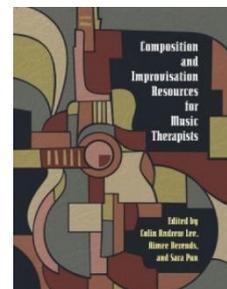


BOOK REVIEW

Composition and improvisation resources for music therapists (Lee, Berends & Pun, Eds.)

Reviewed by Gráinne Ravani Foster

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Title: Composition and improvisation resources for music therapists **Editors:** Colin A. Lee, Aimee Berends & Sara Pun **Publication year:** 2015
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REVIEWER BIOGRAPHY

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This book of resources for composition and improvisation within music therapy seeks to “inspire and capture your creative spirit”, inviting you, the readers, to “tap into your own compositional and improvisational potential as artists and therapists” (p. xv). The volume is a companion to *Song Resources for Music Therapists* (Lee & Pun, 2015). Clearly grounded in music-centred and aesthetic approaches to music therapy practice, the editors emphasise the importance of an “informed clinical and artistic response” (p. xv) to a client’s playing within music therapy practice, and the necessity of developing musical skills through practising and learning new idioms and musical styles. While doing so, however, they invite clinicians of all theoretical approaches to make use of the material provided.

Of the 26 contributors, 13 have links to Wilfred Laurier University, being alumni, current students or faculty staff. Other contributors range from music therapists based elsewhere in Canada, to clinicians and researchers working in the United States, England, Scotland and Israel. The work of the late pioneering music therapist and composer Paul Nordoff also features through the inclusion of his series of compositions *Music for Eleven Eurhythmy Exercises*.

This book differs from Colin Andrew Lee’s previous publication with Marc Houde, *Improvising in Styles* (2011), which provided a workbook-style approach aimed more broadly at music educators and musicians as well as music therapists. Instead, this book offers a collection of compositions, improvisational themes and interactional frameworks primarily for use by music therapists. Similarly to this prior publication, audio examples of some of the pieces throughout the book can also be heard (via an online link), in addition to the scores printed throughout.

The book is divided into seven sections. The first section, entitled *Compositions*, is the largest, offering a diverse selection of 26 pieces from 11 composers, many of which were born directly in response to work with individual clients, or were inspired by various ethnic influences including Armenian folk music and Canadian aboriginal hand-drumming. Each notated composition is prefaced by an introduction by the composer outlining the clinical reasoning behind each composition, salient details of the musical style and, in some cases, suggestions for its appropriate use with particular clinical populations. The scope and depth of the compositions vary widely, from the short-form *Modal Reflection* by Catherine Haire (pp. 16-17) to the more in-depth setting of the E.E. Cummings poem *In Time of Daffodils* to music, composed for SATB choir by Brian Abrams (pp. 43-48).

The remaining six sections focus largely on aspects of improvisation in music therapy. The second section, *Improvising with Orchestral Instruments*, offers brief historical and practical overviews of the qualities of the flute, oboe, clarinet, trombone, marimba, xylophone, violin, viola, cello and double bass, along with instrument-specific exercises and techniques related to using each instrument in clinical improvisation. The section *Themes in World Styles* follows; a rather short section of four chapters which offers insights into Tango improvisation for guitar, the art of Indian Solkattu music, Balinese Gamelan music, and Indian Raga-inspired guitar-playing. The subsequent section, *Themes in Contemporary Styles*, provides examples of song-writing within rap, hip-hop and funk styles, as well as describing a variety of pop, rock and jazz vamps and harmonic frameworks.

Within the first chapter of the next section, *Receptive Themes*, Nechama Yehuda uses the second movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 as a resource for clinical improvisation through the lens of a clinical vignette with a five-year-old boy. In the subsequent chapters of this section, Colin Lee offers five receptive themes inspired by his work with several clients, suggesting that these musical sketches be used as 'A' sections, or as bridges to freer, improvised passages.

The sixth section of the book, *Levels of Interaction* by James Robertson and Colin Lee, is perhaps the most structured and pedagogic of the sections. The authors lay out Robertson's conception of four levels of interaction as a means for the therapist to frame his/her approach to improvisation with a client: *Foundational Support*, *Reciprocal Support*, *Enhance*, and *Challenge*. Five in-depth musical examples using different instrumental/vocal combinations are subsequently provided of these four levels of clinical improvisation, with clear clinical rationales outlined for the musical-therapeutic approach offered in each case. The authors suggest that these exercises be used by two music therapists or two students, with opportunities for each player to workshop and role-play both therapist and client roles. In this way, they invite the players to consider more deeply the "detailed intricacy of the therapist's response to a client's improvising" (p. 200), and thus increase their awareness of their own responses in the moment-by-moment unfolding of a session.

In the seventh and final section of the book, *Interval Explorations*, Lee offers nine exercises based on the musical intervals of a major 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th, suggesting different overall musical forms in which to practise them. He emphasises the importance of listening with intention to the tones and their relationships, and suggests experimenting with different instrumentation as well as separating the voices within the pieces in order to role-play the parts using two players as before. He envisages the pieces as a "springboard to develop clinical listening skills" (p. 253), and in this way aid the therapist in discerning further musical detail when improvising with a client. The book's somewhat

uneven structure is not balanced or tied together with a chapter of concluding thoughts, instead ending rather abruptly with a page listing further musical resources.

A central tenet of the book which is returned to throughout is the concept of using structured pieces “as a catalyst for freer improvisations” with a client (p. 253). This in my opinion is the book’s strength, as it certainly offers the reader a wide variety of compositional and improvisational themes and pre-composed pieces, in short and longer forms, spanning a broad spectrum of styles from classical and folk to pop, jazz and funk. In addition, the *Levels of Interaction* framework described by Robertson and Lee with notated examples offers a clear and helpful means of framing therapeutic thinking when improvising with a client.

It is unfortunate, however, that the flow of the book is marred by many typographical errors throughout, not only common mistakes such as the misplacement of apostrophes, misspellings and omitted words, but also errors which create ambiguity of meaning. For example, in describing the piece *Reed Horn Blues in D*, the composer in question writes about the opportunity to make some noise within the piece, describing how “this is *atypical* feature of the blues idiom” (p. 22, author’s own emphasis) where this should read “a typical”.

A wider critique of the book relates to the clear gap in the music therapy literature in terms of publications which address the actual *processes* of composing music *with* clients, rather than *for* clients. A number of other publications have addressed song-writing (e.g., Baker, 2015; Baker & Wigram, 2005) or offered valuable case-study information on unique journeys with clients as composers (e.g., Viega, 2013), however the act of composing with a client, particularly within instrumental music, has yet to be explored in a systematic way. Rather than addressing this gap, instead the book mostly follows the traditional approach of therapist as composer and client as a receiver of pre-composed works. One exception to this is Michael Viega’s chapter *Sanctify and Testify*, which delves into three clients’ individual processes of composing rap and hip-hop songs. Viega provides insights into his role as facilitator of the clients’ song-writing, the clients’ individual processes, and useful details of the studio production, mixing and editing techniques.

A further aspect to highlight is the paucity of references within the book to music technology and the ways in which it can facilitate compositional and improvisational processes. The elements described above within Viega’s chapter, along with a brief mention of the *GarageBand* iPad app within Houde’s chapter on *Vamps and Harmonic Frameworks* (p. 177) are the only brief mentions given to music technology within the book, the lack of an exploration of which is, I believe, a distinct oversight.

In summary, I found this book to be a useful potted source of ideas, frameworks and styles with which to expand my musical skills and inform my practice, sitting comfortably within the canon of practical musical resources for clinical work. In reflecting on the overall aims of the book, however, in my personal experience the volume fell short of truly inspiring and capturing my creative spirit, or fully tapping into my compositional and improvisational potential. That said, perhaps this book paves the way towards a publication which offers a platform for the clients’ voices to be more clearly heard and actively involved in the compositional process. If such a volume were to provide more comprehensive insights into the actual mechanics of composing, including an examination of the use of relevant technology, this would be an innovative and most welcome addition to the literature.

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