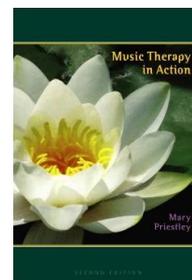


Music Therapy in Action (Mary Priestley)

Reviewed by Kay Sobey



Title: Music Therapy in Action (2nd Edition) | Author: Mary Priestley | Year: 2012 | Publisher: Barcelona Publishers | Pages: 270 | ISBN: 978-1-937440-15-2

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It is both a privilege and a challenge to attempt to review a book which has such great historical significance for the music therapy profession, especially one that has had wide readership internationally. *Music Therapy in Action* was originally published in 1975 with a second edition in 1985. Barcelona Publishers have now reprinted that second edition and many will be grateful to them for once more making it available after several years out of print. Four sections (pp. 106-138) from the book are reproduced in Priestley's later publication, *Essays in Analytical Music Therapy* (1994).

Written, not only near the beginning of the author's career as a professional music therapist but also early in the development of the UK music therapy profession as a whole, the book is wide ranging and packed with information and insightful reflection on both theory and practice. Much of this remains relevant today. There is a very detailed table of contents showing that the book is divided into 32 chapters, each with several subheadings, making it easy to locate a topic of particular interest. This is fortunate as, in my opinion, the way the material is presented does not lend itself to being read straight through from beginning to end. Rather I would recommend it as a rich treasure

trove of ideas and words of wisdom making it both useful and a source of inspiration to music therapists. Additionally it provides a valuable resource for anyone interested in the early history of music therapy training and clinical practice in the UK.

Priestley's Foreword reminds the reader of just how different the professional context for music therapy was when it was originally written. Despite this, the book still fulfils one of her stated purposes in writing it by cogently answering the questions "What happens in music therapy? What do patients do? How does it work?" (p. xv). The invaluable Introduction which follows (pp. xvii-xx) was provided by the consultant psychotherapist Gerald Wooster, to whom the book is dedicated. In this he gives a thoughtful and persuasive endorsement of the usefulness of a psychoanalytic approach to music therapy – particularly with psychotic clients. He brings to our attention the dangers as well as benefits when working with a medium (the music) which has the potential to undermine defences – warning against naivety and stressing the importance of a therapist capable of providing adequate containment.

Chapter 1 immediately provides some answers to the author's key questions, with a directness

praised by Leslie Bunt in these words “[w]here is a more well-written page defining music therapy than in the opening section of her first book [...]” (Bunt 2004). The last of this chapter’s five sub-sections is a brief summary of those concepts from the theories of Freud, Adler, Jung and Klein that she finds the most relevant to her approach to music therapy. By then it has become clear what makes this book so exceptional: the author is a master of the English language and expresses herself as fluently and vividly in words as she undoubtedly did in music. She can produce succinct definitions of complex theoretical concepts in such a way as to make them instantly accessible.

The remainder of the book is presented as falling into three parts: Preparation; Practical Experiences and Techniques; Thoughts Around Music Therapy. Although Part One makes fascinating reading (especially for anyone involved with training), it is largely of historical interest as the training programmes and working environments have undergone so much change and development since this was written. Nevertheless the intensity of experiences in training, particularly descriptions of being taught improvisation, will resonate with many more recently trained therapists.

In contrast to this it is hard to ignore some disconcerting outdated terminology, and occasionally somewhat dismissive descriptions, for example in the section headed Choosing a Field of Action (pp. 27-32). Reading this might leave the reader with the impression that there were considerable limitations to ways of working as a music therapist with non-verbal clients or children, particularly those with a learning disability. It has to be remembered that this book preceded the work of Valerie Sinason and her Tavistock colleagues in the 1980s. Their clinical work, research and teaching (Sinason 1986, 1992) notably challenged this view showing how psychoanalytical psychotherapy could be used effectively with those who had difficulty expressing themselves in words. This had a profound effect on subsequent clinical practice, especially that of music therapists whose fields of work were enriched and greatly expanded thereafter.

Included in Part One is the first introduction to Analytical Music Therapy (AMT) and Intertherap for which of course Priestley is best known and rightly acclaimed. After initial definitions and description of its inception she emphasises that the music therapy qualification alone was then “not sufficient to practise as an analytical therapist” (p. 20). She continues by writing that the pre-requisite for doing so is “a special kind of interpersonal and

intrapersonal experience” (p. 20) specifying the need for undergoing one’s own analysis or least being supervised by an analytical psychotherapist. Intertherap(y) was developed to become another essential ingredient in this self-exploration. We know now that UK training programmes were expanding in the late 1980s and were to grow ever longer to reach the two-year full-time MA programme that is currently the requirement for qualification. Within this they have all come to include greater emphasis on experiential learning and mandatory personal therapy – although this might not be with a therapist of psychoanalytical orientation. Priestley herself benefitted from having her own analysis with a Freudian and supervision from a Jungian analyst. She also undertook further training in groupwork and family therapy from the Institute of Group Therapy (IGA). This formed an unusually rich background of knowledge and experience for developing her own psychoanalytical approach to music therapy. Although Chapter 3 (pp. 19-26) is appropriately included under Part One: Preparation, some readers might find it more helpful to read, or re-read, it in conjunction with Chapters 14-16 where AMT theory and practice are explored in more depth.

Chapter 5 concludes Part One with practical suggestions for repertoire and instruments. This is an example of information which has inevitably become dated and therefore less likely to be found relevant and useful in current practice. To me Part Two, *Practical Experiences and Techniques*, is the heart of this book, not least for its emphasis on detailed descriptions of her casework. As with other psychoanalytical authors, from Freud through Yalom to Grosz, I have always found that theory becomes most intelligible and meaningful when it is conveyed through descriptions of clinical practice. Through Priestley’s ability to bring her work with patients to life we engage with each individual’s therapy process and the author’s warmth and authenticity shines through. This reminds us that research into efficacy has often indicated that the therapists’ personal qualities are as likely to be the factor promoting change as the methods they employ and the theory that informs them.

Chapters 6-13 describe all the areas of work that were undertaken by music therapists in the 1970s/80s within large old-style psychiatric hospitals and asylums. I found this particularly interesting because of the diversity of roles and activities that were then expected of the music therapists – not least because I worked in a similar context towards the end of that period. It may surprise new readers, or those only familiar with

Priestley's later publications, to find descriptions headed *Therapeutic Teaching*, *Record Sessions* and *Psychodynamic Movement/Relaxation*. The long-running issues such as what differentiates music therapy from the therapeutic use of music or the case for using familiar repertoire and performance (mainly classical music in her case) rather than improvisation are all addressed. She tells us with characteristic clarity that for therapy

“[t]here must be three factors [...] the client, the music and the therapist. Where there are only two, the client and the music, the experience may be therapeutic but there is no therapy [...] Human relationship is an essential ingredient [...]” (p. 1).

It is clear throughout that whatever ‘action’ is being described her therapeutic thinking is the core of the work and informs all the relationships with her clients. This gave her exceptional insight and understanding of their inner worlds which could transform what might otherwise have been mundane or more superficial experiences.

Chapters 14-16 focus on AMT in more detail by describing numerous *Techniques* (pp. 106-132). These together with *The Emotional Spectrum* (Chapter 17, pp. 133-138) are the sections later reproduced in *Essays on Analytical Music therapy* (1994). They demonstrate precisely how the author would make use of both her vast knowledge of analytical theory and her own personal experiences in analysis and Intertherap. Some techniques may be more familiar as resembling the work of those trained in and practising Guided Imagery with Music (GIM). Others closely relate to the practice of today's drama therapists or dance movement therapists. They are helpful as illustrations of the application of her theoretical approach and especially so when described in context as occurs later in her *Case Studies*. Good examples of this are Chapters 20 and 21 *Music Therapy with a Private Client* (pp. 155-161) and *Notes on a Hospital Patient's Music Therapy* (pp. 162-180). It is possibly debatable whether it would be advisable to take them too literally as a model for close imitation. They seem to me very much part of the author's own personal style and also to require the rigorous amount of analysis and supervision she referred to earlier (p. 20)

Part Three is made up of a further eleven chapters. These are once more divided up into sub-sections, some of which are very short. Chapter 23, *Inner Music* aroused my interest particularly. This she defines as “the prevailing emotional climate behind the structure of someone's thoughts”

continuing “[it] is the music of ‘how’ rather than ‘what’ [...] the music of adjectives” (p. 189). It is clearly something she greatly relies on to inform her musical responses together with transference and counter-transference. The use of the latter in music therapy is explored in Chapter 29 which provides another example of the author's ability to give succinct and useful explanations of psychoanalytical thinking.

The remaining sections are more general musings on wider aspects of both music and therapy. Reactions to these will depend a great deal on the personal experience and viewpoint of the individual reader. An important aspect of the author's writing is that it is always thought-provoking but its very strength means it is also likely to arouse an emotional response. Personally I found much to appreciate in Chapter 22, *The Aims of Music Therapy*, and its sub-section *The Functions of the Therapist* (p. 182). On the other hand I struggled with Chapters 25 and 31. *Discussion of The Meaning of Music* (pp. 244-250) are almost inevitably controversial. For me assertions as to the effects of specific pieces of music, or even the elements thereof (p. 206), are at best arguable but other readers will doubtless have entirely different reactions and preferences.

It is to be hoped that a generation of new readers will be surprised and delighted by this book. Those who are familiar with *Essays in Analytical Music Therapy* (1994) will still find much of interest in reading more about its early practice and developments. As Bunt comments following his interview (2004), Mary Priestley appears to be better known and more widely appreciated outside her home country. This reprint will remind us how innovative her thinking was at the time of both first and second edition and of its lasting impact on music therapy ever since.

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