



Tribute

A tribute to Jean Eisler

14 April 1916 – 8 July 2017

Pauline Etkin

Nordoff Robbins International

Editorial note: An earlier version of this tribute was published on the Nordoff Robbins website (www.nordoff-robbins.org.uk) on 21st July 2017.

Jean Eisler (nee Layton), a loved colleague and respected music therapy pioneer, has died at the age of 101.

Jean was a key figure in the early establishment of Nordoff Robbins and the emergent music therapy profession. She became a music therapist in 1974 when she trained on the very first Nordoff Robbins training programme in London, a six-month course based at Goldie Leigh Hospital in south London. A person of extraordinary youthful vigour, she was coming up for 60 then. At a time when most people might be thinking towards retirement, Jean embarked on a second career that was to see her working into her 90s.

She had already had a colourful life: coming from a very musical family, she was a pupil of Gustav Holst at St Paul's Girls' School, studied in Vienna and at the Royal College of Music and then embarked on a career as a professional violinist. She played with the Jacques Orchestra and the Ebsworth String Quartet during the 1930s and 1940s, and during the war travelled around England entertaining the troops. In 1944 her life changed dramatically when she married Paul, a Czech economist, and lived for the next 25 years in Prague in political exile, scraping a living as a translator and raising her children.

Following her husband's untimely death in 1966, Jean returned to England. In 1972, by chance, she picked up a copy of Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins' first book in a music shop. She had never heard of music therapy but was captivated and contacted

Sybil Beresford-Pierse who, of a similar age to Jean, had developed great enthusiasm for the work of Nordoff and Robbins. Sybil was attempting to establish a foundation for their work in the UK in order to bring them to the country to talk about their work and to develop this approach in the UK.

At the first meeting of those two indefatigable ladies, Jean was keen to learn what she could do to become a music therapist. Sybil, however, had different priorities, and knowing that she had nobody to take minutes at her fundraising committee meeting the following day, her first question to Jean was not about her musical credentials, but rather, in typical pragmatic style, "*Can you type?*"

So Jean began doing voluntary work supporting the embryonic Nordoff Robbins Fundraising Committee. This led in time to her enrolment on the Nordoff Robbins training programme, organised by Sybil, and taught by Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins, the first of only two courses taught by Paul Nordoff before his death in 1977. Jean was a member of that first generation of music therapists who acted as a bridge between Paul Nordoff and future music therapists and kept alive his teachings. As she later said, "*It was such a new vision of music, and what you could do with it... I saw what was possible, when I saw Paul and Clive's work.*"

When the training programme migrated to Roehampton in 1978, Jean became head of the music therapy department at Goldie Leigh Hospital. Many newly-qualified music therapists went to work with her to gain apprenticeship experience. Here, and at Queen Mary's Hospital for Children in Surrey where she established a pioneering music therapy department in 1984, Jean led many creative developments in the Nordoff Robbins approach. It

was also in 1984 that Jean established a Saturday clinic at the Nordoff Robbins London Centre (an independent centre in Kentish Town with the one-year postgraduate diploma being validated externally by City University), and she became an outstanding inspiration to generations of music therapists through her role as a therapist, student supervisor and lecturer (see Box 1).

Eisler, J. (1990). Creative Music Therapy for the Mentally Handicapped or Emotionally Disturbed Child. In S.S. Segal (Ed.), *Creative Arts and Mental Disability* (pp. 84-89). Bicester, Oxon: A B Academic Publishers.

Eisler, J. (1992). *The Cinderella of music therapy in Great Britain: Music therapy in child psychiatry*. In the Proceedings of First European Music Therapy Conference, Cambridge, UK. London: BSMT.

Eisler, J. (1993). Music therapy in the context of the multi-disciplinary team. *Journal of British Music Therapy*, 7(1), 23-24.

Eisler, J. (1997). Carol Robbins: An Appreciation. *British Journal of Music Therapy*, 11(1), 31-32.

Eisler, J., & Hoskyns, J. (1992). Book Review: Music Therapy for the Autistic Child. *British Journal of Music Therapy*, 6(1), 24-25.

Pavlicevic, M. (1999). *Music Therapy: Intimate Notes* (Chapter 2; pp. 23-37). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Robarts, J. (2017). Obituary: Jean Eisler, 14 April 1916 to 6 July 2017. *British Journal of Music Therapy*, 31(2), 65-67.

Verney, R. (1991). Jean Eisler—interviewed by Rachel Verney: Historical perspectives interview series. *British Journal of Music Therapy*, 13(2), 44-48.

Box 1: Examples of Eisler's written work and of publications related to her work

Personally, I will always owe a great deal to Jean. Once qualifying, I was offered a post at Nordoff Robbins but decided that I needed to return to South Africa and try and develop work in deprived areas there. I did however undertake a one-year locum with Sybil Beresford-Peirce and worked with Jean during this time. Sybil had sadly accepted an 11-month only permit for me which was non-renewable. Following enormous changes in South Africa and my inability to set anything up in the deprived areas, Sybil persuaded me to return to London and work at the Nordoff Robbins music therapy centre. However, understandably, the Home Office would not grant me a work permit due to the previous 11-month restricted one. Thanks to Jean, who had a contact with Lord Ennals, I was able to be represented in the House of Lords and obtain permission to work in the

UK. Without Jean's intervention this would never have happened. Once I began working as a music therapist and tutor (1984-1990) and later as Director and then CEO of the charity (1991-2013), I had the privilege to work with Jean and get to know various aspects of her personality. I remember clearly how inspirational Jean was and how overwhelmed I was by Jean's musical giftedness, her freedom, openness, passion and commitment to the children with whom she worked. I felt privileged to work with Jean for many years as co-therapist and in particular with Susan, a delightful girl with Rett Syndrome. Jean's determination, creative and musical skill and sensitivity as a music therapist enabled Susan to find expression and communication – I was honoured to be part of this process.

One of my lasting memories will be of Jean well into her 80s being a 'bunny', jumping around the room with John, a young boy she worked with (Photograph 1 and 2). What energy and what commitment to being *with* this child and enabling him to feel that he was 100% heard and accepted – to me, this was a perfect reflection of Jean's simply wonderful personality.



Photograph 1: Jean Eisler and co-therapist Hilary Wainer working with John

Jean remained active in supporting the charity in whatever way she could. She was on the Board of Governors for many years, and always supported me and offered her wise advice as well as constructive criticism. Jean inspired fundraisers and supporters with presentations of her work with children, facilitating the dissemination of the work and encouraging donations for ongoing therapy services. She was much appreciated by the Nordoff Robbins fundraisers and Board of Governors and in 2001 she was awarded the 'Woman of the Year Award' for Outstanding Contribution to Nordoff Robbins and Music Therapy (Photograph 3).

The extraordinary youthfulness that Jean maintained into her 80s and 90s, as well as her warmth, compassion and humour, brought endless

admiration from her colleagues and friends, and she continued to practise music therapy for decades beyond normal retirement age.



Photograph 2: Jean Eisler and John in focused musical communication

In her 100th year, the European Music Therapy Confederation (EMTC) conferred on Jean the prestigious EMTC Award, awarded every three years to a person who has contributed in a unique and outstanding way to the development of European music therapy. Closer to home, Jean was honoured with a Lifetime Achievement Award by Nordoff Robbins in May 2017 at the opening of the newly refurbished London Centre (Photograph 4), marking her contribution to the charity as a therapist and teacher and, after her retirement, through her annual bursary programme (the Jean Eisler Bursary Fund) supporting trainee music therapists, for which she drew donations from influential contributors.

Jean is remembered with affection and gratitude by so many, and her spirit lives on in the work of the countless lives she changed and inspired.

Thank you for so much, Jean: we will miss you.

Suggested citation:

Etkin, P. (2018). A tribute to Jean Eisler (14 April 1916 – 8 July 2017). *Approaches: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Music Therapy*, 10(2), 241-243.



Photograph 3: Pauline Etkin OBE and Jean Eisler at the 'Woman of the Year' ceremony



Photograph 4: Jean Eisler receiving a Lifetime Achievement Award by Nordoff Robbins