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Don't give me the small talk, give me the big talk

Citation for published version:

MacDonald, R 2023, 'Don't give me the small talk, give me the big talk', *British Journal of Music Therapy*, pp. 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13594575231173782>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/13594575231173782](https://doi.org/10.1177/13594575231173782)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

British Journal of Music Therapy

Publisher Rights Statement:

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“Don't give me the small talk, give me the big talk”

Book Review

Title: Toward a sociology of music therapy: Musicking as a cultural immunogen **Author:** Even Ruud **Publication year:** 2020 **Publisher:** Barcelona Publishers **Pages:** 339 **ISBN:** 9781945411571 **Price** £45

Reviewed by Raymond MacDonald

National treasure and cult Scottish surrealist poet Ivor Cutler could be described as parochially iconic. In other words, everybody in Scotland loves him, even if nobody outside Scotland knows who he is. In one of his most famous miniatures, “Good morning! How are you? Shut up!”, he pleads to hear the big talk not the small talk. Even Ruud unquestionably provides the requisite “big talk” in his text “Toward a Sociology of Music Therapy: Musicking as a Cultural Immunogen”. While research in the humanities is often caricatured, mostly unfairly, as dancing on the head of a pin, or reinventing the wheel, Ruud avoids such trivialities and circular arguments as he elegantly delineates some of the most important issues of our time for those interested in investigating the health affordances of musical engagement within our everchanging world.

Ruud’s text is a tour de force and essential reading for anyone interested in where contemporary sociology intersects with therapeutic applications of music. Written in Ruud’s captivating and unique style, combining assured scholarly gravitas with an accessible light-touch, reading this book is both pleasurable and intellectually rewarding. It offers new insights into how music therapists engage in “health musicking” while meeting the challenges of contemporary society in all its meta-modern ambiguities. Ruud shows how new technologies, evolving political agendas and shifting cultural landscapes necessitate ongoing reflection about what it means to be healthy and how music can contribute. The central focus is on how music can play a role in caring for communities by helping people live healthily and navigate illness. However, this is not a practical self-help book but rather a deep and wide-reaching philosophical treatise on what it means to be a music therapist in late modernity.

Indeed, Ruud digs deep into what he perceives as the defining characteristics of Music Therapists’ identities. He emphasises competencies and relational processes and his approach foregrounds therapeutic alliances rather than client-patient relationships. His use of the term “health musician” reflects the constantly evolving and subtle parallels, contrasts and overlaps between music therapy, community music and music education practice.

Overlaps is an implicit recurring theme in the book and Ruud develops his arguments by layering and merging numerous key themes. For example, Intersectionality, with its emphasis on how social categorisations such as ethnicity, disability, gender and class overlap and create related systems of discrimination, is foregrounded. These ideas combine with the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of music therapists’ work and training which are examined from multiple perspectives. His ideas articulate perfectly with the anti-individualistic writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose work is a key

influence for Ruud. Another important reference, in amongst a plethora of current debates and seminal thinkers, is music sociologist Tia DeNora. Ruud frequently draws key therapeutic implications from DeNora's sociological overviews (DeNora, 2013), not least in his advocacy of "slow sociology" and "slow music therapy", a possible counterweight to the ever-increasing and unsustainable institutional demands to produce academic work quickly and voluminously.

Other topics of great social and political import are seamlessly infused throughout the text, and Ruud invites us to integrate post-colonial thinking (e.g. the reliance on western classical music within GIM practice) and post-human constructions of identity (the use of teleconferencing, artificial intelligences and new technologies) into our understandings of how the health affordances of music function. The importance of improvisation as an accessible, spontaneous and creative social processes that is utilised for health musicking across all genres of music is emphasised. This resonates emphatically with researchers who note that improvisation is now a well-established and recognised discipline of study, taught and researched globally outwith the confines of genre expectations (MacDonald and Wilson, 2020)

Relationships, communities and interactions are a central concern across the whole book. Emphasis is placed on collectivity; ways of relating and distributed creativity, rather than individual personalities, internal cognitions and patients receiving therapy. Ruud's conceptual approach is unambiguously "rhizomic" in terms of how he views ideas originating, developing and propagating. Rhizomic research takes a non-hierarchical view of the networks of concepts that develop during research (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). So rather than seeking to develop cause and effect relationships, Ruud's theories emerge and develop like an underground lattice of roots reaching out, making connections, developing communities and offering possibilities rather than concrete conclusions. These mycelia-like concepts develop and support each other, propagating and facilitating other ideas to emerge, possibly in related disciplines. But make no mistake, this is not a platitudinous, happy clappy, woo woo wah wah, let's-all-hold-hands-and-hug-each-other approach. Quite the contrary; Ruud offers copious evidence and a compelling cast iron logic to support his assertions with philosophical evidence, sociological evidence, clinical evidence, political evidence, empirical data and beautifully crafted anecdotes. Musical case studies including ex-combatants in Columbia, Palestinian refugee camps, and community choirs are introduced as Ruud develops his gentle, yet utterly persuasive, evidence-based treatise, advocating the importance of music as a technology of health.

The universal potential for human creativity, for musical engagement and for music to play a fundamental role in everyone's health, lies right at the heart of this text. While this may not come as big news to music therapists, a subtle and important message of health as an identity project, is neatly woven into the numerous examples. In other words, Ruud highlights that Health is something we "do" not something we "have" and music has an important role to play in life's never ending and constantly evolving identity projects.

In summary and returning to Scottish iconoclast Ivor Cutler's clarion call to action, anyone looking for the "big talk" in music therapy should look no further than Even Ruud, as he unquestionably answers Ivor's demands for intellectual stimulation. I'm not sure if the

concept of a national treasure exists in Norway, but if it does then Even Ruud, with over 50 years of ground-breaking research and generations of musicologists and music therapists inspired by his work, must surely be considered the Norwegian equivalent of a national treasure. Having just checked with a Norwegian colleague I can declare, although I have no authority or gravitas to do so, Even Ruud is a “Nasjonalskatt”.

References

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