

CONFERENCE REPORT

The 4th Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Research Conference and the 4th International Spirituality and Music Education (SAME) Conference

'Exploring the spiritual in music: Interdisciplinary dialogues in music, wellbeing and education'

Karin S. Hendricks

Boston University, USA

Tawnya D. Smith

Boston University, USA

The 4th Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Research Conference and 4th International Spirituality and Music Education (SAME) Conference *'Exploring the spiritual in music: Interdisciplinary dialogues in music, wellbeing and education'*, London, UK, 9-10 December 2017.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Karin S. Hendricks is Assistant Professor of Music Education at Boston University. She has served in local, state, and national music education leadership roles and has published papers on motivation and social justice in a variety of academic journals and books. Hendricks is an award-winning orchestra teacher, researcher, and clinician. [khen@bu.edu] **Tawnya D. Smith** is Assistant Professor of Music Education at Boston University. As a researcher and educator, she is interested in transforming educational spaces by applying therapeutic knowledge to create safe and healthy learning environments. She has published papers on personal development in education, and explores the use of art-based research as a means to better understand the inner-world of learners. [tdsmith7@bu.edu]

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On a foggy December morning we found our way from our Kings Cross Station hotel to the Nordoff Robbins Music Therapy Centre in London. We arrived at the entrance thanks to the help of another conference attendee – a perfect stranger to us at the time, but who became an instant kindred spirit as all three of us took time to pause and watch a squirrel at play on the ground. We did not know whether our new friend shared our practice in nature-based spirituality or whether she was simply exercising remarkable empathy for a tiny living being. In any case, the details did not matter because we knew –as we paused together to see eye-to-eye with a squirrel– that we were also safe with one another.

Each of us entered the Nordoff Robbins Therapy Centre with different backgrounds but with similar hopes and intentions. We represented an eclectic mix of music researchers, teachers, therapists, philosophers, students, and clients, all with an interest in sharing with and learning from one another. The interdisciplinary nature of the conference was one in which individuals from

various backgrounds in music therapy and education could share ideas and gain new insights into topics surrounding spirituality and wellbeing.

SPACE AND PLACE

Much more than simply a building in north London, the Nordoff Robbins Therapy Centre had a history: countless interactions between people who care deeply about helping others, recognising and celebrating the best in others, and supporting and strengthening one another in that endeavour. The authors of this article –music education researchers who are admittedly too often caught in our heads– embraced the invitation to enter the centre and join others from a variety of backgrounds, to experience a weekend devoted to integrating mind, body, and spirit. As we interacted with likeminded individuals from a variety of fields we felt a sense of ‘home’ there, despite having never visited the centre before.

This remarkable feeling of ease in an unfamiliar location reminded us of the geographical concepts of space versus place. According to geographical scholars, space represents a temporal or structural essence, whereas place is a more personalised or humanised essence of dwelling, rank, or order (Casey, 1996). Space turns to place as something indifferent becomes personally valuable (Agnew, 2011; Cresswell, 2004; Murray-Tiedge, 2014). Said differently, “*Space* is physical, structural, and geographical. *Place* is alive with meaning.” (Hendricks, 2018, p. 125).

In a phenomenological essay arguing for the primacy of place versus space, Casey (1996) described how humans do not just occupy places but that we both create them, and are created in them, through our experiences and perceptions: “[W]e are not only *in* places but *of* them” (Casey (1996, p. 19). Such was our experience as we entered the Nordoff Robbins Centre building ‘space’. As we began to interact with others and sense the potential for care and healing within its walls, we came to view it first and foremost as a safe and meaningful ‘place’.

Humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) noted an ironic dualism between these two “where” aspects of human experience: “place is security, [while] space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other” (p. 3). Yet notions of both space and place are fundamental to our understanding of the world in which we live, and the concepts rely upon one another:

From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice-versa. If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (Tuan, 1977, p. 6)

The interdisciplinary nature of the 4th Nordoff *Plus* Research Conference allowed attendees a safe *place* to integrate mind, body, and spirit while also offering each of us the open and flexible *space* to contemplate and consider new ideas. We were both at home with likeminded colleagues, while also encountering others from a variety of fields who might challenge our perceptions. Our conversations juxtaposed topics of philosophy, epistemology, medicine, nature, and even angels – with each of us allowing one another to explore our own meanings and interpretations of the world.

In this uniquely interdisciplinary context we practised unconditional positive regard and openness to people from numerous backgrounds, beliefs, and practices in music, therapy, and spirituality. Many of us in attendance shared a disposition to embrace mystery, thereby providing place to simply wonder at our various questions and interpretations about music, wellbeing, and spirituality. We were, therefore, simultaneously comfortable, stimulated, and challenged.

CONFERENCE OPENINGS AND SPIRITUAL INVOCATIONS

The Nordoff Robbins Music Therapy Centre evoked a spirit of collaboration and interdisciplinary dialogue at this conference, which was a joint venture between the Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Research Conference Series and the Spirituality and Music Education (SAME) group. As Julie Whelan (CEO of Nordoff Robbins, UK) described, “this conference [...] highlights Nordoff Robbins’ commitment to engaging in collaborative dialogues across sectors, academic disciplines and research institutions” (Whelan, 2017, p. 10). Nordoff Robbins’ interest in broadening and enriching its understandings and approaches was similarly expressed by Neta Spiro (Chair, Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Research Conference Series), who explained that this event extended upon the success of three prior conferences by collaborating with SAME to “question traditional assumptions and venture beyond familiar knowledge and methods” (Spiro, 2017, p. 11).

According to conference chairs Giorgos Tsisis (Head of Research at Nordoff Robbins Scotland and Senior Lecturer in music therapy at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, UK) and Gary Ansdell (Professor and Research Associate, Nordoff Robbins, UK), conference attendees came from a variety of fields, backgrounds, and parts of the world. Attendees’ shared interest in spirituality was the common thread that allowed us to engage in critical and constructive dialogue about the ways in which music and wellbeing might manifest in a variety of settings and contexts.

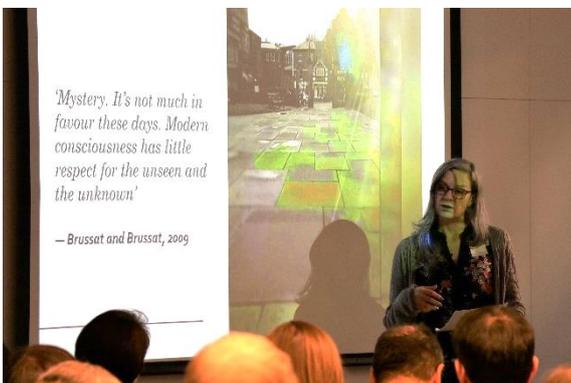


Photograph 1: Welcome by Giorgos Tsisis

Opening keynote

In her opening keynote address, human geographer Sara MacKian (Senior Lecturer in Health and Wellbeing, Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies at The Open University, UK) invited

attendees to engage in the space of mystery, gently but firmly challenging us to “become a little more comfortable with some of [the] more uncomfortable dimensions” of spirituality (MacKian, 2017, p. 19). While sharing of her research experiences into “issues of health, wellbeing, and the otherworldly,” she considered the ways that her research participants understood their own experiences between the “real and imaginary, the body and the spirit, and this world and the otherworldly” (MacKian, 2017, p. 19). These stories made clear the importance of embracing the mystery or the unknown as an active agent in healing and wellbeing. Citing Fowles (1965), MacKian reminded us that the mystery or unknown is a form of energy that is stifled or killed the moment we humans attempt to solve or confine it intellectually or through religious dogma. The keynote response given by Lars Ole Bonde (Professor in Music Therapy at Aalborg University, Denmark and Professor in Music and Health at the Norwegian Academy of Music, Norway) provided a reflection upon Sara’s work more generally, and connected her ideas with related work in the field of music therapy.



Photograph 2: Keynote address by Sara MacKian



Photograph 3: Keynote response by Lars Ole Bonde

CONTINUED CONVERSATIONS IN SEPARATE SPACES

Following the keynote on Saturday, the presenters were organised according to three themes that served as ongoing strands of conversation in each room throughout the remainder of the day. The attendees enjoyed two of the Nordoff Robbins buildings for the event. Damp and chilly air in the courtyard between the buildings provided the opportunity to breathe in the beauty of the space and be reminded of the holiday season as there were evergreens adorned with Christmas lights covered in newly fallen snow.

Uncertainties and controversies (theme 1)

The Reverend Professor June-Boyce Tillman (Artistic Convenor for the Centre for the Arts as Wellbeing, Convenor of the Tavener Centre for Music and Spirituality, UK; Extraordinary Professor at North-West University, South Africa) further invoked a place of mystery by challenging current trends in music education such as standardised assessments that impose a limited way of knowing and a “forced and false simplicity.” Her talk stressed the importance of uncertainty in the appreciation of

beauty, and the inclusion of pedagogies that encourage “wonder and risk” (Tillman, 2017a, p. 26). The discussion was furthered by Giorgos Tsiris, who shared his research of the “everyday” in music therapy and spirituality. Following fellowship and refreshment enjoyed during the break, the conversation was further developed by Gavin Hopps (Senior Lecturer in Literature and Theology and Director of the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts at the University of St Andrews, UK), who explored the spiritual potential of popular music; Janet McDonald (spiritual director and music therapist in the L’arche community, UK), who suggested that the music may offer a “theological language” for expression that is “revelatory, progressive and all inclusive” (2017, p. 41); and Owen Coggins (researcher at Nordoff Robbins London, UK), who contemplated upon the spiritual and therapeutic possibilities within the ambiguities of drone metal music.

Culture, politics, and identity (theme 2)

A separate conversation on culture, politics, and identity took place in a nearby space in the Nordoff Robbins Centre. Here, Koji Matsunobu (Assistant Professor, Department of Cultural and Creative Arts, Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong) opened the discussion by challenging the masculine spirituality of shakuhachi flute practice, which (due to its sexual symbolism) has traditionally been unavailable to women. Hetta Potgieter (research fellow at the School of Music, North-West University, South Africa) discussed the South African Mass *Missa de Meridiana Terra*, and explored the spiritual dimensions of how the work, as paired with Strijdom van der Merwe’s land art, can be seen as a means to experience “experiences of connectedness, relationship or oneness with God/Christ/a higher power/the sacred/nature and appreciation” (Morgan & Boyce-Tillman, 2016, p. 157). After the break, Giorgio Scalici (PhD student, Durham University, UK) examined the *momagu*, a shamanistic ritual of the Wana people to better understand the role of music in this soul-retrieving rite, while Conroy Cupido (Senior Lecturer at North-West University, South Africa) provided a case study detailing the role of the New Apostolic Church in the music education of those living in the Western Cape during the 1980s Apartheid era. Faith Halverson-Ramos (counsellor and music therapist, USA) demonstrated how popular music might be an important tool for Baby Boomers, as they work to achieve transpersonal development during times when elders are facing unprecedented financial and health related issues exacerbated by a longer lifespan.

Learning and teaching (theme 3)

A third simultaneous strand of presentations centred around spirituality in music learning and teaching. Elizabeth Mitchell (PhD Candidate, Western University, Canada and music therapist in residence at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada) opened this discussion by sharing her work with Cathy Benedict (Assistant Professor and Director of Research, Don Wright Faculty of Music, Western University, Canada) that explores the applications of music-centred music therapy within music education settings. John Burdett (Director of Instrumental Studies and Director of Graduate Music Education, Azusa Pacific University, USA) explored the development of spirituality as fostered by the curriculum of a faith-based institution. After the break, Karin Hendricks (Co-Director of

Undergraduate Studies in Music, Boston University College of Fine Arts, USA) took the attendees on a tour of her forthcoming book *Compassionate Music Teaching* and offered key concepts from the text as a framework for music teaching and learning. While discussing musical ritual and liminality in schools in the UK, Michael Davidson (Head of Rock, Family, and Community Music for Hertfordshire Music Service, UK) suggested that there might be a “benefit in adopting a more global approach to instrumental music teaching that integrates aesthetic and social healing uses” (2017, p. 30). The discussion was furthered by Frank Heuser (Professor and Head of Music Education at University of California, Los Angeles, USA), who presented research of “spiritual connectedness” (Heuser, 2017, p. 34), as experienced in a non-competitive and student-driven music-making context.

Nordoff Robbins Choir and Jam Band

The inclusion of music at any conference has the potential to deepen the experience of spirituality, filling an otherwise intellectual conference space with vibrations of emotion and connection. The Nordoff Robbins Choir and Jam Band certainly provided such an opening for the participants at the close of the day on Saturday. The performers exuded a love for singing and performing that was both charming and heart-warming. Performing a wide range of music including mash-ups of rock classics, folk songs, and popular tunes, the choir captivated the audience and then included the conference participants in both singing and playing rhythm instruments on the closing number. An especially poignant moment was a performance of Pink’s “What About Us” performed by a member of the Jam Band: we found ourselves moved to tears by her courageous expression of these lyrics, co-written by Johnny McDaid and Steve Mac. We did not need to know the Jam Band member’s background or personal story to connect with her, as the music provided instant resonance with our own experiences of loss and betrayal as described in the song lyrics.

RESTING, CONNECTING, AND FURTHER REFLECTING

An often-cherished aspect of any academic conference is found in the intentional creation of a place for rest, connection, and reflection. Saturday evening provided such an opportunity for conference attendees, with time to reflect upon the day’s presentations either on their own or in groups at dinner. The formal proceedings took place again on Sunday, beginning with a launch and promotion of forthcoming books on music and spirituality (Boyce-Tillman, 2017b; Coggins, 2018; Hendricks & Boyce-Tillman, 2018). Following the book launch and promotion, presenters similarly organised into topical strands in three separate spaces.

Music, imagery, and reflection (theme 4)

Bolette Daniels Beck (Associate Professor in Music Therapy, Aalborg University, Denmark) began the discussion of music, imagery, and reflection by sharing case vignettes of Guided Imagery in Music (GIM) sessions that were specifically intended to induce transcendent experience and personal transformation. Evangelia Papanikolaou (Adjunct Professor at the Hellenic American University and

Director of 'Sonora-Organization for Music Therapy & Research,' Greece) shared related research where GIM was used as a treatment for women with gynaecologic cancer, while Martin Lawes (founder of the London-based integrative GIM programme, UK) expanded the discussion of the spiritual dimensions of GIM as it pertained to work in palliative and bereavement care. Adam Kishtainy (Associate Lecturer on the MA Music Therapy Programme at the University of the West of England, UK) encouraged intuition in music therapy by honouring the spiritual beliefs and inclinations that therapists might bring to their practice. At the close of the presentation strand, Janelize van der Merwe (PhD Candidate in Music Education, New York University, USA; Lecturer in music education and manager of Musikhane community music programme, North-West University, South Africa) described a compelling autoethnographic method for introspection through the process of self-interviews, the analysis of which led to "a dense polyphonic composition of contradictions" that she heard in her own voice (van der Merwe, 2017, p. 50).

Musicians, thinkers, and approaches (theme 5)

The strand on themes of musicians, thinkers, and approaches embraced history along with mystery. MacKinlay Himes (PhD Candidate in Music Education, Penn State University, USA) opened this discussion with a review of the sacred music of Duke Ellington and Dave Brubeck, followed by reflections from David Marcus (Nordoff-Robbins Center for Music Therapy at New York University, USA) about how the invention of music-listening technologies had caused him to question the need for music and further contemplate the role it plays in human development. Shifting the conversation to a somewhat different perspective, Liesl van der Merwe (Research Director of Musical Arts in South Africa: Resources and Application, and Associate Professor in the School of Music at the North-West University, South Africa) and John Habron (Head of Music Education at the Royal Northern College of Music, UK) presented their research, which has led to the formulation of their own theory of spirituality in Dalcroze Eurhythmics. After the break, Oksana Zharinova-Sanderson (Director of Music Services for Nordoff Robbins, UK) presented work based upon Paul Nordoff's understanding of pathology and shared her clients' as well as a music therapist's search for freedom from limitations. Continuing the discussion of the Nordoff Robbins approach, Richard Sanderson (tutor on the Nordoff Robbins Master of Music Therapy programme in Manchester, UK) shared stories of musical encounters between music therapists and clients with advanced dementia.

Living and dying (theme 6)

The final presentation strand of the conference very fittingly offered a place to reflect upon both living and dying. Leading off this discussion, Noah Potvin (music therapist and Assistant Professor of Music Therapy at Duquesne University, USA) stressed the importance of "internal and external alignment" (Potvin, 2017, p. 46) during the end-of-life transition and how psychospiritual processes as facilitated by music therapy practices might be beneficial. Also concerned with the "thin place" between life and death, Kate Binnie (music therapist and mindful yoga practitioner working in palliative care settings, UK) presented her research of CRMT treatment with a hospice patient dying

from mesothelioma (Binnie, 2017, p. 25). Richard Bennett (Regional Manager for London South/South-East at Nordoff-Robbins, UK) then shared how the Bahá'í twofold moral purpose, particularly the practice of an outward-focused spirituality, can inform the practice of music therapists. After the break, Astrid Notarangelo (music therapist at a hospital in regional Australia) and Katrina McFerran (Head of Music Therapy at the University of Melbourne, Australia) continued the discussion of music therapy as a support for spiritual care for those in the hospital, and Oliver Kluczewski (music therapist at St Christopher's Hospice and at Nordoff Robbins London, UK) closed the discussion by returning to the topic of end-of-life care through his exploration of his client's creative spirit as experienced in music therapy sessions in hospice care.

Poster session

The main meeting space where keynotes and opening and closing events took place was also the location of the poster session. Posters were affixed to the walls along the perimeter of the room and the authors were present several times during the two days of the conference. A wide range of topics were included. From the discipline of music education, posters included research by Christian Bernhard (Professor of Music Education at the State University of New York at Fredonia, USA) concerning contemplative practices in music-teacher education; John Burdett's exploration of Dallas Willard's theological framework as applied to music and spirituality; research by Olivia Dowd (undergraduate music education student at Penn State University, USA) on the culture of care and empathy in music education; a description of a course on music and religion by Deborah Saidel (freelance woodwind performer and educator, Richmond, Virginia, USA) that explores global cultural diversity; and an essay exploring worldview and the function of music engagement as a means of psycho-spiritual becoming presented by Tawnya Smith (Assistant Professor of Music Education, Boston University College of Fine Arts, USA). In the discipline of music therapy, posters were presented by Jon Blend (psychotherapist and psychotherapy instructor at Gestalt Centre London and Minister Centre, UK), who explored Lifemusic as a means for spiritual journeying and healing; Elizabeth Coombes (music therapist and course leader of the MA in Music Therapy at the University of South Wales, UK), who examined the use of GIM in the professional development of music therapists; Faith Halverson-Ramos, who examined the benefits of mindfulness practice for music therapists and music educators; and Efrat Roginsky (therapy coordinator at the Israeli Ministry of Education, and supervisor and lecturer at Haifa University, Israel), who studied the spiritual-musical communication between parents and young adults with profound cerebral palsy.

A FINAL CELEBRATION AND CONVERSATION

In a final communal celebration of spiritual place-making, the conference attendees participated in a roundtable discussion provided by Gary Ansdell, June Boyce-Tillman, Simon Procter (Director of Music Services, Nordoff Robbins, UK), Liesl van der Merwe, and Rachel Verney (music therapist, UK). This final coming together allowed us to reflect upon and challenge themes that had emerged and ideas that had been birthed throughout the conference. Befitting for his service as our host and

co-chair throughout the weekend, Giorgos Tsiris led us in a final forum where conference attendees remarked on their experiences, both impromptu as well as through bulletin board notes that had been posted at will throughout the weekend.



Photograph 4: Roundtable discussion (From right: Gary Ansdell, Liesl van der Merwe, June Boyce-Tillman, Simon Procter, and Rachel Verney)

In this closing session, music therapists, educators, and scholars reflected on their two days spent together, in a space-turned-place that provided us an opportunity to view and envision our professional worlds anew. As one conference attendee stated, “We have much to learn from one another.” The juxtaposition of our differing backgrounds and experiences, with our collective willingness to learn and simultaneously embrace mystery, reflected the “heretical—and quite ancient—thought” proffered by Casey (1996), who suggested that the phenomenon of “place, far from being something simply singular, is something general, perhaps even universal” (p. 19).

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