic engagement and performance.

[Aigen \(2007\)](#) views aesthetic experiences as a central component to understanding clinical practice, suggesting that artistic goals and values are legitimate sources of knowledge to be harnessed by music therapists. He suggests that aesthetic knowledge allows people to discover meaning in their everyday life, feel connected to a fundamental reality, experience themselves in transformation as aesthetic beings, and experience truth regarding the human condition. Although Aigen is not talking specifically about ABR, the reader is encouraged to see connections between therapeutic intention and the goals of transformational research within the realm of aesthetics. ABR allows the freedom for artists-as-researchers to trust and honor the role of aesthetic experiences to reveal complexities of social phenomena just as we value its role to help our clients achieve health-related goals.

ABR allows artists-as-researchers to understand clinical practice by immersing themselves in the music therapy

methods, experiences, relationships, and approaches that we use as a clinician; ABR provides artists-as-researchers a space to trust and harness their own aesthetic sensibilities as a source of knowledge; ABR allows artists-as-researchers to place ethical values at the center of inquiry, finding the courage to challenge conventional means of inquiry and ways of knowing. Overall, ABR seeks to find beauty and value in the everyday life of people whose voices are often not heard and honors the complexities of their lives. I hope that this edition of *Music Therapy Perspectives* inspires its readers to artistically explore research questions, create new possibilities, and perform findings from discoveries made that will impact the social challenges we face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Part Three: About This Edition

The thread stitching the articles in this special edition together is the artistry demonstrated by each of the authors within their own discipline and topic. This includes both the care they show in voicing the articles, as well as the art, music, and theater displayed throughout. Authors have chosen to voice themselves as artists, researchers, educators, advocates, and clinicians; choices have been made by some to demonstrate pluralism in their writing by including gender-neutral pronouns, even in the face of not knowing its use in traditional academic writing (Forinash; Viega). Creating a special focus that was artistically engaging was primary; hence, readers have access to video performances of ABR (Viega; Austin), images of artwork (Kay), music scores and theatrical scripts (Austin), and intimate narratives of each author's direct engagement with ABR in research, clinical, and educational settings.

I begin the special edition by discussing the role of axiology, the values of aesthetics and ethics, in ABR. Using [Crotty's \(1998\)](#) differentiation between methods and methodology, I summarize the broad role of the arts in research across the spectrum of ABR in various disciplines including music therapy: *art as an adjunctive method in qualitative research*, *art as a primary method in qualitative research*, *art as its own methodology in research*, and *art as a radical event in research*. Part two of the article explores axiology as a central component when considering ABR as its own methodology distinctive from quantitative and qualitative paradigms. Following this, I explore the decision-making processes I made while conducting an ABR study that were steeped in axiology. The primary goal for this article is not to define a singular approach to ABR, or to further silo it apart from other research methodologies, but instead to suggest that a spectrum of possibilities for design, evaluation, and dissemination emerges when artists-as-researchers are located within axiology.

Diane Austin's study, *Grace Street*, is often cited as the first example of ABR in music therapy. For this journal, she revisits what it felt like for her to experience the lives of those in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and uncovers the spark for her to creatively research the question "what keeps people coming back to AA" using ABR methods. In this article, Austin brings readers into the world of *Grace Street* through narrative and storytelling, allowing us insight into her artistic and research processes through her aesthetic sensibly. The results of *Grace Street* are disseminated here via the script and scores of the musical she created. The hope of this article is to not

only historically preserve the results of a pioneering piece of research in music therapy, but also for others to use the script and scores in other settings as a way to learn and explore her findings.

Lisa Kay's article discusses her evolving identity as an artist-as-researcher and her journey integrating herself as an artist, art therapist, educator, and researcher within the creative practice of *bricolage*. This term refers to an artist's use of various materials to construct artwork, similar to how a DJ might sample various sound sources to create a new piece of music. Not only is Kay suggesting bricolage as a method for ABR, but she is also expressing her creative worldview by identifying herself as a bricoleur. Her perspective views artistic, research, and clinical processes as synonymous creative endeavors, and she suggests, "I invite the readers to consider themselves as bricoleurs. As creative arts therapists we balance our artistic self, our professional self, and our personal self; I invite the reader to view this as an integrative practice." This viewpoint supports the primary intention of this special edition on ABR.

Laura Beer's article focuses on how music experiences, indigenous to music therapy, can inform research design and be used as a method to construct knowledge within a qualitative paradigm. Central to her perspective is the role that reflexivity plays within ABR. For the author, aesthetic sensibility is revealed in both musical (such as improvisation as a means for data generation) and nonmusical methods of research design (such as triangulation and self-reflective journaling). Her work highlights the inherent connections between the reflexive and creative processes of music therapy practice and ABR design.

Michele Forinash has over twenty years experience advising student research as an expressive arts therapies educator at Lesley University, Boston, MA. She draws upon her vast experience to share her expertise on supervising ABR studies. Her article is reflexive and intimate, sharing the encounters she has had with students throughout the years. The knowledge she brings back from her experiences provides those who might supervise ABR studies some guidance on how to navigate the relationships fostered within artistic inquiries.

Finally, video performances representing the results of two different ABR studies examined in this special edition are presented here and can be accessed online through Oxford University Press. The first is "Rising from the Ashes," which is the performative results from my study "*Loving Me and My Butterfly Wings*": A Study of Hip-Hop Songs Written by Adolescents in Music Therapy. Second is *Grace Street*, Diane Austin's ABR musical that explores the lives of four composite characters who are in AA. Both of these performances occurred on March 12, 2015, at the State University of New York (SUNY), New Paltz, as part of an evening of ABR performance. Accompanying these videos are artist statements, where each performer reflects on these performances to reveal the cyclical nature of ABR in continuously generating data through direct engagement with ABR artifacts.

This special edition on ABR for *Music Therapy Perspectives* represents a continuation of the scholarly dialogue on the role of the arts in, and as, research in music therapy. Jane Edwards recently edited a special edition on ABR for the

*Journal of Music Therapy* (Winter 2015), which presented diverse approaches for utilizing the arts as a medium to express music therapy theory (Kenny) and as a means to explore experience of music therapists (Gilbertson) and clients (McCaffrey & Edwards).

As McCaffrey and Edwards (2015) exclaim:

We celebrate this opportunity to further promote the novel and exciting possibilities for music therapy researchers engaging ABR. This freedom can allow for development of innovative research procedures that draw on multiple individual and theoretical perspectives. (p. 529)

The current edition of *Music Therapy Perspectives* concurs with this statement while concurrently recognizing that artistic freedom can paradoxically blossom within an environment that provides containment and boundaries on practice. ABR can be rigorous when located within aesthetic sensibility and values steeped in axiology. From this vantage point, ABR can be seen as a methodology that is distinctive from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research. This is contradictory to Gilbertson (2015), who warns that "just adding arts or arts-based as a fourth singularity to quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods might result in limiting the capacities for a blossoming of arts inquiry" (p. 511). However, the viewpoints presented in this special edition of *Music Therapy Perspectives* offer boundless possibilities for inventiveness, discovery, and creativity of ABR design and practice toward the betterment of social change, while simultaneously recognizing that it is just one of many perspectives of ABR.

I would like share my deepest gratitude for the authors who have dedicated the time to share their knowledge, vision, and expertise. ABR is critically evolving, not only in music therapy, but also in all disciplines that utilize its knowledge. This edition of *Music Therapy Perspectives*, coupled with the Winter 2015 edition of the *Journal of Music Therapy*, represents a moment in time where a new chapter of ABR is being written in music therapy. It is my hope that readers of this journal will find a metaphorical mirror within the articles and/or artwork to reflect upon. The path of knowledge illuminated by ABR is waiting for each reader to journey down and bring back new discoveries for our field, our craft, and the people for whom we serve as music therapists.

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