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## A Tribute to Robin Howat

Janet Graham

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I first met Robin in 1989 when I went for my interview as a prospective student at the first Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy Centre in London (United Kingdom), where he was Head of training at the time. My first impression was of a warm friendly man with a reassuring smile, who was able to put people at their ease straight away but who also possessed a depth of perception and intuition.

During my one year training (this was a few years before the two-year master's programme was established) these first impressions of Robin proved accurate and his many other qualities became evident as our work together progressed. The Centre was small and intimate and it was inevitable that, even though Robin allowed us students as much time and space as he could, as our principle tutor he spent a large amount of time with us either in the Centre or the students' department at Carker's Lane. While he kept a respectful and professional distance he always made time to listen to our problems, dealing with them pragmatically whenever possible. I remember he was very sympathetic when I complained mightily about the state (and at one point the non-existence) of the ladies' lavatories in the Carker's Lane building, which was in the process of refurbishment and was at times quite chaotic.

Years later, while talking to some of my fellow trainees, we agreed that without Robin's support and encouragement some of us would probably not have completed the course. Not only was he a sensitive listener, but he had the ability to see beyond the difficulties we found insurmountable and look towards what we could achieve. This ability to see people's potential was also evident in his work with clients, all children in those days. The highlights of our week included outings in the Centre minibus to schools, where we were able to observe Robin and other therapists working with groups of children and, though most of us had started with a very vague idea of how music therapy worked and what it could do, we soon began to learn from him that each child was unique and had his or her own needs.

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This leads to the heart of Robin's work as a music therapist and teacher: his complete grounding in the Nordoff-Robbins approach and, though completely without any unrealistic claims or expectations, his faith in the power of music to help people. The sessions we observed, as well as his lectures and seminars, inspired us to explore the world of music in a new way and we discovered depths of meaning and significance which we could not have imagined.

Robin often started a morning or afternoon's work by getting us all to sing together. He seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of songs from various parts of the world which he would analyse with us, and several of the folk tunes he introduced found their way into my own work in the years which followed.

After training, I was privileged to work with Robin at the Centre until he left for Australia. We did several sessions a week together (in the days when co-therapy was more usual) and, for a time, I was taken along as an additional pianist when he and Pauline Etkin were demonstrating group-work at one of the schools. Although anxious about playing in front of the students in the presence of two such distinguished and experienced music therapists, I soon became drawn into the fun of the occasion and the afternoon often ended with a refreshment stop at a favourite ice-cream parlour on the way back to the Centre.

Robin's quiet presence was greatly missed by us all when he left for Australia: his sympathetic listening, his continuing exploration of music both for its own sake as well as for its potential in music therapy resources, his ready sense of humour, and even the sound of his feet as he ran up and down

the stairs in the (new) Centre (in Kentish Town, North London). I saw him only twice after this, and on each occasion we were able to resume our friendly banter as though the intervening years had not happened.

Robin's family was central to his life and his religious faith, though private and not often discussed, was also important to him. The last time I saw him for any length of time was when we attended a church service together in New York in 2001 on the final day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Symposium for Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy.

Robin's sudden and untimely death came as a shock and his loss will continue to be felt by many individuals as well as the music therapy profession as a whole. As well as the countless clients he helped in his work, he inspired many trainees and colleagues over the years and will be remembered with affection and gratitude.

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