

Music and Talk in Tandem: The Production of Micro-Narratives in Real Time

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In this text I explore the interrelationship between musical encounters and the self-perception, and self-report, of health-status and self-identity.¹ I describe how music can be seen to interact and offer a basis for the type of action with which sociologists are most familiar—verbal action as a means of narrating, telling and consolidating social realities. For this task, I present two ‘worked examples’, the first illustrating how musical activity can prime, cue, or trigger forms of self-report, the second illustrating how wellness identities and wellness orientations can be built from the ways in which musical activity and self-reporting about that activity (for example in the form of narratives) make mutual reference. Overall, my aim will be to consider how music offers resources for making a change in wellness situations. As I will describe in the conclusion, the topic of musically-linked micro-narrative connects with a growing body of theoretical work devoted to the question of where and how music can ‘help’ as a medium of relational health (DeNora, 2007; Aasgaard, 2001; Ruud, 2010; Stige, Ansdell, Elefant & Pavlicevic, 2010; Ansdell & DeNora, 2012). In particular, the focus on micro-narratives and music can tell us about practical consciousness and its formation.

Songs and Words

How does music ‘get into’ verbalization, and how can we understand verbalization as helping to constitute musical activity? (Indeed, this begs the question of whether the

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two can ever be considered as separate matters and the extent to which *all* human action can be understood as para-musical.) And how can understanding the connection between musical activity and narrative accounts be a useful component of health promotion and maintenance, more specifically, how can an understanding of how music and narrative action are related be used to encourage the development of pathways to wellbeing? To address these questions I turn to two examples from music therapy research. Each example highlights an aspect of the interrelationship between words (talk) and music:

- Example one (taken from Ansdell et al, 2010): music as an agent of change (short-term time frame) as a means for modulating affective orientation and as a platform for change-oriented talk about self/condition and situation
- Example two: music as its parameters are transferred into action and linger after the music stops—in ways that afford affective and stylistic orientation, and thus identity construction and talk about self in the social world in and apart from real-time musicking.

In both examples I want to develop a perspective that does not unduly privilege talk and verbal modalities but situates real-time verbal action (micro-narrative) in the context of many other, often simultaneous modalities such as gesture, the interaction with materials and—in this case—musicking. In both cases, narratives ‘in action’ are not protracted ‘stories’ but are akin to verbal gestures, instances when words are used to elaborate upon circumstances and identities already being established through other, non- or pre-verbal, cultural channels or when words are used to presage or prefigure musical action (the meaning and power of a musical act is verbally clarified and elaborated). Like Haiku or as with fragments of poetry, these narratives can be short, fleeting and allusive and in ways where ‘less is more’, as illustrated in the first of the two examples (beginning with a quote from Ansdell et al, 2010).

Songs Before Words

Example 1

Pam hits the xylophone hard with the beaters and throws them towards the piano, which they hit, causing the piano strings to vibrate. She shouts “This fucking life!” and becomes very upset. (The therapist [Gary Ansdell] later finds out that the outburst was caused by her seeing the letter names on the xylophone spelling out abusive messages to her from an internal voice). Immediately after the blow-up the therapist encourages Pam to come to the piano, to sit beside him, and encourages her back into musical engagement again. She begins playing a few notes on the top of the piano, which leads into a short piano duet and then into shared singing with the therapist. Pam takes over the singing herself after a short time (accompanied by the therapist on the piano), becoming involved and expressive. The music seems to take her somewhere else. After the music cadences she sighs and says “That’s better!” The entire episode has lasted just over four minutes. (Ansdell et al, 2010)

In the seemingly brief interval of four minutes as described here by Ansdell et al (2010), a mental health client was musically captivated (drawn into music) and (in her own words) transformed (different after music). This transformation was by no means about ‘treating’ the client (stimulating the brain, offering a chance for her to ‘express’ something internal, etc). Rather it can be seen as a music-led *social* and collaborative process, one that mobilised environmental materials so as to effect ‘change’. Or, as Ansdell et al put it, the change was both effected by and about the achievement of ‘communicative musicality’:

Trevarthen (2002, p. 21) defines communicative musicality as “.. the dynamic sympathetic state of a human person that allows co-ordinated companionship to arise”. Such active musical communication happens through the largely non-conscious mutual negotiation between interacting partners, using three music-like dimensions: (i) shared timing (through pulse), (ii) shared shaping of the melodic contour, texture and intensity, and (iii) shared overall narrative form. (Ansdell et al, 2010)

The concept of communicative musicality as used here by Ansdell et al highlights music’s specifically musical—and thus social—features and also highlights how

music offers a material and relational basis for the production (and change) of narrative description of self, other, and situation. I will describe three examples of music's materiality here, the ways in which music recontextualises situations such that it offers pre-texts for re-texting/retelling the story of oneself and circumstances. Music, in other words, is an agent of change.

First, in the four minute episode involving Pam and the xylophone/piano, the *instruments* were changed (Pam 'drops' the insidious xylophone's beaters, distancing herself from them by actually throwing them away from her—they hit the piano and cause it to sound). As an aside, it is worth considering the musical 'biographies' of the instruments in question. On the one hand, the xylophone's broader cultural connotations include images and meanings associated with death, the macabre, and the supernatural. Acoustically, its 'hollow' timbre is often exploited to create 'spooky' effects, the sound of bones in particular (Saint-Saën's *Danse Macabre*, but also Walt Disney's 1929 cartoon, *Skeleton Dance* where the xylophone being played is the backbone of a 'live' skeleton.) The piano, by contrast, is the domestic instrument par excellence and the gendered convention of the piano duet—male at the lower end of the keyboard, female at the higher, is a deep cultural signifier.

Second, when Ansdell encourages Pam to sit beside him at the piano, a *repositioning* is effected (sitting together at the piano and facing the piano rather than each other). The participants are repositioned in such a way that is non-confrontational, literally, and one in which they are placed upon an equal footing, both inhabiting a similar physical/acoustical musical space. Too often, and especially outside music therapy, the embodied relationships that music not only represents but requires, are ignored in favour of music 'as text' and as meaningful representation. Yet music, if it is to be produced, involves materiality—arms straining to beat a drum, bodies in alignment at the piano, vocal chords relaxed while singing a quiet low note.

Third, this re-orchestration and repositioning in turn enabled the *relationship* between therapist and client to be re-cast as one involving musical collaborators and companions ('a short duet' and 'shared singing'). Thus, in four minutes of musical time, moment-by-moment, Pam and Ansdell move away from the crisis of the xylophone and toward increased possibilities of musical companionship (both facing the keyboard and performing a duet together, both piano and vocal). When the music stops (and Ansdell remains silent), an ending is (perhaps) cued (the silence functioning as a question or request for comment from Pam). Pam picks up this cue and redefines the situation saying, 'that's better!'

Note here that what Pam says (including the sigh that preceded her words) works as a kind of health/illness narrative, albeit *in miniature* and in real time as part of on-going, multimodal action. As such, Pam's utterance provides a 'cap' on or frame

of what has gone before her two brief words project both backward and forward, collecting events into a before-and-after account of what has happened, and what has been achieved. Pam's words thus highlight how health-illness narratives may be deployed *in interaction*, during real-time talk and as a way of enhancing that interaction. The point so far is that such narratives can be primed and elicited through musical and embodied activity. In the space of four minutes she has offered two distinctly opposed narrative 'caps' on social reality, literally from 'this f*****g world' to 'that's better'. Music, then, and in this case embodied, shared communicative musicking, can cue or elicit alternate narrative or discursive registers and thus prime forms of agency. By the time (four minutes in) that Pam speaks in words, a pre-textual situation has been achieved. Her words simply seal the reality of this situation and their future, promissory reality ('That's better' is equated with an implicit, 'no more need for outbursts'—at least for a while.) Such a promise can, of course, be 'developed or embroidered upon later, such that this encounter can take on the potential to become a Time 1 in a larger course of change, a situational paving stone to a more extended narrative about overall 'improvement' from Time 1 to Time 2. (In other words, the sum total of this multi-media event, including how it encompassed a change and 'improvement' can be tapped later for a further performance, musical or verbal. The spiral can continue and move in many directions but linking the event, remembered later, to additional and perhaps more elaborated accounts, perhaps elicited through interview, of 'how music helps me' can in turn further fix the trend toward improved wellbeing through music.)

What is of interest here is that music laid the initial groundwork for such micro-narrative. It gave Pam something to 'talk about'. A musical interlude (four minutes) modulated the situation so that Pam and Ansdell shifted from an A to a B, from one place and set of stances (laden with psychiatric implications and roles—Pam's psychosis, Ansdell's role as a representative of the mental hospital) to another 'better', and noticeably calmer stance (Pam sighs before she speaks, they are now in the role of co-musicians). This 'new place' and set of stances brings with it potential—albeit with no guarantee—for the future, for what Pam can do 'next time' and for, in the moment, her sense of being, if not 'well', at least 'better'. So the music (its instrumentalities, its embodied positionings, its format) has 'acted' to set the scene for a different form of talk, a verbal redefinition of an already musically redefined situation. Here music has acted in concert with other practices (not least Ansdell's considerable craft, his long-experience working with mental health clients and his familiarity with this client in particular). The practices by which it is mobilised has cleared a space for situation re-definition. The succinct narrative that Pam provides ('that's better') made possible by a musical change can—in future musical encounters—provide a

shared history of what (musically and beyond) the two can achieve and what other things (psychotic moments, words spelled out by the xylophone) can or might be put behind them. Musical materials in tandem with musical practices thus come to afford new situations in which this musical-verbal-practical spiral can continue and be 'repeated'. Through repetition, role relationships can continue to be redirected and elaborated. The social is or can be enacted through and in relation to music. And at times, music's parameters do not merely 'effect' change, but leave their imprint upon actors after the music stops. In this sense music does not only offer resources for action (metaphors or props) but music, understood as communicative musicality, is a *modus operandi* for action.

Words Before Songs

Example 2

We are in a group music therapy session, adjacent to the hospital where Pam and Ansdell made their music in example one. Incidentally Pam is also a part of this group, some years on from her earlier 'that's better' encounter with Ansdell. About thirty mental health clients, some hospital residents, some not, along with additional members of the public and staff, meet here each week to sing and perform. There are solos, ensemble songs, instrumental interludes and group singing. While Gary works as a strategic 'accompanist' (musical shepherd might be a more appropriate term) he is not entirely in charge of the musical doings, sometimes others take the piano, sometimes the group who have formed a band take over.

In this case, Robbie goes up to the microphone and mentions in an off-hand way as he prepares to sing (*If I loved you*) that he *is* Billy Holiday ('I am Billy Holiday').² This affiliation is evident in Robbie's manner of performing jazz ballads where he channels some of Holiday's delivery as 'his way' of doing the song. Music is a medium, in other words, for capturing, containing, and projecting self to others within the frame of its performance.

But what happens in music does not stay 'in music'. To the contrary, the craft of self-performance—communicative musicality, the projection of persona—migrates to realms outside the real-time performance of the song and when it does it exports musical elements. Robbie's communicative style is imbued with a whiff of Billie Holiday,

² Clients' names and identifying details have been changed. Here, Robbie's musical affiliation has also been changed to protect his anonymity.

from the low and ‘cool’ manner of speech, to the body language, to the sorts of gestures he would or would not make. This *modus operandi* of being in everyday life can—in Robbie’s case as in our own—be seen to take shape from musical exemplary conduct. He ‘is’ the song: the song offers, or affords, materials with which to craft interactional style, persona in real time encounters outside song. Thus, Robbie’s musical and para-musical performance, prefaced by his micro-narrative pointer (‘I am Billie Holiday’) is a show and tell, a way of organizing our attention to him, what he is doing and what he can be or become (what we will enable him to become). ‘I am Billie Holiday’ has a promissory quality, it offers a token of what we can expect from him in the future (he is, for example, a Celine Dion-free zone). Robbie’s micro-narrative is part of how he enlists musical materials and his musical performance to build character, and to create a stylistically inflected situation. He is effectively saying, ‘look, this is a way of being’, a sensibility, one that he and we can understand as an identity stance, one that we can acknowledge, admire and share. At the same time, its promissory quality sets up expectations and claims upon our shared (para-musical and musical) world. It says, within this musical space, this is ‘how I, Robbie, do it’ this is ‘my stylistic bandwidth’. Finding, tuning in to that bandwidth involves a musical-spatial location, a declaration of, ‘this is where you will find me here’, I inhabit this part/this kind of space’. It thus effects, musically and para-musically, a form of social belonging. Music affords and creates space for (aesthetic) agency in the world as the elements of performance style, in other words, become proxies for identity, signs of embodied and tacit dispositions that shoot through and structure social action.

Songs With and Without Words

When Robbie performs himself musically, in the persona of Billie Holiday, and when, after the performance ends, he remains half in role, employing verbally an echo of Holiday’s musical manner, he has found a *modus operandi* that transfers from making music to performing self through the medium of spoken interaction. His micro-narrative (‘I am Billy Holiday’) serves, moreover, as a container and marker, a way of returning him to his musically grounded identity next time (what and how he performs musically) and as a pivotal form insofar as it affords a *modus operandi* (a style of doing) that takes him in and through social situations (how he speaks, how he moves, what he does and does not do and say). In this way it is possible to see musical action leading verbal reports about self, and verbal reports about self simultaneously helping to organise musical action. This reflexive spiral is the place where informal

learning—about how to be, how to be with others, what it is we are or can be, and thus how we are part of a social fabric, how we accrue social capital—occurs, albeit often at the mostly tacit level of ‘felt’ reality. Thus, for Robbie, a critical point of the community music therapy is that it offers a medium (one that is relatively ‘safe’) within which self may be projected and—outside and after the musical action—sustained as ways of being in the world. So, for example, if I can acquire the knack of presenting myself musically (through a two or three minute song), and if I can forge a musical identity indexed by some form of stylistic regularity, repertoire and persona, I have developed a more general skill of sustaining a self through the mastery of competences in a communicative medium.

In this sense, musical performance is a means for resource generation, a way of generating materials for the sustenance and development of self. (In this sense music offers what Procter describes as proto-social capital [Procter, 2012]). Thus, when I go to another social gathering tomorrow, I can talk about my musical hobby or interest and, if only to myself, recall that I did well there yesterday and I can tap my developing skills at interpersonal performance, of rendering myself to others in ways that allow them to relate (recognize, attune) to me. In doing these things, I am converting my musical activity into something else—a topic of conversation and in my conversation I may resort to some of the musical manners that I have absorbed by—to take Robbie’s case—‘being’ Billie Holiday. If so, I have managed to project or ‘spread’ my presence across time (the time I sang in the style of Billie Holiday) and now, here, as I am speaking with you. I have expanded my self by tapping the resource that I created for myself via my musical projection of self. Thus, like laying down pavement, in collaboration with others, I can pave the way to expanded and changed identities and associated health-states, paving block by paving block, as it were and some of these paving stones are my musical performances and musical encounters.

So too, when Pam engages in one form of music and it primes her outburst (‘this f*****g world’) and when, with the help of a music therapist she is encouraged to move into a different musical domain, that new musical domain lays down the groundwork for different forms of talk, both substantively and stylistically. In both of these cases, music has afforded the possibility of narrative, and simultaneously, those narratives frame music—its situated meaning in (musical/para-musical) interaction. Musical action and linguistic action collaborate to create the patchwork of social realities, health and illness realities, capabilities and forms of agency.

Conclusion: Songs With and Without Words

Within recent work on music and consciousness (DeNora, 2011), and work in the area of music and guided imagery (Bonde, 2007; Summer, 2002) and music and sensory perception (Hara & DeNora, forthcoming), there has been considerable attention to the topic of music as an elicitation device for verbalisation and conscious awareness. This work highlights how music inflects situations and offers cues to forms of ambience and stylistic orientation. Thus music can be seen to offer orientational devices, to provide parameters against which experience is formulated and perception organized. Music 'leads' experience and offers platforms (object lessons, metaphors, templates, emotional experiences) that in turn offer purchase for verbal depictions of 'what is happening'. As Bonde puts it (2007, p.72), music provides a *source domain* in which to structure *target domains*—such as emotions, conduct, consciousness and health.

Thinking about the relationship between music and narrative in this way points to a different understanding of what we, as researchers, everyday actors, and/or healthcare professionals do with and about narrative. Narrative is not an *expos facto* description, something independent of experience (including musical experience). Rather, narrative is 'inside' experience, it performs experience; musical narratives are thus not about how something distinct from narrative (the music) has 'helped'. To the contrary, music and narrative are mutually referencing, indeed they are fused. Both offer media that enhance and make possible the others effects; they are part of the multi-modal array of communicative action that crafts an on-going sense of place—who we are (together) and what we (can) do, and what we can change. Thus, to ask someone 'how did music help you' is to ask them to perform a (possible) self in ways that are musically afforded, again, here and now, in real-time. Eliciting such stories can be useful if one wants to capitalise on music as a focal point for effecting change. Thus, recognising—via ethnographic, situated and real-time methods of observation—how micro-narratives emerge and come to be developed into more protracted stories is thus an important part of understanding how music helps.

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